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YOUNG PEOPLES' DISENGAGEMENT: PARENT EXPERIENCES OF FRUSTRATION
AND DISTRESS

**Young Peoples' Disengagement from Education:
parent experiences of frustration and distress.**

Submitted by

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In fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Statement of the Contribution of Others

This thesis was conducted under the supervision of Associate Professor Snowy (Neus) Evans and Associate Professor Margaret Anne Carter. Their academic expertise, intellectual and emotional support were invaluable to the study's design and analysis of findings. Both supervisors provided feedback on numerous drafts of all chapters, which improved the clarity and style of writing.

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Abstract

Educational disengagement is an important and evolving area of academic inquiry. Research indicates that between 20% and 40% of young people are disengaging from their education in various ways, from total absenteeism to being physically present yet mentally and emotionally absent. This trend is particularly alarming, as disengaged youth are at a heightened risk for numerous adverse outcomes, including substance abuse, homelessness, anti-social behaviour, unemployment, mental health issues, and suicide.

To date, the phenomenon of student disengagement has been studied from multiple perspectives, including educators, psychologists, and disengaged students themselves.

However, there is a notable gap in parents' experiences. This is despite substantial evidence suggesting that parents play a crucial role in influencing their young people's level of educational engagement.

This study addresses this gap through a developmental phenomenographic narrative research approach to investigate parental experiences of their young person's disengagement from education. Phenomenographic interview techniques were applied to elicit rich, detailed narratives about parents' experiences. These narratives were subsequently analysed through an iterative process to uncover key themes and patterns. Three key themes emerged: (i) a research-practice gap between research on disengagement and school-based practices; (ii) delayed recognition of student disengagement; and (iii) insufficient school support for disengaged students and their families.

Findings revealed that parents of young people who have disengaged, or are in the process of disengaging from education, exhibit a range of responses and that there is a disconnect between parental experiences and school responses. A key outcome of this research is the development of a hierarchical set of categories that captures and represents the range of different ways parents experienced their young people's educational disengagement. All

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parents experienced frustration, all but one parent experienced distress, three parents experienced determination, three parents experienced acceptance, and one parent experienced feeling pressured. The findings also highlighted that despite a plethora of literature on interventions for disengagement from education, parents did not report any formal school-based interventions for their young people. While every parent's narrative included risk factors and indicators of disengagement, the schools did not appear to recognise these. All parents in this study reported the schools their young people attended failed to provide adequate support to help them remain engaged in education.

The implications of this research indicate that students and parents would benefit from early identification of young people who are disengaging from education. This early identification would enable schools to access and address the research gap and facilitate research-based interventions. Such actions would enable schools to foster a more supportive and collaborative environment capable of mitigating the adverse effects of educational disengagement on young people.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Having experienced disengagement with my own child as a parent, with other people’s children as a support worker and during my school experiences as a Guidance Officer, I empathise with the parents I interviewed. Frustration and distress are two emotions I encountered continuously. It is heartbreaking to watch children, and their parents continuously struggle to engage meaningfully with schools, when school attendance is something we all take for granted.” (Denise Svane, 2024).

Disengagement from education is a complex topic that is framed in many different ways. It involves a spectrum of behaviours, ranging from being present in the classroom but not doing any of the set work or engaging in any activities, to misbehaviour and disruption, through to complete disengagement through non-attendance. Disengagement from education is also a very emotive issue which may elicit strong feelings. There is a high expectation in society that students of school age will be at school and engaged with learning during school hours. When we see school aged children in the streets during a weekday, we tend to form a judgement. In most instances, we want to know why they are not at school, often questioning where their parents are at the time, or if the parents care for their children. Some are concerned about these children engaging in delinquent behaviours, others are concerned for their wellbeing (Henry, 2007; Henry et al., 2012; Luet, 2017; Martinot et al., 2025). There are other children who are in school but not engaged in learning. These are also of concern as they can disrupt the classroom and other children’s learning or simply miss important learning for their future (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015). Put simply, disengagement from education is recognised as a problem today, for many reasons.

As the epigraph above highlights, I have both personal and professional experiences of children who are disengaged from education, as a parent, support worker and Guidance

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Officer in schools. My own child struggled with disengagement as a result of bullying.

When I repeatedly approached the school as a parent, I felt ignored. Even as an employee of the Queensland Department of Education, with explicit knowledge of policy and processes, my concerns about my own child were at times ignored by the school. I had to stand up and advocate strongly to the school, for my child, before these concerns were heard. Finding a person at the school who would listen and understand was a complicated but essential process. The right person was not always available, nor was the same person. There were times when it was easier for me to simply withdraw and disengage, allowing my child to not attend school on days when they were upset.

Non-attendance is the most salient form of disengagement, as attendance records make it obvious when a school aged child is not at school (Rifenbark et al., 2023). As a teacher and a Guidance Officer, I have asked parents why their children are not at school, and I too have been quick to judge. It is rare in these moments when speaking with parents for school staff to consider the wider societal conditions that may affect young people's school attendance. They do not question if larger and unseen barriers exist, which interfere with their going to school. In schools, it is common to either pathologise the young person, looking for a diagnosis that will explain their absences, or start to blame the parent(s) for not enforcing school attendance (Coles et al., 2023; Gatfield & Winter-Simat, 2019; Lewthwaite et al., 2017). Perhaps the parent has problems of their own which affect their ability to support their child to be at school. Non-attendance could also simply be for economic reasons: the child does not have the resources expected or even food to eat at school (Watterson & O'Connell, 2019). Maybe the parent had a bad educational or school experience and thus feels that it is not overly important for their child to attend school. These are some of the many different issues explored by support staff in schools when young people start to disengage. In my experience in schools, the ultimate fault is mostly seen as lying

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with the parent or the student. School staff often assume that the young person's non-attendance is due to factors outside the school, which was certainly the case with my child.

In retrospect, I find the assumption that children's disengagement from school is always the result of internal factors, pertaining to the child or family, quite distressing. In my previous employment, working in a not-for-profit organisation, as a support worker for children either experiencing or at risk of experiencing mental health concerns, I often worked with children and parents who were facing disengagement from education in some form. At one point I had two clients who were completely disengaged from education and tended to stay in their bedrooms during school hours. I spent many hours sitting outside these children's bedroom doors, attempting to speak with them, to engage them in some way, in the hope of finding out their story and try to help them. Their parents were always happy to tell me their story, but I soon learned that there were always many perspectives to be explored. The children's story was my first concern as these were my clients. However, when they refused to leave their bedroom to talk to me, all I could do was speak with their parents and try to offer advice on ways they could attempt to re-engage their children with education.

It appears that it is easier to give up than persevere. The more families I worked with where children were disengaged from education, the more I realised that many of these parents had all but given up on getting their children to go to any school. Even knowing the school system, and knowing who I should speak with, did not make it any easier for me, and I found myself overwhelmed so I just gave up and let my child stay at home. Some families moved from school to school hoping to find someone, somewhere that could help them. Other families opted for home schooling. Regardless of the path taken, many families found themselves frustrated, distressed and at their wits' end. Some parents had been struggling for years, arguing with school staff, berating their child, pushing their child away in the hope that they would attend school if they were not feeling supported at home. Nothing seemed to

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work for some parents and their children. The disengagement from education became an ongoing area of contention in the family, leading, in many instances, to family dysfunction.

These experiences of the phenomenon of disengagement from education led me to this research. I had a burning desire to understand why so many children, my own child included, found school so disheartening, so distressing, that they could not attend. When I began to engage with the literature, I realised that there is a lot of research exploring the student perspective, but very little focusing on the experiences and perspectives of parents. Hence, the aim of this study is to describe, analyse and understand parent's experiences when navigating their children's disengagement from education. The following research questions guide the study:

RQ1. In what ways do parents experience their child's disengagement from education?

RQ2. What variations exist among parents' experiences?

RQ3. How do parents' experiences align with, extend or challenge existing research literature addressing disengagement from education?

By describing, analysing and understanding parental experiences and perspectives of their young person's educational disengagement, this research provides insight into an area of research about which little is known. Research outcomes have the potential to inform best practice to support parents when their young people are disengaging from education, as well as educational policy writers and educators. Below, I contextualise the study by providing a background overview of the topic, followed by the research approach and key definitions. The last section of the chapter outlines the thesis structure.

1.1 Background

In most contexts, engagement in formal learning is regarded as a central aspect of childhood and adolescence. In Australia, formal schooling is compulsory from ages 4-5

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through to 17-18, encompassing primary school (Prep to Year 6) and secondary school (Years 7-12), with students attending approximately six hours per day across four ten-week terms annually.

Education serves multiple interconnected purposes in preparing young people for adult participation in society. While engagement in formal schooling ostensibly prepares students for workforce entry or tertiary education, Murray (2023) positions education more fundamentally as a consumable right that encompasses the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, culture and understanding. This broader conceptualisation underpins education's role in citizenship development, with schools functioning as sites where young people are expected to develop into 'good citizens'(Murray, 2023). Implicit within this framework is the assumption that educational participation is essential for full societal integration—that without formal schooling, young people will lack the requisite knowledge, skills, values, and understanding necessary for effective citizenship and social participation.

However, the realisation of these educational purposes and citizenship outcomes is contingent upon students' meaningful engagement with schooling, which is fundamentally influenced by their wellbeing (Martinot et al., 2025). Pietarinen et al. (2014, p. 40) found that “students’ experience of school-related wellbeing was a key mediator for emotional and cognitive engagement”, highlighting the critical relationship between how students feel and their capacity to participate in the educational processes designed to develop their knowledge, skills, and civic understanding (Gossner et al., 2025; Martinot et al., 2025). Yet, despite a plethora of frameworks and initiatives dedicated to wellbeing in Australian schools Down and Choules (2017) found that the number of young people disengaging from school continues to rise. More recent research, following the COVID-19 pandemic confirms this persistent challenge, with Save the Children (2022) reporting that 68% of parents stated their child’s attendance and engagement at school had been negatively impacted by the pandemic.

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Wellbeing has been on Australian education agendas for over 10 years. At a national level, the Australian Government's *National Safe Schools Framework* (Education Services Australia, 2018) provides a vision and set of guiding principles to assist every school to become a safe, supportive learning community that fosters wellbeing and respectful relationships. The Australian Government then offered further resources and professional development for school staff through the Student Wellbeing Hub (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). At state level, the New South Wales Government developed *The Wellbeing Framework for Schools* (NSW, 2015) and Victoria the *Wellbeing Practice Guide* (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2016). The Queensland Government developed the *Student Learning and Wellbeing Framework* to provide schools with practical resources to enhance the wellbeing of students (Department of Education and Training Queensland, 2018). Regardless of all Australian schools having guiding frameworks for improving wellbeing as outlined above, young people are still disengaging from education.

The numbers of young people who are disengaged from education are variably reported. Goss et al. (2017) found up to 40% of Australian students may be disengaged from education. While Hancock and Zubrick (2015), focusing on Western Australia, state that only 20% of students can be considered disengaged from education. Variations in reporting is often due to the ways disengagement is defined. Many studies consider students who do not complete Year 12 education as disengaged (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). According to Down and Choules (2017) in Australia those who do not complete Year 12 represent between 30 and 40% of students. Other scholars define disengagement based on students who cease to attend (Broadhurst et al., 2005). Others, still, consider students who are behaviourally, emotionally or cognitively disengaged from the classroom, content, school or education system as disengaged (Balwant, 2018; Hancock & Zubrick, 2015). Goss et al. (2017) and

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Oliveira and Lathrop (2022) found that up to 40% of students are disengaged and unproductive in schools.

Much of the research on disengagement from education explores the topic from the perspective of the school and staff (Ekstrand, 2015; Henry et al., 2012; Wong et al., 2024). Within this context, disengagement is perceived from a deficit perspective, a framework that locates the 'problem' of disengagement within perceived inadequacies or deficiencies in the student or their family. This deficit perspective may include; low parental educational level and income, dysfunctional parental relationships, the child's birth order and number of siblings, and alternative family cultures with lower social status (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Lanza & Taylor, 2010; Lessard et al., 2008; Martinot et al., 2025; Roisman, 2002; Upadaya & Salmela-Aro, 2013; Wang & Eccles, 2012; Wang & Fredricks, 2014; Watterson & O'Connell, 2019; Wong et al., 2024). This deficit perspective appears in the media, is heard in staff rooms, at parent-teacher meetings, and is seen on school reports (Caslin, 2021; Nairz-Wirth & Feldmann, 2017; Zyngier, 2008). Because of these differences, young people may be excluded from education and thereby denied the benefits that education can bring (Atweh et al., 2008). It is my experience that young people themselves are unable to stand up and address any misperceived deficits within themselves or their families. The result is an unequal education system, where those young people who fit into the system of schooling are privileged, while those that do not become disengaged (Down & Choules, 2017) and are perceived as failures, and in turn, pathologised (Lewthwaite et al., 2017). The parents of these young people are then often left unsupported to find solutions to help their children.

Support for parents of disengaged young people is also important. A recent Senate report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023) on school refusal advocates for a need for schools to offer more support to parents because "parents and carers dealing with school refusal experience profound effects on their health and wellbeing, social connections, and

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employment and financial security” (p. 113). The report speaks of the shame, confusion and pressure experienced by the parents. Recommendations include financial assistance, support to help parents navigate the school system, and “consultation with people with lived experience” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023, p. 74). While the literature differentiates between school refusal and disengagement from education, I propose there is a strong link between the two because school refusal is seen as nearing the end point of the process of disengaging whereby young people refuse to attend school completely.

Research (e.g., Coles et al., 2023) reveals that the impacts of COVID-19 is further exacerbating the risk of young people disengaging from formal schooling. During the pandemic, schools changed the way they provided learning opportunities to students. These changes included online learning, lower expectations for attendance, and provision of take-home learning packs. It was speculated that such changes may lead to a lack of teacher support and poor peer, school and teacher connectedness, which may increase the risk of students disengaging from education (Coles et al., 2023). It was noted that the onset of pandemic-related school closures, online learning and cancelled or modified activities and events increased the risk of academic, behavioural and mental health concerns, leading to increased absenteeism (Coles et al., 2023). Reimers and Reimers (2022) reported that beyond the interruption to schooling caused by COVID-19, the pandemic is responsible for many other impacts on families that have diminished parents' ability to support their young people to engage in education. Due to the timing of data collection for this research, such information is outside the scope of this study.

1.2 Research Approach

This research adopts a qualitative, phenomenographic approach to investigate the experiences and perspectives of parents whose children are disengaging from education. Qualitative research relies on participants recounting their experiences (Lapan et al., 2012)

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and highlights the importance of interpreting data collected to enhance understanding of participants' experiences and understandings, while acknowledging challenges faced by the researcher (Barnacle, 2005). Phenomenography allows the researcher to examine participants' experiences of a particular phenomenon in a unique way by emphasising qualitative differences or variations in people's experiences (Marton, 1981). The approach aims to identify and describe the different ways people experience or understand a phenomenon (Marton, 1981). I considered phenomenography was appropriate for this study because it allowed me to fully explore the different ways that parents experience and understand the phenomenon of their child's disengagement from education. The approach also gave parents a much-needed voice and offered them a place to tell their story of their children's disengagement from education. This is fully explained in Chapter 5.

1.3 Key Definitions

For the purpose of this study, education refers to the process of being engaged in learning at mainstream primary and secondary schools. I use the word 'education' in the context of disengagement as opposed to 'school' for two reasons. First, because disengagement can take various forms. For example, young people can disengage from education completely or disengage from a school or even disengage from a classroom or the content of the lessons delivered in the classroom. Second, I conceptualise education as a process and school as the site where the education process takes place. I also use the term 'school system' throughout the study to describe the holistic ways of being a student within a school community, including the expectations of behaviour, engagement and the cultural capital of the school. I adopt term 'parent' rather than 'parent/carer' as all interviewed participants were the biological parents of the young people who are at the centre of this study. I use the term 'young person' to refer to the child of the parent participant as it reflects the age group of the children in this study, whose ages range from 12 to 17. This age group

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was selected as this is the period of secondary education in Australia where the highest rate of disengagement is recorded (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015).

Various terms are used to refer to young people who are not engaged in education. The official term is 'disengaged' (Smyth & Fasoli, 2007), but other terms in the literature include 'disaffected', 'at risk', 'alienated', 'detached', 'dropout', and 'disenfranchised'. The Queensland Department of Education (Department of Education and Training Queensland, 2017) in its *Framework for Maximising Engagement and Re-Engagement in Education* use the term 'disengagement'. This reflects an understanding of disengagement as a continuum, ranging from entirely absent from school, through to physically present but disengaged either cognitively, behaviourally or emotionally (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015). Given this study was conducted in Queensland and involved parent participants with young people attending Queensland Department of Education schools, the term 'disengagement' appears most suited.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis contains nine chapters. Chapter 1 has introduced the study, provided some background information, definitions of key terms, the research questions and a brief outline of the methodology. Chapter 2 explores the topic of engagement with education to provide a contrast to the main topic of disengagement from education, and to highlight what is expected of a young person when they are engaged in education. Chapter 3 continues reviewing the pertinent literature around disengagement from education, exploring the levels, dimensions and indicators of disengagement. The deficit perspective of disengagement is examined, and some alternative ways of viewing disengagement are offered. Chapter 4 investigates interventions for disengagement, some theories and models used to examine disengagement with a broader holistic view, as well as existing literature on parental perspectives. Chapter 5 offers an outline of the research approach, the theoretical stance, the phenomenographic approach, the interview process and data analysis. It concludes with an examination of the

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research's validity and some ethical considerations. Chapter 6 presents the parents' individual stories in narrative form. Chapter 7 presents three themes identified through analyses of the parent's narratives and comparing them to the literature examined in Chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 8 presents the categories of description which are the outcome space of a phenomenographical study. These categories of description explain the diverse ways the parents experienced their young person's disengagement from education. Chapter 9 concludes the thesis by answering the research questions and providing a summary of the key findings. This is followed by a discussion of the implications and limitations pertaining to this study and recommendations for further study.

Chapter 2: Engagement in Education

In this chapter, I explore engagement in education to highlight what is typically expected of young people when they are in a school and to offer a contrast to the topic of disengagement from education, explored in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. The chapter begins with an examination of the definitions and dimensions of engagement offered in the literature. This is followed by an exploration of the factors that contribute to and enhance engagement in education. Finally, I also consider one conceptual framework that enables a broad, holistic understanding of engagement, and the factors involved (Kahu, 2013). In phenomenography, a thorough examination of the literature is necessary to build a deep understanding of the field before beginning to analyse interview data. In alignment with a phenomenographic approach to research, where the participants are asked to share their understanding of the phenomenon, the researcher's knowledge of the field needs to be broad enough to analyse individual experiences of the phenomenon. I have delved deeply into the current literature on engagement and disengagement from education across Chapters 2, 3 and 4, to ensure a broad knowledge base to underpin analysis and discussion of the interview data.

2.1 What is Engagement in Education?

Engagement in education is poorly defined in the literature with no consensus on a definition (Wong et al., 2024). While it is clear that students learn better when they are engaged in education (Kahu, 2013), in Balwant's (2018, p. 394) words, researchers are "yet to identify what it is and what it is not". Some argue that engagement encompasses being occupied by education, while one's interest and attention is focused on participation in the social and academic aspects of school (Kahu, 2013). Others explain that engagement also involves building a meaningful connection with the school community (Bond et al., 2005). Christenson et al. (2012) state "*Engagement* refers to the extent of a student's active

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involvement in a learning activity” and go on to say it is a multidimensional construct. While Wong and Liem (2022, p.112) define engagement as “the quality of students’ participation in classroom activities”.

Educational engagement in adolescence is a powerful predictor of life-course outcomes. Longitudinal evidence from the 1970 British Cohort Study shows that being more engaged at age 16 predicts higher educational attainment, occupational status, and income well into midlife, even after accounting for childhood socioeconomic status and cognitive ability, because engagement builds competencies and channels social and educational resources over time (Symonds et al., 2023). Meta-analytic findings similarly indicate large associations between student engagement and both academic achievement and subjective well-being, underscoring the cumulative benefits of engagement for success and health across the lifespan (Wong et al., 2024). At the same time, research highlights that engagement is shaped by relational, contextual, and systemic conditions, particularly in regional and rural settings, pointing to the need for whole-school and cross-sector strategies to sustain engagement and alter student trajectories (Lawson & Lawson, 2020; Gossner et al., 2025).

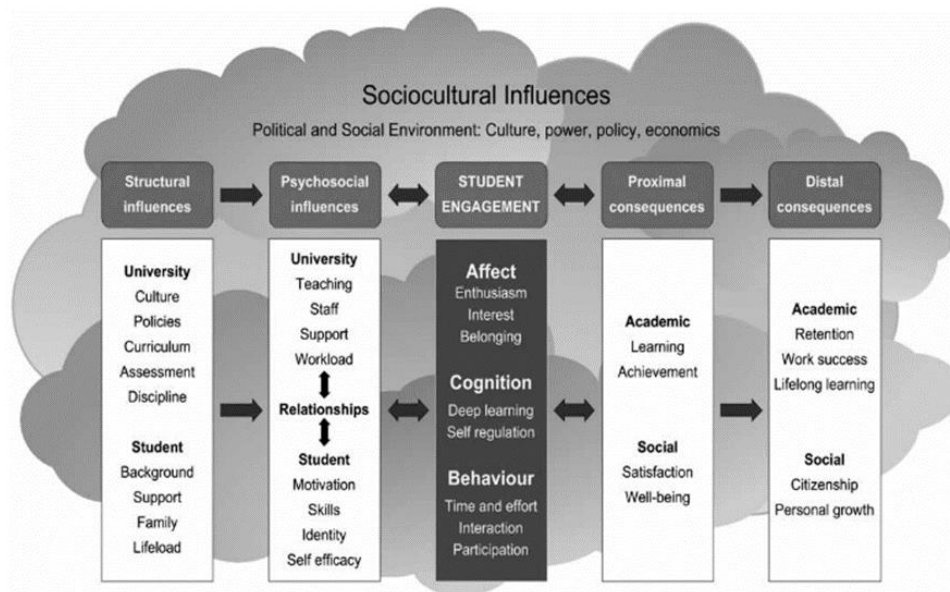
2.2 Socio-cultural Influences

Kahu (2013, p. 763) proposed that socio-cultural influences focus “on the impact of the broader social context on student experience”. Researchers have used such socio-cultural factors to examine students ‘who come from diverse backgrounds’ experiences and the difficulties they have navigating their learning in higher education institutions. This takes into account the social and institutional bias that often exists in education and such an approach encourages examination of the school culture. Kahu (2013) considers engagement to be the interplay between the individual and the environment. She posited therefore, that any discussion of engagement at school that did not examine the socio-cultural influences diminished the importance of the context in which education took place.

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The socio-cultural influences on engagement can be thought of as existing outside the young person. It relates to the surrounding influences that impact on the young person and their ability to engage in education (Kahu, 2013). For this study, the socio-cultural influences on engagement are seen as enhancing and contributing to the young person's engagement in education or alternatively contributing to their disengagement. Unlike the other three dimensions used in this study, it is not an internal dimension of their engagement.

Kahu's (2013) conceptual framework of engagement (see **Error! Reference source not found.**) offers a framework for understanding all the influences and consequences of engagement for young people. It demonstrates the complex interplay and unites both the internal state of engagement involving emotional (affect), behavioural, and cognitive dimensions and the external socio-cultural aspects of the school environment. This framework brings together six elements: socio-cultural influences, structural influences, psychosocial influences, student engagement, proximal consequences, and distal consequences (Kahu, 2013). While this framework was conceived from research into student engagement at universities, it is not improbable to fit this framework to student engagement in a school environment as the same elements are present within a school community. It is proposed that this framework may offer a holistic lens through which to view disengagement.

Figure 1*Conceptual framework of engagement (Kahu, 2013)*

Error! Reference source not found. illustrates the structural influences on engagement (Kahu, 2013) including university (or school) culture, policies, curriculum, assessment and discipline and the student's background, support, family and lifeload. Lifeload is described as an accumulation of all the pressures on student experiences. Structural influences also include the university (or school) teaching styles, staff, support available and work expectations. These are thought to be mediated by relationships between the school and the student. Structural influences are seen as more distant from the student, while psychosocial influences are considered to more immediately affect them. The psychosocial influences are stated to include, but are not limited to, motivation, skill level, identity as a learner and self-efficacy. This framework highlights that student engagement, involving emotional, behavioural and cognitive dimensions, is not the consequence of any one of these structural and psychosocial influences. Rather, it is impacted by the interactions between these factors (Kahu, 2013).

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There are two kinds of consequences outlined by Kahu (2013): proximal and distal. The proximal consequences include academic outcomes such as learning and achievement, and social outcomes such as students' wellbeing and satisfaction in their learning. These consequences not only impact a young person's engagement but also their psychosocial influences. Authentic engagement, students' meaningful cognitive, behavioural, emotional, and agentic participation in learning, operates as a developmental engine that links immediate (proximal) and long-term (distal) outcomes. Proximally, it stimulates academic learning and achievement alongside social outcomes such as satisfaction and wellbeing; these, in turn, strengthen motivation, skills, and self-efficacy, creating virtuous cycles that further deepen engagement (Kahu, 2013). Over time, these compounding gains accumulate into distal outcomes: persisting in school, success in further education and work, and sustained dispositions toward citizenship and lifelong learning (Kahu, 2013). The distal consequences of engagement are both academic and social. The academic consequences involve staying at school, work success and becoming a lifelong learner. The social consequences involve developing a sense of citizenship and a focus on ongoing personal growth, leading to a successful life (Kahu, 2013).

This distinction between proximal and distal consequences is particularly salient for understanding parental experiences of their child's disengagement. When parents observe their child withdrawing from education, they are likely responding not only to immediate, visible proximal consequences—declining grades, reduced motivation, or diminished wellbeing—but also to anticipated distal consequences such as school dropout, limited employment prospects, or compromised life outcomes (Kahu, 2013). This dual temporal perspective may intensify parental concern and shape their responses to disengagement. Understanding how parents navigate between addressing immediate academic and social needs while simultaneously considering longer-term trajectories is therefore central to this

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study. The framework of proximal and distal consequences thus provides a lens for interpreting the complexity and urgency that characterises parental experience of educational disengagement.

2.3 Dimensions of Engagement

In Table 1 below, all dimensions of engagement are presented with the key authors who have written on the specific dimension. Below the table, the discussion outlines the many dimensions of engagement in order to clarify the rationale for focusing on the overarching dimensions of engagement proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004): behavioural engagement, emotional engagement and cognitive engagement.

Table 1

Dimensions of engagement in education

Dimension	Authors
Behavioural engagement	Anderson et al. (2004); Fredricks et al. (2004); Gregory et al. (2014); Harris (2011); Kahu (2013)
Academic engagement	Anderson et al. (2004); Finn and Zimmer (2012); Harris (2011)
Cognitive engagement	Balwant (2018); Bundick et al. (2014); Finn and Zimmer (2012); Fredricks et al. (2004); Gregory et al. (2014); Harris (2011)
Psychological engagement	Harris (2011); Kahu (2013)
Emotional engagement	Christenson et al. (2012); Fredricks et al. (2004); Gregory et al. (2014)
Affective engagement	Finn and Zimmer (2012)
Social engagement	Finn and Zimmer (2012)
School engagement	Pietarinen et al. (2014)

Learning engagement	Pietarinen et al. (2014)
Procedural engagement	Bempechat and Shernoff (2012)
Substantive engagement	Bempechat and Shernoff (2012)
Agentic engagement	Reeve and Shin (2020)

Behavioural engagement is described as young people's "attendance, compliance with school rules, and participation in classroom and extracurricular activities" (Harris, 2011, p. 377). Anderson et al. (2004) highlighted the importance of behaviours such as attendance, participation and paying attention. Behavioural engagement is related to on task behaviour and adhering to the classroom rules according to Fredricks et al. (2004), who also stated that behavioural engagement incorporates motivation, putting in effort, persisting in tasks, concentrating, questioning and joining classroom discussions. However, Finn and Zimmer (2012) identified these behaviours as part of social engagement. Behavioural engagement has been linked to academic achievement, as the more time spent on task and in the classroom, the more a student will learn (Gregory et al., 2014). Therefore, for this study, behavioural engagement is considered an important dimension of engagement because attendance, compliance, participation, motivation, persistence and joining classroom discussions are essential elements of learning in schools.

Academic engagement can be understood as the observable behaviours displayed by a young person who is involved in the learning process (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Anderson et al. (2004, p. 97) defined academic engagement "as work completion and accuracy, class preparation, eagerness to learn, and persistence". Harris (2011) stated academic engagement is evidenced by the time a young person spends doing schoolwork, participating in classroom activities or doing homework. Academic engagement can be conceptualised as what a young person is seen to do that engages them with their learning, however, this at times, is considered part of cognitive engagement (Gregory et al., 2014; Kahu, 2013). Fredricks et al.

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(2004) notably positioned these observable behaviours attributed to academic engagement as part of behavioural engagement because they involve the behaviours of engaging with learning. Since elements of academic engagement sit within behavioural engagement and cognitive engagement, academic engagement is not considered a separate dimension for this study.

Cognitive engagement can be understood as the effort and psychological investment directed towards learning and understanding (Balwant, 2018; Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Research on cognitive engagement encompasses motivation and self-regulated learning (Balwant, 2018; Fredricks et al., 2004). Harris (2011, p. 377) stated that “cognitive engagement appears to have the strongest relationship with improvements in student learning”. This is not surprising if we consider that students who are cognitively engaged in education use metacognitive strategies in planning and evaluating their own thinking and monitoring their own learning (Bundick et al., 2014). The ability to plan and evaluate your own learning, motivation, effort and psychological investment in learning are essential for success in schools. For these reasons, cognitive engagement is included as a significant dimension of engagement for this study.

Psychological, emotional, and affective engagement are interrelated dimensions. Psychological engagement can be understood as involving factors such as enjoyment, a sense of belonging, having an interest in school, feeling supported and retaining a positive attitude towards school and learning (Harris, 2011). Notably, psychological engagement is viewed as malleable, fluctuating in strength and responding to environmental influences, which allows for improvements in engagement (Kahu, 2013). Emotional engagement involves feelings and beliefs about education, similarly, encompassing enjoyment and interest in education. Emotional engagement has been related to attachment and the concept of having a sense of belonging to a school community (Harris, 2011). Christenson et al. (2012, p. 38) described

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emotional engagement as also comprising “affect (positive and negative) in interactions with teachers, peers, schoolwork, and the school”. Affective engagement is described similarly to emotional engagement. It affords students a reason to participate and persist in education. However, it is not seen as directly influencing academic achievement but rather as influencing other forms of engagement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). For this study, given the similarities between psychological, affective and emotional engagement, I will use the term emotional engagement.

Social engagement, according to Finn and Zimmer (2012), is where a student has high attendance rates, is present in the classroom and is interacting well. Social engagement impacts on academic engagement. Students who are socially engaged follow the rules of the school and classroom, including those expectation or norms that are unwritten; they will know how to behave appropriately. These aspects of social engagement fit within the previously mentioned behavioural dimension of engagement. Finn and Zimmer (2012) also stated that socially engaged students have positive interactions with other students and with teachers, which is encompassed by emotional engagement. All of these elements moderate their cognitive engagement in education (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). For this study, therefore, social engagement is not considered a separate dimension of engagement.

School engagement and learning engagement are proposed by Pietarinen et al. (2014) as a two-dimensional way of viewing engagement. School engagement is proposed to involve the dimensions of behavioural engagement and emotional engagement. This could be thought of as ‘doing’ school properly, following the rules, engaging socially with teachers and peers, and generally fitting in at school. Their other proposed dimension of engagement is learning engagement by which they mean being cognitively engaged in learning the academic curriculum. School engagement is perceived to involve building a sense of belonging in school and school attachment, while learning engagement involves motivation

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and self-regulated learning (Pietarinen et al., 2014). Within this study, school and learning engagement fit within the dimension of cognitive engagement, as outlined above.

Procedural and substantive engagement, proposed by Bempechat and Shernoff (2012) is a two-dimensional model of engagement. Procedural engagement can be thought of as merely going through the motions without any deep commitment to the process. This dimension is often the result of compliance to authority, as already attributed to behavioural engagement. These researchers stated substantive engagement is indicated by “deep processing” and “intrinsic motivation”. Bempechat and Shernoff (2012, p. 318) , which have been discussed above as cognitive engagement. They therefore conceive of substantive engagement as more likely than procedural engagement to involve positive attitudes towards education and motivation to achieve at school. Bempechat and Shernoff (2012) suggested that students who are substantively engaged achieve a state of flow during learning episodes. Csikszentmihalyi (2014) characterised flow as being fully in the moment and deeply engaged without distraction. To operationalise engagement for the purposes of their study, these researchers proposed these two dimensions of engagement as a way of identifying young people who were highly motivated and academically resilient (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012). While both procedural and substantive engagement are of interest to describe a young person's engagement with education, as indicated they fit within behavioural and cognitive engagement and will not be considered as separate dimensions of engagement for this study.

Agentic engagement (Reeve & Shin, 2020) represents students feeling a sense of agency in the classroom. When they have a sense of agency, students constructively contribute to the flow of instruction. They take action and behave in ways that demonstrate motivation and interest in the learning (Reeve & Shin, 2020). Agentic engagement involves aspects of behavioural and cognitive engagement which are explored in more depth in this study.

This study adopts Fredricks et al. (2004) three-dimensional framework of engagement: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Behavioural engagement encompasses efforts toward academic achievement, on-task classroom behaviour, and adherence to school expectations. Cognitive engagement focuses on the learning process and its relationship to academic outcomes. Emotional engagement incorporates psychological and affective dimensions, reflecting students' attachment to school and sense of belonging. Other engagement dimensions identified in the literature—including academic, social, procedural, and substantive engagement—are subsumed within these three primary categories and therefore not treated as distinct constructs in this study..

2.4 Factors that Contribute to Enhancing Engagement in Education

Understanding the factors that are conducive to young people being engaged in education can inform the work schools are doing to reduce student disengagement from education. With insight into these factors, we can enhance our comprehension of young people's needs and ultimately create more engaging educational environments (Carrington et al., 2013). Many factors that contribute to enhancing engagement in education are reported in the literature. Here I have organised these into family and school factors.

There are two main family factors that strongly influence student engagement, family engagement with the school, and the young people's relatedness to their parents (Davis & Lambie, 2005; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Gil et al., 2021). Family engagement with the school leads to consistent attendance, higher achievement, homework completion, increase in positive attitudes, better behaviour, higher aspirations and a higher likelihood of enrolment in tertiary education (Davis & Lambie, 2005). Furrer and Skinner (2003) discussed young people's relatedness to their parents as a predictor of their motivation to engage in education, Gossner et al. (2025) extend on this stating that poor parent-child relationships impact on the young people's ability to form positive relationships at school. Young people who have a

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strong level of relatedness to their parents enter the classroom with a willingness to engage and follow the classroom agenda (Gil et al., 2021). Young people who come from families with low levels of conflict, low mobility and no family history of problems with school are more likely to engage in education (Bond et al., 2005; Gil et al., 2021).

Research consistently identifies a set of school-level conditions that significantly enhance student engagement, spanning curriculum, pedagogy, climate/structures, student voice, and community partnerships. Drawing on earlier syntheses (Murray et al., 2004; Ali & Hassan, 2018) and recent updates, these conditions are mutually reinforcing rather than discrete silos.

First, curriculum design centres on relevance and purpose: engaging schools link content to students' daily experiences and futures and share responsibility and control with students over the learning process through meaningful choices and authentic tasks (Wong & Liem, 2022; Yau et al., 2022). Multidisciplinary, rigorous assessments signal high expectations while allowing multiple ways to demonstrate understanding.

Second, pedagogy and teacher practice matter. Effective teachers facilitate learning by building caring, respectful relationships, setting clear goals, scaffolding challenge, and using formative assessment to guide both collaborative and independent learning (Wong & Liem, 2022). Ongoing professional development maintains current subject knowledge and pedagogical skill (Patall et al., 2024).

Third, school climate, structures, and supports create the conditions for engagement. A climate characterized by belonging, justice, and consistency underpins students' willingness to invest effort and persist (Ali & Hassan, 2018). Inclusive practices ensure students of all ability levels learn together in respectful, diverse classrooms. Evidence suggests that, within typical ranges, smaller classes can enhance students' perceptions of academic progress, which may in turn support engagement (e.g., 12–32 students; Thijs et al.,

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2010). Fair consistently applied rules, and a rich menu of extracurricular opportunities expand pathways for participation beyond the classroom (Ali & Hassan, 2018).

Fourth, student voice and community partnerships extend engagement beyond lessons. Students are more engaged when they experience agency and are heard in matters affecting their learning (Smyth, 2006; Xu et al., 2023). Community engagement enriches curriculum and connects learners with external supports, reducing risk of disengagement and broadening relevance (Murray et al., 2004; Thomas & Dymment, 2019).

Cross-cutting these domains, the quality of relationships, teacher–student and peer–peer, is a central mechanism through which culture, pedagogy, and content become engaging in practice (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Gossner et al., 2025). Recent qualitative evidence from regional and rural contexts reiterates that relational, contextual, and structural conditions coalesce to shape engagement opportunities and barriers (Gossner et al., 2025). Taken together, these principles have been stable for two decades, and contemporary studies confirm they remain critical levers for engagement today, highlighting an enduring gap between research knowledge and system-level reform (Gossner et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2023).

In summary, engagement in education while poorly defined, is described as consisting of a number of dimensions, factors and influences that contribute to enhancing student engagement in their education. I have presented Kahu's (2013) conceptual framework of engagement to offer an overview of the dimensions, factors and influences of engagement that interact to either enhance a young person's engagement in education or contribute to their disengagement from education. For this study, I refer only to behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions of engagement as they are the most common dimensions in the literature, and they encompass other dimensions mentioned in the literature. Finally, I have considered family and school factors that influence a young person's engagement in

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education to offer possible influences that may impact on the young people whose families I interview for this study.,

Chapter 3 begins to examine the phenomenon of disengagement from education. It starts by examining how researchers have conceptualized and framed disengagement within educational contexts. The chapter then delineates the various levels at which young people may experience disengagement, including at the content, classroom, school, or education level. Following this, it explores the dimensions of disengagement, categorized as behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. Subsequently, the chapter discusses key indicators of disengagement and examines deficit perspectives alongside alternative viewpoints on disengagement from education. Finally, the chapter identifies the risk factors associated with disengagement, offering insights into early detection and intervention when young people begin to disengage.

Chapter 3: Disengagement from Education: levels, dimensions, indicators, deficit perspective, alternative views and risk factors

This chapter explores disengagement from education. Figure 2 below offers a visual representation to help understand the flow of the chapter. It begins with a brief exploration of what is disengagement from education and sets the scene for how researchers have framed it over time. The chapter then explains various levels of a young person's disengagement: content, classroom, school or education itself, before exploring the dimensions of disengagement from education: behavioural, emotional and cognitive. The chapter then continues with a discussion of the indicators of disengagement before reviewing deficit perspectives of disengagement from education. It then explores possible ways of reframing disengagement from education. Finally, the risk factors of disengagement are highlighted to facilitate early identification of young people who are beginning to disengage from education.

Figure 2*Outline of Chapter Three*

What is Disengagement and historical context							
Levels of Disengagement							
Education	School		Classroom		Content		
Dimensions of Disengagement							
Emotional		Cognitive			Behavioural		
Indicators of Disengagement							
Early failure to achieve	Disconnecting from school norms and expectations	Poor student-teacher relationships	Student mobility	Defensive pessimism or self-handicapping	Behaviour problems, absence, failure and lack of commitment	Peer group expectations and social status	
Deficit Perspectives of Disengagement							
Not fitting the system		Deficits in power			Blaming and labelling young people		
Reframing Disengagement							
A way for students to claim agency	School as a poor fit for young people	Discursive relationships between school and young people	School factors that can lead to disengagement	A combination of individual and system factors	Not valuing the curriculum	Cultural Consciousness	Future time perspectives
Risk factors contributing to disengagement							
Risk factors associated with parents and families	Ways young people engage with school		Young people's absence from school		Schools and teachers		

3.1 What is Disengagement?

Disengagement from education, similar to engagement in education, is also poorly defined (Duffy & Elwood, 2013). Disengagement from education refers to a withdrawal or disconnection from the learning process, manifesting across behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. It is a process that occurs overtime and varies in terms of the ways it manifests for each individual (Gossner et al., 2025).

Disengagement from education can be considered as a process or an outcome. As a process, disengagement is something that happens over time. As an outcome, disengagement

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from education is the total withdrawal from education, when the young person stops attending any school or engaging in any educational activity. This has variably been termed school refusal, school phobia, school dropout, school avoidance, truancy, chronic absenteeism and extended non-attendance (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Commonwealth of Australia, 2023; Gase et al., 2016; Richardson, 2016; Sahin et al., 2016). All these conditions describe students who, for a myriad of reasons, are not attending school at all and can be considered as completely disengaged from education.

3.1.1 Disengagement from education – historical context

Disengagement from education became a topic of research in the 1980s due to high youth unemployment rates. Allan and Duckworth (2018, p. 45) linked disengagement from education to “the collapse of the youth labour market in the late 1970s”. Young Australians in the 1950s and 1960s had a clear pathway from education to employment; those who left formal education at age 15 entered full-time work. This “linear transition from school to work came to an end” in the 1970s as the post-war boom ended (Denny & Churchill, 2016, p. 7). With the restructuring of the Australian workforce in the late 1980s and the recession in the 1990s, youth unemployment soared to 25%. This led to a realisation of the need for secondary and tertiary qualifications to improve employment opportunities. This, in turn, led to the current policy of “learning or earning” (Bland, 2012, p. 75) for all young people, which, with its focus on productivity and competition, further destabilised the transition from school to work (Denny & Churchill, 2016). Since this time, engagement from education has been an important government policy agenda.

The implications of disengagement from education are serious and of great concern in Australia because disengagement can lead to lifelong challenges. Young people who disengage from education experience greater risk of substance abuse, homelessness, anti-social or criminal behaviour, unemployment or menial employment, welfare dependency,

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mental illness, and suicide (Burns et al., 2021; Burns et al., 2008; Christle et al., 2007; Hancock & Zubrick, 2015; Lumby, 2012; Watterson & O'Connell, 2019; Wilson et al., 2011).

The size of the problem is difficult to understand as the number of young people who are disengaged from education is difficult to accurately assess. Some studies report on students who are not fully engaged in education or work (Wilson et al., 2011), while others report on non-completion of Year 12 (Down & Choules, 2017; Evans & DiBenedetto, 1991) and yet others focus on disengagement as being unproductive (Down & Choules, 2017; Goss et al., 2017; Hancock & Zubrick, 2015; Wang & Fredricks, 2014). The percentage of disengaged young people in Australia is variably reported as being from 20% to 40% (Down & Choules, 2017; Goss et al., 2017; Hancock & Zubrick, 2015; Oliveira & Lathrop, 2022; Wang & Fredricks, 2014; Wilson et al., 2011). Down and Choules (2017) reported that between 30% and 40% of students do not complete Year 12. Goss et al. (2017) and Oliveira and Lathrop (2022) found that up to 40% of students are disengaged and unproductive in schools. Hancock and Zubrick (2015) however, stated that only 20% of students can be considered disengaged from education to some degree. More recently, studies tend to report on drops in attendance rates or retainment to year 12, rather than disengagement. For example, Groves et al. (2025, p. 6) state “Semester 1, 2023, the attendance rate for students in Years 1 to 10 (all sectors) was 88.6%, 2.1 percentage points higher than 2022, but still 2.8 percentage points lower than 2019”.

3.2 Levels of disengagement

Disengagement is not a single event but a nested, dynamic process that can surface in different parts of schooling. Young people may disconnect from the content they are asked to learn, from the everyday life of the classroom, from a particular school, or from formal education more broadly—and these can occur in combination. For instance, a student may value learning yet leave a specific school after having negative experiences there or remain

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socially engaged with peers while finding the curriculum irrelevant. Ross (2009) captures this spectrum as three interrelated levels: first, students who are disengaged from school but not from education, evident in behaviours such as disliking school or skipping classes while still expressing a desire to learn; second, students who are attached to school routines but hold low aspirations, anticipating unskilled work and expressing no intention for higher education; and third, a more concerning group who are disengaged from education in all forms, reporting low aspirations, hostile attitudes toward school, higher truancy, and broadly negative views of learning.

Content-level disengagement typically emerges when students cannot see why they are learning particular material, have little interest in it, or struggle to connect it to their lived experience. When purpose and relevance are opaque, students can feel alienated and frustrated, and disengagement from the material can gradually widen into disengagement from schooling (Egbert & Roe, 2014; Down & Choules, 2017; Reichenberg, 2018). Perceived lack of autonomy compounds this pattern: when students experience little control over what or how they learn, disengagement often presents as disruption, refusal to work, off-task socialising, or truancy (Allan & Duckworth, 2018; Reichenberg, 2018).

At the classroom level, disengagement is visible in both withdrawal and disruption. Students may drift to the margins, daydreaming, remaining silent, or avoiding participation, or they may seek status through behaviours such as persistent chatting, wandering, joking, or interfering with others (Ravet, 2007; Reichenberg, 2018). Peer dynamics can reinforce these behaviours when group norms reward resistance to learning, while lesson content that students regard as lacking value can intensify disengagement (Reichenberg, 2018). An alternative lens locates classroom disengagement in the breakdown of the pedagogical relationship itself: when the relational fabric between teacher and student frays, participation and effort often follow (Beutel, 2003).

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Disengagement at the school level is multifactorial, shaped by climate, structures, relationships, and policy settings. Contemporary Australian evidence shows sectoral differences in climate and engagement and that behavioural engagement is the strongest predictor of reading and numeracy, while bullying harms achievement, patterns that point to safety, fairness, and meaningful participation as critical levers rather than sector alone (Tomaszewski et al., 2024). Qualitative work from regional–rural contexts highlight additional system-level barriers, conflicting priorities, rigid structures, limited capacity to meet diverse needs, staff shortages, heavy testing, timetabling/homework load, and outdated behaviour management, that depress engagement (Gossner et al., 2025). Longitudinal multilevel research indicates that school social capital, trusting, supportive teacher–student relationships, reduces school burnout and boosts achievement, with classmates' family social capital also contributing (Lindfors et al., 2018). Meta-analytic evidence confirms strong links between student engagement and both academic achievement and subjective well-being, underscoring the centrality of conditions that foster engagement (Wong et al., 2024). Earlier U.S. findings of higher disengagement in very large schools and differences by sector and academic orientation remain informative but require contextual qualification (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Taken together, schools that cultivate social capital, safe and fair climates, and relevant, adaptable curricula with student voice are less likely to see disengagement, whereas weak social capital and inflexible, one-size-fits-all structures elevate risk (Gossner et al., 2025; Lindfors et al., 2018; Tomaszewski et al., 2024).

Total disengagement from education is the most concerning form because a wholesale rejection of schooling sharply constrains life opportunities. Often it follows “tipping points” at which young people cease attending altogether. Lessard et al. (2008) describe several such pivotal moments: critical life incidents (e.g., being struck by a vehicle en route to school or an unintended pregnancy), escalating student–teacher conflict that culminates in a final

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confrontation after which the student leaves to end the struggle, and academic collapse, whether the accumulation of failures across the year or poor performance in high-stakes examinations, experienced as a decisive signal to give up. For others, burnout emerges from chronic overload as part-time employment and schoolwork become untenable, with the continual effort to meet competing demands eroding capacity and precipitating withdrawal.

Across the levels, disengagement is nested and dynamic: it often begins with difficulty connecting to the content, when purpose, relevance, or autonomy are opaque, which then surfaces as classroom withdrawal or disruption (e.g., silence, off-task talk, status-seeking interference), especially where pedagogical relationships are strained (Egbert & Roe, 2014; Ravet, 2007; Beutel, 2003). Repeated negative classroom experiences can accumulate into school-level detachment, avoiding spaces, routines, or staff in a setting that feels unsafe, unfair, or inflexible, until students change schools despite still valuing learning (Ross, 2009). Where misfit at the school level persists, disengagement can generalise into a global stance toward education, with aspirations shrinking and attendance patterns fracturing, sometimes precipitated by tipping points such as escalating teacher–student conflict, academic collapse, critical life incidents, or burnout from competing demands (Lessard et al., 2008). The causal arrows also run the other way: a poor school–student fit or rigid structures can drive classroom friction and content avoidance, and peer norms that reward resistance can pull disengagement downward through the levels. Conversely, relevance and choice at the task level, relational and autonomy-supportive pedagogy in the classroom, safe and fair school climates with student voice, and flexible pathways at the school/system level can interrupt these trajectories and reopen routes back to learning. Designing supports that align these levers across content, classroom, school, and system is therefore key to preventing shallow disengagement from deepening into total withdrawal.

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The above levels of disengagement intersect with dimensions of disengagement which include emotional, behavioural, or cognitive disengagement (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015), explored in Section 3.1.3 below.

3.3 Dimensions of disengagement

Building upon the theoretical framework established in Chapter 2, this study adopts a three-dimensional conceptualization of educational disengagement, focusing on the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions identified by Fredricks et al. (2004) and further refined by Wong et al. (2024). This tripartite framework was selected because these dimensions are the most extensively researched and theoretically robust, effectively encompassing the broader spectrum of disengagement manifestations identified across the literature.

Emotional disengagement represents the erosion of young people's psychological and affective connection to their educational environment. This dimension manifests when students develop negative attitudes toward schooling, demonstrate diminished commitment and motivation, and fundamentally devalue the educational process (Fredricks et al., 2004). The emotionally disengaged student experiences a profound disconnection from the school community, characterized by poor teacher-student relationships marked by disrespect and conflict (Wang & Peck, 2013). Furthermore, these young people report diminished feelings of autonomy and enjoyment in classroom settings, while simultaneously experiencing heightened work pressure and stress (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016). This emotional withdrawal creates a barrier to meaningful educational participation, as students who lack a sense of belonging struggle to invest psychologically in their learning journey (Li & Lerner, 2012; Tomaszewski et al., 2024).

The behavioral dimension encompasses the visible actions and conduct patterns that signal withdrawal from educational participation. While this dimension is most readily

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identified through disruptive behaviors—including chronic absenteeism, tardiness, classroom disruption, and disrespectful conduct (Gossner et al., 2025; Reichenberg, 2018) it also encompasses more subtle manifestations that may escape institutional notice. Paradoxically, students who withdraw into silence and passivity, while appearing compliant, may be equally disengaged behaviorally, yet their disengagement remains largely invisible to educators focused on managing disruptive behaviors (Wong et al., 2024). This dual nature of behavioral disengagement—both overt and covert—presents significant challenges for early identification and intervention.

Cognitive disengagement reflects the degree to which young people withdraw their intellectual investment from the educational process. This dimension is characterized by minimal cognitive effort, lack of persistence when confronting academic challenges, and poor self-regulation skills (Fredricks et al., 2004; Gossner et al., 2025). Beyond mere effort, cognitive disengagement encompasses students' metacognitive approaches to learning, including their strategic thinking about academic tasks and their willingness to engage with intellectual challenge (Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011). When cognitively disengaged, students demonstrate an aversion to academic challenge and fail to develop the self-regulatory mechanisms necessary for sustained learning engagement.

While this three-dimensional framework provides a valuable analytical lens for understanding disengagement, it is crucial to recognize that these dimensions do not operate in isolation, nor do they capture the full complexity of the phenomenon. Educational disengagement cannot be understood solely as an individual deficit; rather, it emerges from the complex interplay between individual characteristics and broader systemic factors including peer influences, family dynamics, school culture, community contexts, and media influences (Burns et al., 2008; Gossner et al., 2025).

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The pathways to disengagement are further complicated by exclusionary practices embedded within educational systems, including institutional racism, socioeconomic discrimination, assumptions about youth capabilities, and the privileging of forms of social capital (Piscitello et al., 2022). Geographic isolation, disability-related barriers, and family involvement with justice systems create additional structural impediments to engagement (Gossner et al., 2025). Moreover, contemporary challenges such as part-time work commitments, bullying, family conflict, attachment difficulties, and learning disabilities create multiple, often intersecting pathways to disengagement (Coles et al., 2023; Gossner et al., 2025; Wong et al., 2024). Understanding these multifaceted influences is essential for developing comprehensive approaches to re-engagement that address both individual and systemic factors contributing to educational disconnection.

3.4 Indicators of Disengagement from Education

Many studies identify indicators of student disengagement from education, in the hope that early identification may allow for interventions to prevent or disrupt disengagement. This section discusses the following indicators of disengagement: early failure to achieve; disconnecting from the norms of school; poor student-teacher relationships; student mobility; lack of adaptability; defensive pessimism or self-handicapping; behaviour problems, absences, failure and lack of commitment; and peer group expectations and social status. The indicators examined below represent the most common indicators in the literature examined. They are presented to provide background for understanding how the young people, whose parents are interviewed for this study, were demonstrating their disengagement from education.

3.4.1 Early failure to achieve

Failure to achieve in the early years of education is considered an indicator of possible future disengagement (Martins et al., 2022). When young people experience a sense of failure early on, they may give up trying and identify as being not good at school. This negative self-perception can foster a sense of helplessness, which can result in students withdrawing from active participation in their education (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Watterson and O'Connell (2019, p. 24) emphasised the seriousness of early academic failure, noting that “one in five children start school behind their peers, and half of these do not finish their education or go on to employment.” Collectively, these findings underscore that early failure to achieve is not just a temporary setback, but a powerful predictor of future educational disengagement (Martins et al., 2022).

3.4.2 Disconnecting from school norms and expectations

A student's disconnection from school norms and expectations is a strong indicator that they are on the path toward educational disengagement. This process often emerges in the middle years of schooling, typically in Years 6 and/or 7, when students are transitioning from primary school to a new environment in secondary school. At this time social status becomes important to young people and exhibiting behaviours that challenge school norms and expectations can gain higher social status among peers (Balfanz et al., 2007; Galvan et al., 2011; Martins et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2019). Over time, disengaging from school norms and expectations leads to a breakdown in the bond students form with school, leading to academic failure and eventual disengagement from education (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2012; Martins et al., 2022).

3.4.3 *Poor student-teacher relationships*

Poor relationships between students and teachers can be indicative of disengagement from education (Gossner et al., 2025; Katsantonis, 2025). Teachers often come from different socio-economic backgrounds and circumstances than the students at their school, which can create a disconnect (Hendrickson, 2012). Disconnections between teachers and students can lead to poor relationships and to teachers offering more support to those young people who are more academically focused, than to those who are not (Mikami et al., 2012). Disequilibrium in support may lead students to feel alienated, further contributing to their disengagement. Addressing these relational gaps is therefore essential to preventing long term disengagement and enhancing student engagement with education (Gossner et al., 2025; Martins et al., 2022).

3.4.4 *Student mobility*

Student mobility, or frequently changing schools, may also indicate disengagement from education. When a family moves their child from school to school, they are often responding to the early signs of disengagement and are seeking a more appropriate fit for their child's education (Degroote et al., 2020). Young people with high school mobility often experience a number of risk factors such as poor behaviour, low academic results, extended absence from school, family dysfunction, lower socio-economic status and other family problems (Stamp et al., 2022). Ultimately, mobility risks complete disengagement from school and/or education. While dated, it is interesting to note that Gasper et al. (2012, p.490) compared students who are 'stayers' to those who are mobile and noted that changing schools increased the likelihood of dropping out of school by between 6 % and 9 %.

Student mobility also has detrimental effects for schools. It disrupts the flow of teaching as teachers are compelled to divert their attention from the class as a whole to the new student and the need to catch them up with the work the class has already done (Stamp et

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al., 2022). There is also disruption to student support services as these are halted for staff to build foundational relationships with new students to get to know them and their needs first. This interruption can have detrimental effects on the new student's engagement because it delays access to support services and, in turn, reduces the student's ability to develop a sense of belonging in the school community (Jones, 2024).

3.4.5 *Defensive pessimism or self-handicapping*

Defensive pessimism and self-handicapping represent two strategies students adopt to protect their self-worth, which can be early indicators of disengagement. Defensive pessimism involves students having unrealistically low academic expectations in the hope of buffering themselves against failure (De Castella et al., 2013). In other words, if the young person expects to perform poorly and they do, then they will not be disappointed. If they do better than expected, they can feel a sense of achievement. De Castella et al.'s (2013) research, however, revealed that defensive pessimism can backfire as it leads to lower grades and, more stress, increasing psychological problems over time – factors which can lead to disengagement.

Self-handicapping involves deflecting the cause of failure away from the self through deliberate efforts to create obstacles (De Castella & Byrne, 2015; De Castella et al., 2013). For example, procrastination, avoiding tasks, not making an effort or doing any practice, feigning sickness, substance abuse and staying up late to induce tiredness. In this way the young person can attribute failure to external factors rather than ability. In De Castella et al. (2013, p. 862) words “If I leave study to the last minute, then I failed because of this, not because of my ability”.

3.4.6 Behaviour problems, absences, academic failure and lack of commitment

Behaviour problems, ongoing absences, and subject failure were identified as key indicators of disengagement (Gossner, et al., 2025), with Mac Iver and Messel (2013) finding that these same factors predicted reduced likelihood of high school graduation and college enrollment. In other research, Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir (2012), studying school engagement with a sample of 832 Icelandic adolescents, found poor behaviour, a lack of emotional commitment to education and disinterest and boredom during the high school years are indicators of disengagement. They highlighted that students' behavioural and emotional disengagement from school, during Years 9 and 10, predicted their likely educational pathway in the senior years and that students who unexpectedly dropped out in the senior years were behaviourally and emotionally disengaged at age 14. Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir (2012) concluded that the extent of disengagement at age 14 was the best indicator of total disengagement or dropping out and that students who display disengagement behaviours should be identified for early intervention.

3.4.7 Peer group expectations and social status

Peer group expectations and young people's social status were examined as indicators of disengagement in a US study by Galvan et al. (2011). Their findings indicated that in Years 4 and 5 of primary school young people who were disengaged were perceived to have a lower social status. Those who were academically engaged were seen as 'cool' (2011, p. 347). This changed dramatically in Year 7 of middle school where those who were disengaged from education were seen to have a higher social status. At this age, challenging adult authority and exhibiting poor academic behaviour increased peer acceptance. Galvan et al. (2011) concluded that a peer culture that glorifies disengagement could be an indicator of disengagement from education. These dated findings are supported by Gossner et al. (2025) who indicate that peers influence a young person's disengagement as young people who

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attempt to connect with their peers, may do so through anti-social behaviours or associating with peers who truant.

In summary, the literature identifies a large number of indicators that have been shown to impact on a young person's ability to engage meaningfully with learning – early failure to achieve, disconnection from school norms and expectations, poor student-teacher relationships, student mobility, defensive pessimism or self-handicapping, behaviour problems, absences, academic failure and lack of commitment, and peer group expectations and social status. These indicators provide guidance for schools looking to reduce disengagement. It is my premise that proactively recognising and addressing indicators as early as possible, particularly during key transitional periods, is essential for breaking disengagement.

3.5 Deficit Perspectives of Disengagement

The issue of disengagement is commonly perceived from a deficit perspective, where the young person or their family is considered to be at fault. The causes of disengagement are perceived by school staff as laying purely within the control of the young people themselves or related to their family circumstances. This discourse appears in the media, is heard in staff rooms and at parent-teacher meetings and is seen on report cards (Bahou, 2017; Bland, 2012; Callingham, 2013; Down & Choules, 2017; Harris, 2011; Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; McGregor, 2017; Zyngier, 2008). Given the regularity of the deficit discourse, this section explores deficit perspectives to highlight ways that students are pathologised and blamed for their disengagement or are labelled as having social, emotional or behavioural difficulties. Importantly, deficit framings rarely stop at the student; they extend to parents, who are frequently construed as the root of disengagement (e.g., “poor parenting,” “low value for education,” or “non-compliance”), shaping how schools interact with families and how families experience school (Allan & Duckworth, 2018; Gossner et al.,

2025). These framings matter because they influence access to support, the tenor of parent–school encounters, and whether families feel able to partner with schools, or withdraw in self-protection.

3.5.1 Young people who do not fit the system

Young people who do not fit the system may be perceived by Teachers and other school personnel as having a deficit. These deficits are often associated with the family circumstances, such as economic status, poor parenting or low parental education (Allan & Duckworth, 2018; Gossner et al., 2025). The consequences of a deficit perspective for the young person are lower levels of social capital, marginalisation and a silenced voice. Staff attempts to include young people who do not fit the system can appear at times to be tokenistic. For example, where staff insist that a young person who does not hold the necessary capital, participate and speak on behalf of all marginalised young people in the school. This, in turn, leads to poor behaviour and “resistance to learning” (Allan & Duckworth, 2018, p. 44). Further exacerbating things, young people with low social capital could lack language skills and, consequently, what they say may be misunderstood and/or perceived as unimportant. This leads to frustration for the young person and reinforces disengagement (Allan & Duckworth, 2018).

For parents, the “poor fit” narrative often translates into being judged at parent–teacher meetings, positioned as lacking the “right” knowledge or cultural capital, or being asked to secure assessments and services with minimal say in the process. Families with less social capital or for whom English is not the first language may find their perspectives discounted or misunderstood, compounding a sense of marginalisation and reducing capacity to advocate effectively for their child (Allan & Duckworth, 2018; Gossner et al., 2025). This parental disenfranchisement can then be read by staff as “hard to engage,” reinforcing the original deficit gaze.

3.5.2 *Deficits in power*

Hayes refers to the “political technologies of power” (Hayes, 2005, p. 685) evident within school communities which often exclude those young people who lack certain school appropriate attitudes, material possessions or understandings of expectations, which is often attributed to the young person’s family situation (Gossner et al., 2025; Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018). Such lack of power is considered a deficit which can lead to disengagement. Students who lack understanding of school expectations due to interruptions in early schooling, can be seen as problematic, and become subject to a number of disciplinary processes, such as detention and suspension, that can further alienate them from school. Viewing this from a deficit perspective sees the young person as being disruptive or unmotivated (McBride et al., 2016), rather than seeking to understand the many factors that lead a young person to lack the attitudes, possessions and understandings in the first place.

3.5.3 *Blaming and labelling young people*

When student disengagement is perceived as originating within the individual, students are viewed as the source of the problem, which can lead to blaming, labelling and pathologising young people for the phenomenon of disengagement. This deficit approach seeks solutions that are done to young people, who are positioned as passive recipients (Atweh et al., 2008; Caslin, 2021; Lewthwaite et al., 2017). For instance, young people may be referred to community services for diagnosis or treatment with minimal consultation or involvement in decision-making. This expectation of passive participation can lead to further alienation and reinforce students' lack of agency.

Students are aware of how they are perceived. When asked about their experiences, they describe how teachers push them aside or overlook their situations (Lewthwaite et al., 2017). Negative relationships and interactions with teachers may communicate to marginalised students that they do not belong (Lewthwaite et al., 2017). Consequently,

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students may develop the perception that education is meaningless and oppressive, and resist attempts to re-engage them (Atweh et al., 2008).

Labelling young people can reflect a deficit perspective, particularly when labels carry negative connotations and reinforce harmful stereotypes. Examples include young people in England receiving the "social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD)" label (Caslin, 2021, p. 2), or young people in Australia being categorised as having a social/emotional disability, defined as "a disorder, illness or disease that affects the person's thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgement, or that results in disturbed behaviour" (Australian Government, 2022). These labels are sometimes applied in the absence of formal diagnosis and used to justify removal from the classroom, which can compound disengagement from education. Over time, the application of such labels may contribute to ongoing disengagement and, in extreme cases, result in exclusion from school (Caslin, 2021).

3.5.4 Parental experience of deficit discourse

Deficit accounts of disengagement are routinely extended to families, shaping how parents are seen and how they see the school. Parents report being blamed for attendance, behaviour, and motivation, and being required to secure diagnoses or interventions with limited consultation; experiences that can feel like surveillance rather than support (Caslin, 2021; Australian Government, 2022; Gossner et al., 2025). In meetings, parental concerns may be reframed as "resistance" or "non-compliance," and time- and resource-intensive requirements (appointments, paperwork, travel, especially in regional/rural areas) can become practical barriers to partnership (Gossner et al., 2025). Over time, these patterns erode trust, contribute to parental disengagement, and create a feedback loop: parents' protective distancing is interpreted as lack of care, which justifies further exclusionary responses, which in turn intensifies the child's disengagement.

Deficit framings are particularly consequential for families whose cultural knowledge, language practices, or neurodiversity-affirming views are at odds with school norms. When families' expertise is devalued, their child's needs are more likely to be pathologised, labels are more likely to be used to justify removal from class, and family–school relationships deteriorate (Caslin, 2021; Allan & Duckworth, 2018). Conversely, when schools adopt strengths-based, collaborative approaches, families' knowledge becomes a resource for re-engagement (Lawson & Lawson, 2020; Gossner et al., 2025).

3.6 Reframing Disengagement

Some researchers have explored ways of reframing disengagement from education to offer an alternative perspective. This involves shifting the blame from the individual towards the education system, the school, government policy or society. The shift diverts from perspectives that associate disengagement from education with something being wrong with the young person, their family or upbringing. These alternative perspectives on disengagement discussed below are significant because they provide a new lens for understanding disengagement that are helpful for addressing the problem.

3.6.1 Reframing disengagement as a way for students to claim agency

For some young people, disengaging from education provides a pathway for regaining agency and power. In such cases, young people engage in a counterculture to challenge their own disempowerment by schools. The counterculture sees young people actively engaging in disruptive behaviours and leaving the classroom in an attempt to regain agency. This is the case for participants in Allan and Duckworth's (2018) study, that found young people perceive disengagement as a form of retaliation for loss of power, often due to being treated like a child and disrespected by the school systems at play. Engaging in anti-social behaviours and being disengaged from the classroom and school norms and the content was

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seen as having high social value in the middle years (Galvan et al., 2011), which equate with early high school years in Australia. Watterson and O'Connell (2019) identify young people's lack of agency as a possible cause of disengagement. Parents also exercise agency in response to disempowering encounters; by contesting decisions, seeking alternative placements, or withdrawing from adversarial processes. Recognising and legitimising this parental agency is a precondition for rebuilding partnership and co-designing re-engagement (Watterson & O'Connell, 2019; Lawson & Lawson, 2020).

3.6.2 The school as a poor fit for young people

Viewing disengagement as a result of school being a poor fit for the young people who attend offers an alternative perspective. A poor fit is particularly relevant during transitions between schools and can be attributed to a number of factors (Wallace et al., 2012). For example, the context of a new school may not be a good fit for the young people's developmental needs. Context refers to classroom climate, social support, teacher experience, school size, diversity and socioeconomic status (Benner & Wang, 2014). School size in this study related to a difference in enrolment numbers between middle school and high school during transitions, with a larger high school enrolment than their middle school having a positive effect on students attendance (Benner & Wang, 2014). The right sized school, one that is not too large, and not too small, can provide both "academic achievement and socioemotional well-being" for at-risk young people (Benner & Wang, 2014, p. 1299). "High diversity" can have a negative effect on attendance for young people who come from less diverse schools as they may find it challenging to fit in. Inexperienced teachers may not have capacity to develop the academic skills young people need to succeed in their new school. Parents are often the first to notice misfit at transition points and can articulate context features that exacerbate or reduce risk (e.g., size, routines, diversity, teacher

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experience). Inviting parents into early, solution-focused conversations helps align supports with developmental and contextual needs (Benner & Wang, 2014; Gossner et al., 2025).

3.6.3 Discursive relationships between the young person and the school

Atweh et al. (2008, p. 2) explicitly advocate conceptualising disengagement as a "discursive interaction between the individual and the social". In this way, a discursive approach to understanding educational disengagement shifts focus from the young person's individual deficits to the social factors of the school. For example, socio-economic background of the school, Indigenous population, rural or remote schools, parental influences, peer and teacher relationships. The approach can allow for new ways of intervening when students disengage. Teachers role modelling discursive processes can have a positive impact on student engagement (Gatfield & Winter-Simat, 2019). Focusing on social systems, rather than individual students, avoids alienating young people through blame and instead identifies opportunities to renegotiate misunderstandings and revise institutional norms. In this way, disengagement is positioned as an ongoing dialogue to manage and mitigate misunderstandings between the young people and school system (Atweh et al., 2008) rather than a fixed student attribute. A discursive approach necessarily includes parents as co-interpreters of meaning and co-constructors of solutions. Family–school dialogue surfaces mismatches in expectations and language, reduces blame, and reframes disengagement as a renegotiable relationship rather than a fixed trait (Atweh et al., 2008; Gatfield & Winter-Simat, 2019; Lawson & Lawson, 2020).

3.6.4 School factors that can lead to disengagement

Exploring school factors that influence disengagement can provide an alternative perspective to understand and address disengagement from education. One study from the USA (Christle et al., 2007) found that schools with poor behaviour management, or that rely

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on exclusionary practices such as detention and suspension, tend to have higher rates of disengagement. Schools with larger populations of young people from minorities and low socio-economic family backgrounds also experience more disengagement. The school climate influences disengagement through having dirty, disorganised facilities, and noisy inadequate common areas. Young people who do not feel safe, supported or respected are more likely to disengage from education (Christle et al., 2007).

A more recent study by Gossner et al. (2025) on school factors that impact disengagement identified other important school factors to consider. These include, “conflicting educational priorities, rigid school structures, the inability to meet diverse learning needs, and lack of teacher training and preparedness” (Gossner et al., 2025, p. 41). Other contextual factors raised during focus groups included having a ‘one-size fits all’ approach, homework practices, reliance on standardised testing, the school not meeting the needs of the students, staff shortages and outdated behaviour management approaches (Gossner et al., 2025). Exclusionary responses (detention, suspension) not only distance students but also fracture relationships with families—often triggering defensive dynamics and escalating compliance demands on parents. Schools that replace exclusion with predictable, relational, and restorative practices report better student and family engagement (Christle et al., 2007; Gossner et al., 2025).

3.6.5 A combination of individual and system factors

Viewing disengagement as a combination of individual and system factors allows disengagement to be perceived as a “socially mediated phenomenon” (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009, p. 221). This means disengagement is understood as developing due to the day-to-day educational experiences, with a gradual accumulation of experiences and school factors (mentioned above in section 3.4.4) that impact a young person’s disengagement from education (Gossner et al., 2025). For example, Brown and Rodriguez’s (2009) study

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discovered links between individual factors such as truancy, talking back to teachers, and having negative perceptions of adults in the school, and institutional factors like low academic expectations, meaningless curriculum, staff who are overworked, are perceived as not caring, and where stereotypes related to gender and race are common. The interaction of these young people's perceptions and behaviours and the school system factors lead to disengagement. This 2009 study emphasised the importance of exploring interactions between the individual young people and the school as a system of education. To reduce disengagement, they recommended considering a school and teacher evaluation process whereby the student voice is sought to improve school conditions and teacher quality (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009). Because disengagement emerges through daily interactions, the family–school relationship is a crucial site of influence. Combining student voice with structured opportunities for parents to evaluate school conditions and teacher practice can improve fit, expectations, and care (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Lawson & Lawson, 2020).

3.6.6 Curriculum lacking value

Another alternative perspective on disengagement positions the issue not within the student, but within the relevance and accessibility of the curriculum itself (Gossner et al., 2025). This shift in focus, from individual deficit to institutional practice, merits closer examination, particularly given the tensions that emerge within the literature.

Ekstrand (2015) advances this argument by exploring how young people with limited school attendance perceive the curriculum as both meaningless and insufficiently challenging. Significantly, Ekstrand reframes truancy not as individual failure but as an act of resistance; a deliberate rejection of school culture. This sociological lens is important because it redirects attention toward systemic barriers rather than student pathology. From this perspective, Ekstrand (2015) advocates for two key shifts in practice: first, moving away from deficit-based approaches toward identifying student strengths and success factors; and

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second, prioritizing relationships between adults and young people within the school community. The proposed solution, building positive school communities through relational approaches and core competencies, positions social connection as central to addressing both truancy and broader educational disengagement.

However, this emphasis on relationships and community, while valuable, may underestimate the role of curriculum itself. . Davies et al. (2025, p. 27) offer a contrasting view, asserting that “Curriculum-based interventions support positive student outcomes”. This creates a productive tension: if the curriculum is experienced as irrelevant (Ekstrand, 2015), yet curriculum-based interventions can be effective (Davies et al., 2025), the critical question becomes *what kind* of curriculum and *how* it is delivered. This suggests that rather than viewing relational and curricular approaches as competing solutions, a more nuanced understanding might recognize that curriculum relevance and strong relationships may be mutually reinforcing elements in re-engaging disengaged students. Parents frequently name curricular irrelevance as a driver of disengagement and are key partners in tailoring meaningful pathways. When schools pair relational approaches with relevant, strength-based curriculum, families report greater confidence that school is “for” their child (Ekstrand, 2015; Davies et al., 2025).

3.6.7 *Cultural consciousness*

The alternative perspective of what is termed ‘cultural consciousness’ (Gallant, 2011) reminds us that disengagement from education has been a problem for over 50 years and suggests the current ways of viewing and addressing disengagement are not optimal. Gallant (2011) based her argument on the work of Jean Gebser (1985) who explored the concept of cultural consciousness or cultural reality. Cultural consciousness is the awareness and understanding of how cultural beliefs, values, and perspectives shape individuals' thoughts, behaviours, and interactions within a society. In these terms, it is evident that schools have

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remained static over a long period of time, with small changes to the parts, but no real cultural changes to the whole (Street, 2018). The system of education as experienced in 2011 “values efficiency, benchmarking, compliance, skills, and material outcomes, but not processes” (Gallant, 2011, p. 350). In high schools, learning is fragmented, divided into discrete subjects, delivered by subject experts in silos of practice. Young people are given grades for each subject and these results become a measure of their self-worth. Albeit such findings date back some 13 years, my experience in schools is that the situation remains unchanged and Street (2018, p. 35) expresses similar concerns about schools stating “the school system is run on strategies that promote obedience, control, and the need to work hard”. Such experiences promote “a sense of alienation and self-doubt” (Gallant, 2011, p. 354) which, in turn, leads to disengagement for many students who experience failure. To reduce educational disengagement, Gallant (2011) recommended an awakening to stimulate the cultural consciousness of those involved in education, with the aim of truly changing the system. Parents’ cultural knowledge is too often the “missing data” in school reform. Raising cultural consciousness requires validating family expertise and redesigning routines so that families shape, not merely receive, school practices (Gallant, 2011; Street, 2018).

3.6.8 Young people’s future time perspectives

As indicated at the beginning of Section 3.4, a final alternative perspective of disengagement from education involves examining young people’s FTPs (Burns et al., 2021). FTPs can be understood as the extent to which young people understand how their current behaviours influence their future goals. Some young people have short FTPs, only concerning themselves with behaviours that will lead to immediate benefits, for example, completing an assignment to get a good grade. Others have longer FTPs and can, therefore, see how current behaviours lead to longer term benefits such as gaining a place at university to get a good job. Burns et al. (2021) suggests that, when attempting to intervene with

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students who are disengaging from education, there is the need to understand if the student is able to see the longer-term outcomes of disengagement and intervene to explain these if they do not see them. FTPs are important because they impact motivation, decisions and behaviour in the school context (Burns et al., 2021). Students with an extended FTP will set longer term goals as they perceive the distant future as closer in time. Students who have a shortened FTP see long term goals as distal and unrelated to their current decisions, and do not see the value of engaging with school as they cannot appreciate the benefits this will have for their longer-term future (Burns et al., 2021). Parents interpret and scaffold young people's future time perspectives (FTPs) in the home; involving them in helping students link near-term choices to longer-term goals strengthen motivation and reduces misalignment between home and school expectations (Burns et al., 2021).

Across these perspectives, three interactions recur. First, deficit framings travel, students and parents are co-positioned as problems, producing cycles of mistrust, labelling, exclusion, and withdrawal (Caslin, 2021; Australian Government, 2022; Gossner et al., 2025). Second, misfit is relational and contextual: what looks like "resistance" often reflects unmet needs at the intersection of curriculum, pedagogy, climate, and family culture (Allan & Duckworth, 2018; Brown & Rodriguez, 2009). Third, partnership is the mechanism of change: when schools adopt strengths-based, dialogic, and relational practices, and mobilise community supports, they convert contested encounters into collaborative problem-solving (Lawson & Lawson, 2020; Christle et al., 2007; Gossner et al., 2025). Centring the parental experience makes visible how school responses either amplify risk or build capability, and therefore where re-engagement efforts must focus.

3.7 Risk Factors Contributing to Disengagement from Education

Many risk factors have been identified that contribute to disengagement from education. For example, truancy may indicate the young person is disengaging from

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education (Mac Iver & Messel, 2013). Rather than presenting these as discrete categories, it is important to recognize that risk factors operate in complex, interconnected ways across four broad domains: the family context, young people's engagement patterns, absence from school, and institutional practices of schools and teachers. Understanding these domains not as separate lists but as intersecting systems reveals how disengagement develops through cumulative and reinforcing processes.

3.7.1 Risk factors associated with the family context

The family context establishes foundational conditions that either support or undermine educational engagement. Key risk factors include low family involvement with schools, lower socio-economic status, larger family size, dysfunctional family relationships, frequent school changes, negative parental attitudes toward education, and lower parental education levels. However, these factors do not operate in isolation; rather, they interact to limit the support and resources available to young people, disrupt communication channels, and foster negative attitudes toward schooling. The mechanism through which family factors influence disengagement is often relational. When families do not engage with schools, young people may experience a breakdown in their relationship with the institution, with no mediating presence to repair ruptures or advocate on their behalf (Gil et al., 2021). This absence of family-school partnership leaves young people vulnerable when conflicts arise, as unresolved tensions between the young person and school are not conducive to engagement.

Socio-economic factors compound these relational dynamics. Young people from families with lower socio-economic status are more likely to skip school (Balkis et al., 2016), experience suspension or grade retention (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012) and lack necessary resources (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015) creating a material basis for disengagement that intersects with relational factors.

3.7.2 *Risk factors associated with young people's engagement patterns*

While family factors establish external conditions, young people's own engagement patterns—shaped by both individual characteristics and institutional responses—constitute a second critical domain. Risk factors here include poor academic achievement, streaming into academic or non-academic pathways, negative attitudes towards school values, breakdown in relationships with peers and teachers, and early skills deficits. Critically, these factors are often interconnected in self-reinforcing cycles. Young people with persistent emotional or behavioural problems fall behind their peers academically (Evans-Whipp et al., 2018), which can lead to disengagement as they feel unable to catch up. Institutional responses to struggling students may inadvertently exacerbate this trajectory. Streaming, for instance, produces mixed effects: while some studies suggest benefits from peer comparison at similar ability levels, others demonstrate lasting negative impacts on academic self-concept that contribute to disengagement (Dumont et al., 2017). This ambiguity suggests that how schools organize learning matters as much as individual student characteristics.

Makarova and Herzog (2013) conducted a longitudinal study of dropout in Switzerland illuminates how these factors coalesce into trajectories of disengagement. They found that the path toward dropping out begins early, with poor attitudes towards school values, poor relationships with peers and adults, and low academic achievement forming a mutually reinforcing pattern. Central to this pattern is connectedness—or its absence. Young people who lack connection to school, peers and teachers struggle academically and experience increased alienation (Makarova & Herzog, 2013). Conversely, connectedness functions as a strong protective factor, improving both achievement and engagement (Beutel, 2003).

Early skills deficits, cognitive and social, further compound these risks, but it is the experience and interpretation of early failure that may be most consequential for long-term

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engagement trajectories. Failure to achieve in the early years of education is considered an indicator of possible future disengagement (Martins et al., 2022). The mechanism appears to be psychological as much as academic: when young people experience a sense of failure early on, they may give up trying and identify as being "not good at school." This negative self-perception can foster a sense of helplessness, resulting in students withdrawing from active participation in their education (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). The long-term consequences of early academic failure are sobering. Watterson and O'Connell (2019, p. 24) emphasize that "one in five children start school behind their peers, and half of these do not finish their education or go on to employment." This statistic reveals how early disadvantage can crystallize into lasting educational trajectories.

3.7.3 Risk factors associated with absence from school

Absence from school represents both an indicator and a risk factor of disengagement, creating a third domain of risk that bridges family circumstances and institutional responses. When young people are not present at school, they experience low academic achievement due to missing essential work and relationship breakdown with peers and teachers—further entrenching the disconnection patterns identified above.

The circumstances surrounding absence reveal how family and institutional factors converge. Broadhurst et al. (2005) identified key factors associated with student absence: single parenting, housing problems, dependence on government benefits, and histories of domestic violence and/or mental health concerns. These family-level stressors create conditions in which school attendance becomes difficult to maintain, yet the institutional response often treats absence as an individual behavioural choice, labelled as truancy when students are absent for no apparent reason (Adika, 2016).

This framing of absence as truancy triggers institutional responses that paradoxically increase disengagement risk. Truancy can lead to misbehaviour, isolation, academic failure,

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suspension and expulsion (Adika, 2016; Dahl, 2016; Dickson & Hutchinson, 2010; Flannery et al., 2012) each of which further distances the young person from school. School suspension, in particular, creates a vicious cycle. Young people with challenging behaviours experience higher than average suspensions and exclusions (Michail, 2011) which increase disconnection from school and create difficulties with schoolwork. Over time, suspensions increase in both length and frequency, potentially leading to exclusion (Beauchamp, 2012; Hemphill & Hargreaves, 2009) and ultimately disengagement from education. Thus, absence—whether rooted in family circumstances or behavioural responses—becomes self-perpetuating through institutional practices that remove young people from the very environment meant to engage them.

3.7.4 Risk factors associated with institutional practices of schools and teachers

The fourth domain—institutional practices of schools and teachers—is perhaps most significant because it represents the arena over which educators have most direct control. School and teacher factors that increase disengagement risk include pedagogy, teachers' treatment of students, relevance of content taught, power dynamics within the school community, and practices that actively push young people out of school. Importantly, young people themselves identify these institutional factors as central to their disengagement.

In a UK study by (Lumby, 2012) UK study, young people attributed their disengagement directly to teachers and content. When young people were trained as researchers to investigate disengagement (Carrington et al., 2010), pedagogy emerged as the leading factor, with participants describing a lack of fun or interest in content and boring classrooms as contributing to their withdrawal. This suggests that curriculum relevance and pedagogical approach—the "what" and "how" of teaching—matter profoundly to engagement.

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Beyond pedagogy, the relational quality between teachers and students emerges as critical. McGrath (2009) found young people disengaged due to divisive relationships with teachers involving negative labelling, humiliation, and punishment. More fundamentally, McGrath (2009) identified inequitable power relationships as disengaging, with teachers using their positions to demoralize and intimidate young people. This power dimension reveals how institutional structures and individual teacher practices intersect: schools grant teachers authority, and how that authority is exercised shapes young people's experience of school as welcoming or hostile.

McGraw (2011) provides the concept of 'shoving' as a particularly powerful lens for understanding how institutional practices actively produce disengagement. Shoving involves schools forcibly pushing young people out through both visible and invisible means, utilizing power imbalances and authority. Young people described battles for power with teachers belittling and targeting them. This institutional shoving can manifest as bullying, which in turn encourages young people to "shove back." The resulting alienation reinforces disengagement (McGraw, 2011), with students eventually 'shoving off' and leaving school entirely.

The concept of shoving is significant because it reframes disengagement not as young people dropping out but as institutions pushing out. This shifts analytical attention from individual deficits to institutional practices, connecting back to the family factors discussed earlier: when schools shove young people out, families with fewer resources and weaker school connections have less capacity to intervene. Similarly, it connects to absence patterns: shoving may manifest through repeated suspensions that formalize the pushing-out process. Thus, institutional practices do not simply add to a list of risk factors; they actively shape how other risk factors operate and whether they culminate in disengagement.

3.7.5 *Interconnected risk domains*

Across these four domains, several patterns emerge that challenge a simple list-based understanding of risk factors. First, risk factors are cumulative and interactive rather than additive. Family socio-economic disadvantage intersects with school resource allocation; early skills deficits interact with pedagogical approaches; absence triggers institutional responses that increase disconnection. Second, many risk factors operate through relational mechanisms—breakdown in family-school partnerships, peer and teacher relationships, and sense of school connectedness recur across domains. Third, institutional practices play a dual role: they respond to risks originating in other domains (family circumstances, student characteristics), but they also actively produce risk through pedagogy, power dynamics, and exclusionary practices. This suggests that while disengagement has multiple contributing factors, schools and teachers occupy a pivotal position in either interrupting or reinforcing trajectories toward disengagement.

3.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter has examined disengagement from education. It began by exploring the literature on disengagement and how researchers have conceptualised it. The chapter then explained the various levels at which a young person might disengage, ranging from specific content to the classroom, school, or education as a whole. This was followed by an exploration of the dimensions of disengagement, including behavioural, emotional, and cognitive aspects. The chapter then discussed the key indicators of disengagement: early failure to achieve, disconnecting from the norms of school, poor student-teacher relationships, student mobility, lack of adaptability, defensive pessimism or self-handicapping, behaviour problems, absences, failure and lack of commitment, and peer group expectations and social status. Following this, the chapter explored deficit perspectives on disengagement and some alternative views of educational disengagement. Finally, the risk

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factors associated with disengagement were highlighted to support early identification of young people who may be at risk of disengaging from education.

Chapter 4: Disengagement from Education: theories, models, interventions, and impacts of parents on disengagement

The previous chapter reviewed the literature on disengagement from education focusing on content, classroom, school and educational levels of disengagement; behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions of disengagement; indicators of disengagement; then the deficit perspective; ways of reframing disengagement; and finally, risk factors for disengagement from education. Recalling that it is important for a phenomenographic study to have a broad overview of the phenomenon, for this purpose I continue to expand understanding around the concept of disengagement from education in this chapter. As shown in figure 3 below, firstly, I explore the different theories that have been used to explore disengagement. I then discuss models that have been used to frame disengagement from education. Next, I look at research-based interventions developed to address disengagement from education. And finally, I examine the literature around the impacts of parents or family circumstances on disengagement.

Figure 3

Outline of Chapter four

Theories on Disengagement								
Intelligence	Resilience and buoyancy	Wellbeing	School attachment	Power	Social & linguistic capital	Hopelessness theory of depression	Self-determination theory	Self-worth theory
Models of Disengagement								
Bronfenbrenner's ecological model		The dynamic biopsychosocial model		The frustration-self-esteem and participation-identification models		Pushout or pullout model		The life course model
Interventions								
Early intervention approaches			Student centred approaches			Systems based approaches		
Impacts of Parents on Disengagement								
Parental engagement in schools				Parental experiences of youth engagement and disengagement				

4.1 Theories on Disengagement

4.1.1 *Intelligence*

One way of examining disengagement is by focusing on young people's individual perceptions of their own intelligence. De Castella and Byrne (2015) explored young people's beliefs about their own intelligence as a possible way of addressing disengagement from education. Children's mindsets about their intelligence has been associated with engagement and disengagement in research since as early as 1989 (Chen, 2025). Believing one's intelligence is fixed and cannot be altered is considered an entity belief, or a fixed belief. When young people hold a fixed belief about their own abilities and intelligence, they are more likely to seek less challenging and familiar tasks, prioritising gaining a good grade over learning new skills. Young people with these fixed beliefs also see failure after effort as reinforcing their beliefs. To elaborate, regardless of the amount of effort they use, their continued failure leads to the belief that they are less intelligent than others. These young people may then engage in self-handicapping behaviours such as reducing effort, procrastinating or faking illness (De Castella & Byrne, 2015). These behaviours when they are ongoing and not challenged, can contribute to disengagement from education.

4.1.2 *Resilience and buoyancy*

Resilience and academic buoyancy are related but distinct resources that help young people resist and recover from disengagement. In schooling, resilience refers to successful adaptation when stressors are significant, chronic, or multifaceted—mobilised when threats are intense, severe, and sustained (Wang, 2020; Salmela-Aro et al., 2021). By contrast, academic buoyancy denotes students' capacity to deal effectively with the routine setbacks and everyday pressures of school life (e.g., disappointing grades, deadline stress, minor conflicts)—the “bounce back” needed for day-to-day persistence (Martin & Marsh, 2008;

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Salmela-Aro et al., 2021). Operating at different intensities and timescales, the two are complementary: resilience supports re-establishing competence and agency under adverse conditions, while buoyancy sustains ongoing participation amid the ordinary ebb and flow of classroom demands. In the context of disengagement, resilience enables young people to remain connected to learning and contest pathologising narratives when marginalised or disrupted (Wang, 2020; Lawson & Lawson, 2020), and buoyancy helps them stay present and re-engage across everyday hassles that would otherwise accumulate into withdrawal (Martin & Marsh, 2008; Salmela-Aro et al., 2021). School conditions can strengthen both: social capital and supportive teacher–student relationships reduce burnout and predict achievement (Lindfors et al., 2018), safe and fair climates with meaningful participation bolster engagement across sectors (Tomaszewski et al., 2024), and context-responsive practices mitigate structural stressors that erode students' coping capacity (Gossner et al., 2025). Consistent with meta-analytic evidence linking engagement to both achievement and well-being (Wong et al., 2024), fostering resilience and buoyancy together reduces the likelihood of disengagement by supporting recovery from major setbacks and everyday challenges.

4.1.3 Wellbeing

Another way of examining disengagement from education focuses on student wellbeing as explored previously in Chapters 1 and 3. As previously stated, wellbeing is a contested term, poorly defined and understood in educational communities (Bache et al., 2016; Svane et al., 2019). For this study, student wellbeing is understood as having the psychological, social and physical resources needed to meet the challenges of life within given contexts (Atkinson, 2013; Dodge et al., 2012; Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2015). Wellbeing is important because students who have experiences of poor wellbeing were often more disengaged from education and often reported not liking school (Evans-Whipp et al.

(2018). In fact, students with low levels of wellbeing were found to be twice as likely as their peers to be disengaging from learning (Evans-Whipp et al., 2018).

4.1.4 School attachment

School attachment as a conceptual lens is often entwined with terms such as ‘school connectedness’, ‘school bonding’, ‘school involvement’ and ‘the school climate’ (Libbey, 2004). School attachment expanded on attachment theory that explains how children attach to caregivers in early childhood and form “internal working models” (Furrer & Skinner, 2003, p. 148) that young people use throughout life to form connections with others. It has been proposed that young people also form these same connections with peers and school staff, considered essential for engagement at school (Di Lisio, et al., 2025). Attachment to school builds a sense of belonging, safety, inclusion, acceptance and support. Young people who securely attach to school feel self-confident, put in more effort, adapt and cope with change better, have more positive emotions regarding school and have better academic outcomes (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). School attachment is related to engagement and may help build further understanding of students who disengage from education.

4.1.5 Power

Power is one other conceptual lens that has been used to explore disengagement from education. Power in educational settings traditionally lies with those in charge, for example the teachers and the principal of the school. Students who are disengaging from education often feel disempowered (Allan & Duckworth, 2018). Students are expected to comply with the norms and expectations set by these teachers and principals. When students are unable to comply, or choose to take back their power, they are often seen as problematic, which leads to pathologising them (Allan & Duckworth, 2018). There is a need to see these students who do not fit the expectations of the school as struggling to regain some power in their life, rather

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than problematic (Lewthwaite et al., 2017). When students feel disempowered, some withdraw and disengage, while others will stand up and be heard.

4.1.6 Social and linguistic capital

Two different forms of capital can be used to explain disengagement. Allan and Duckworth (2018) explored how the lack of “social and linguistic capital in school” (p. 43) leads to disengagement from education. The social capital of the school comprises all the hidden nuances of how to be within a particular school community. Linguistic capital is conceptualised as voice, which involves “a range of activities that encourage reflection, discussion, dialogue, and actions” (Allan & Duckworth, 2018, p. 44). When students lack the social capital and linguistic capital of the school, they are unable to understand how to navigate their way through the school systems, and this can lead to disengagement from education. In contrast, when we allow student voice, we empower students and help them attain the social capital of the school (Allan & Duckworth, 2018).

4.1.7 Hopelessness theory of depression

Originating in clinical psychology, the hopelessness theory of depression reconceptualises the learned helplessness reformulation by positing “hopelessness”, the expectation that valued outcomes will not occur and that one cannot effect change, as a proximal sufficient cause of a particular depressive syndrome (Abramson et al., 1989). Within a diathesis–stress framework, negative life events trigger inferential processes about causes, consequences, and the self; when these inferences are shaped by vulnerable cognitive styles, they increase the likelihood of hopelessness and, in turn, produce marked motivational deficits alongside sadness and related symptoms (Abramson et al., 1989). Although advanced to explain depressive phenomena, this framework is readily translatable to educational

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settings in which repeated academic setbacks can cultivate pessimistic expectancies and perceived uncontrollability.

Au et al. (2010) presented the view that lower academic achievement leads to learned hopelessness which, in turn, contributes to disengagement from education. Students who experience learning difficulties demonstrate low academic achievement. Over time, low academic achievement can result in the student feeling responsible for their failure. This sense of responsibility can lead to disengagement as students consider there is no point in trying any more as they will experience continued failure. Lower academic achievement may contribute to feeding a sense of hopelessness and this in turn may lead to disengagement from education (Au et al., 2010).

4.1.8 *Self-determination theory*

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a macro-theory of human motivation and personality that explains how the satisfaction versus frustration of three innate psychological needs, autonomy (the experience of volition and self-endorsement), competence (feeling effective and capable), and relatedness (feeling connected and cared for), shapes the quality of motivation, engagement, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT distinguishes autonomous from controlled motivation and specifies how social-contextual features facilitate internalisation of values and behaviours. In educational contexts, the theory applies to the broader learning ecology. Not only teacher practices, but also curriculum design, assessment, classroom and school climate, peer dynamics, and family–school interfaces all of which, can support or thwart, students' basic needs and thereby foster engagement or, conversely, amotivation and disengagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020; Reeve, 2012).

This theory focuses on how teachers can nurture students' inner motivation to encourage young people to engage in education. Teachers and students thus create a learning

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environment that fosters students' motivation, which will reduce disengagement. The young person seeks to fulfil their psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Their motivation, goal orientation and cognitive evaluation of these needs all interrelate to create a unique outlook on their own educational experiences. When this outlook is combined with how a young person behaves, SDT's complexity is revealed. Viewing engagement through the lens of SDT identifies the young person's inner motivations to learn and offers guidance to teachers to enhance the young person's inner motivation (Reeve, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020) as a way to reduce disengagement from education.

4.1.9 Self-worth theory

Self-worth theory originates in Covington's account of achievement motivation, which posits that self-acceptance (a sense of personal worth) is a central human motive and that school settings make perceived ability a primary currency of worth (Covington, 1984, 1992). Because failure is interpreted as evidence of low ability, and effort makes ability more "visible," students may experience effort as diagnostically risky: failing despite trying hard can be especially threatening to self-worth. Consequently, when evaluative climates heighten concern about ability, students adopt self-protective strategies, such as task avoidance, withdrawal of effort, and attributional manoeuvres, to manage the implications of potential failure (Covington, 1992). Consistent with this framework, research shows that when young people feel incompetent, they report shame and humiliation and engage in strategies to protect self-worth, including defensive pessimism (lowering expectations to buffer the self) and self-handicapping (creating or claiming obstacles so that poor performance can be attributed to the obstacle rather than to low ability) (De Castella et al., 2013). These self-protective dynamics can manifest as disengagement from schoolwork, reduced effort, and strategic underachievement. At the same time, self-worth is shaped by factors beyond school, including contingencies of self-worth, anxiety levels, baseline self-esteem, stereotype threat,

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social support, and motivational quality, which should be considered when applying this lens to disengagement (Covington, 1992; Huang et al., 2022; Van der Putten, 2017).

4.1.10 Synthesis

There is strong conceptual overlap across these theoretical lenses. SDT's needs align with other constructs: relatedness dovetails with attachment and belonging (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2000); competence resonates with self-worth's focus on perceived ability and the shame–effort dilemma (Covington, 1992); autonomy intersects with student voice and the redistribution of power and linguistic capital in classrooms (Allan & Duckworth, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Fixed ability beliefs, self-worth protection and hopelessness describe mutually reinforcing pathways: in controlling, high-stakes evaluative climates, repeated failure can frustrate competence, heighten ability threat, prompt self-handicapping or withdrawal, and foster pessimistic expectancies (Abramson et al., 1989; De Castella, Byrne, & Covington, 2013; Reeve, 2012). Resilience and buoyancy operate as cross-cutting buffers, helping students recover from chronic adversity (resilience) and everyday hassles (buoyancy), and are closely tied to the availability of wellbeing resources and supportive mesosystem relationships (Lumby, 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Atkinson, 2013; Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012; Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2015).

At the same time, there are productive tensions. Individual-centred lenses (mindsets, SDT, self-worth, resilience) can be misread as locating problems within the learner, while critical perspectives on power and capital re-centre how institutional practices and social structures constrain participation and success (Allan & Duckworth, 2018; Lewthwaite et al., 2017). Rather than treating these as competing, I hold them in dialogue: motivation and meaning-making are always situated within, and responsive to, structural conditions (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Likewise, while attachment and belonging are often operationalised as fitting institutional norms, a critical lens acknowledges that some “disengagement” is an agentic,

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protective response to harmful or exclusionary practices (Allan & Duckworth, 2018; Lewthwaite et al., 2017). Finally, SDT's claim to basic psychological needs as universal recognises how autonomy, relatedness and competence are expressed, supported and valued (Lewthwaite et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020).

4.2 Models of Disengagement

Models clearly show how certain processes might lead to a phenomenon by breaking them down into their key parts, the features of these parts, how the parts are connected, and how they change over time (Fried, 2020). While several of these models have been employed to understand disengagement, only a few (e.g., Finn's models, pushout/pullout) were specifically developed to explain disengagement or dropout from education. Others are broader developmental or psychosocial frameworks adapted to examine the many factors that impact on a young person's disengagement from education. They focus on the developmental pathways that lead to disengagement and the impacts and interactions of internal and external risk factors. Awareness of these models can assist in understanding why some young people are disengaging from education. While Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012), is not strictly a model and more of a theory, it is included here as a model of disengagement in response to the work of Bempechat and Shernoff (2012). The other models explored are, the dynamic biopsychosocial model (Lehman et al., 2017), the frustration-self-esteem and the participation-identification models (Finn, 1989), a pushout or pullout model (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011), and finally, a stress process life course model (Dupéré et al., 2015).

4.2.1 *Bronfenbrenner's ecological model*

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory provides a theoretical lens through which to explore the influences on young people's disengagement from education. The five nested

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systems in Bronfenbrenner's model (see Figure 4) are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012). The microsystem includes the young person and the immediate settings they exist in, such as their family and school. The mesosystem is the system where interactions take place between the settings in their microsystem, such as interactions between the family and the school. The exosystem is considered to contain the societal contexts that surround the young people, including systems that indirectly affect them such as parental workplaces or local government policies. The macrosystem involves the cultural and historical contexts in which the young people live, including broader societal values, beliefs, and ideologies.

The chronosystem represents the dimension of time, encompassing both the micro-time (what occurs during specific interactions), meso-time (the extent to which activities and interactions occur with some consistency), and macro-time (the changing expectations and events in the broader society across an individual's lifespan) (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). For students, the chronosystem is particularly significant as it captures developmental transitions, historical events, and the evolving nature of relationships and contexts over time—all of which can influence engagement with or disengagement from education.

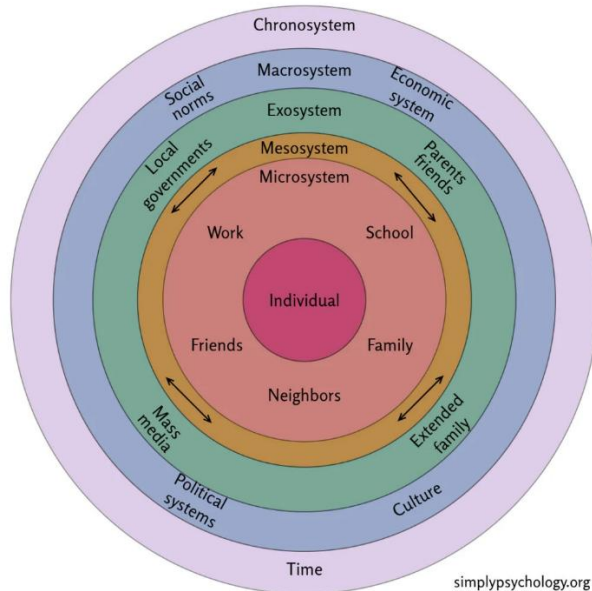
Central to Bronfenbrenner's model is the understanding that the child is not a passive recipient of environmental influences. Rather, young people are active agents within their ecological context, exerting influence on and being influenced by the systems around them (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This bidirectional nature of influence means that students actively shape their environments even as those environments shape them. For example, a student's behaviour and engagement level can affect teacher responses and family dynamics, which in turn influence the student's subsequent attitudes and actions. These systems of influence impact on young people in different ways throughout their lives and, in turn, shape how they interact with the system of education. While all levels impact on disengagement

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from education, the mesosystem of home/school relationships is especially important when examining disengagement from education (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012).

Figure 4

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Guy-Evans, 2025)



4.2.2 The dynamic biopsychosocial model

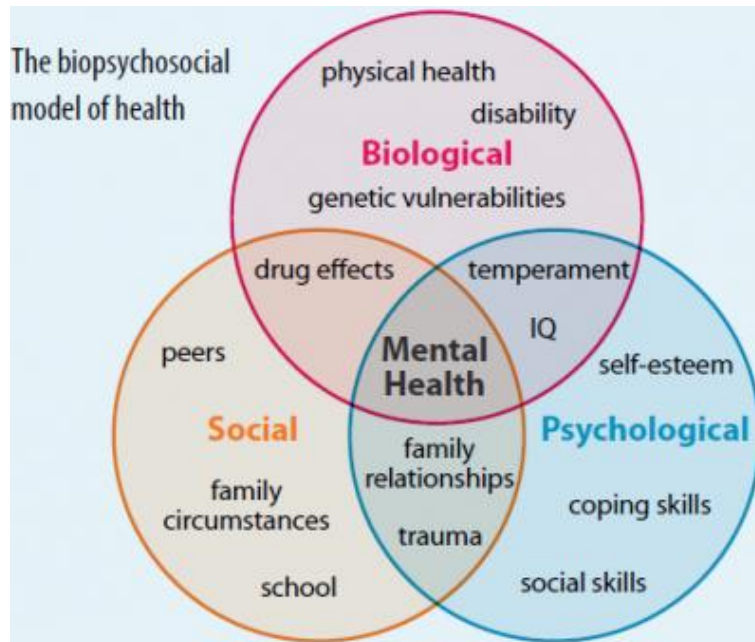
The dynamic biopsychosocial model (see Figure 5) can provide a unique and holistic way of understanding young people who are disengaging from education (Lehman et al., 2017). This model integrates Bronfenbrenner's ecological model explained above with Engel's (1977, 1980) biopsychosocial model, providing a dynamic model that considers how biological, psychological and social aspects interact. Biological aspects include cognitive difficulties or a disability, or a myriad of learning difficulties that may impact on a young person's engagement with education. Psychological aspects include the young person's mental health, attitudes and motivation that have the potential to impact attendance and engagement. Social aspects include the influence of the young person's social circles and family and how these can either encourage engagement or contribute to disengagement (Lehman et al., 2017). The young person's biological, psychological and social characteristics may impact on disengagement through creating barriers to engagement in

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education. Understanding which aspect is most affected will more likely facilitate targeted intervention.

Figure 5

The biopsychosocial model (Physiopedia contributors, 2025)



4.2.3 The frustration-self-esteem and participation-identification models

The frustration-self-esteem and participation-identification models (Finn, 1989) provide a way to understand school dropout. Firstly, the frustration-self-esteem model (see Figure 6) describes a process whereby failure to achieve in school leads to frustration exhibited through more and more inappropriate behaviour. This leads school staff and parents to focus on the behaviour, not the initial failure to achieve. This focus on behaviour, at the detriment to academic achievement, means the young person falls further behind academically, leading to more frustration and an escalation of inappropriate behaviour. This behaviour is seen as a coping method and may lead the young person to a sense of achievement through identification with other non-achieving young people. This can then lead to a cycle of suspension, further frustration, lowered self-esteem, and eventually disengagement from education. Secondly, the participation-identification model (Finn, 1989)

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describes a process where young people become disengaged from the classroom or school community through ongoing non-participation in school activities (see Figure 7). This leads to a young person feeling alienated or isolated and misunderstood, which impacts on the young person's identification with school and sense of belonging at school. This then becomes a cycle of reduced identification with school, leading to further non-participation and, in turn, to disengagement from education. Both models described by Finn (1989) highlight that such disengagement is a long term, ongoing process that often starts in the early years of education.

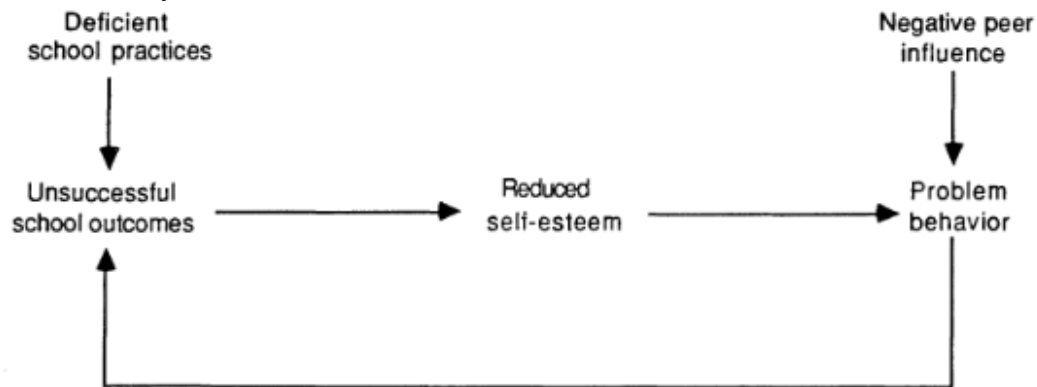
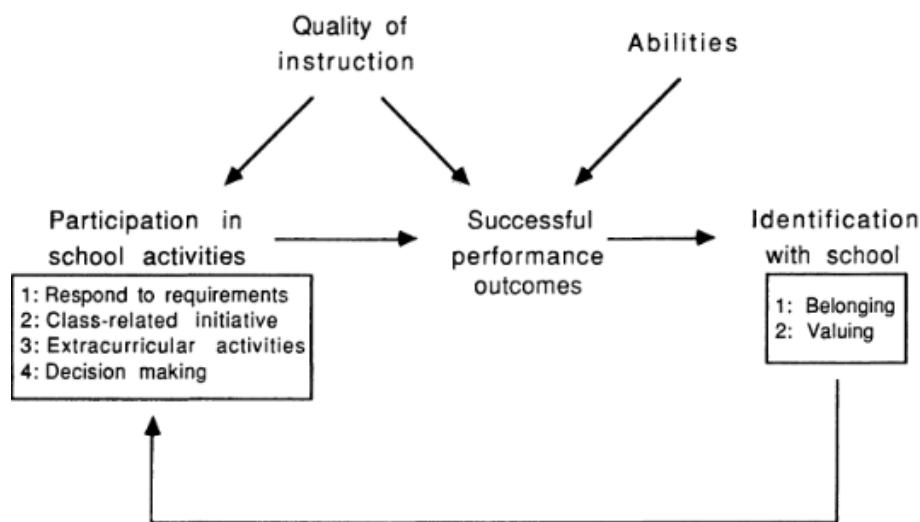
Figure 6*Frustration-self-esteem model*

Figure 7*Participation-identification model***4.2.4 Pushout or pullout model**

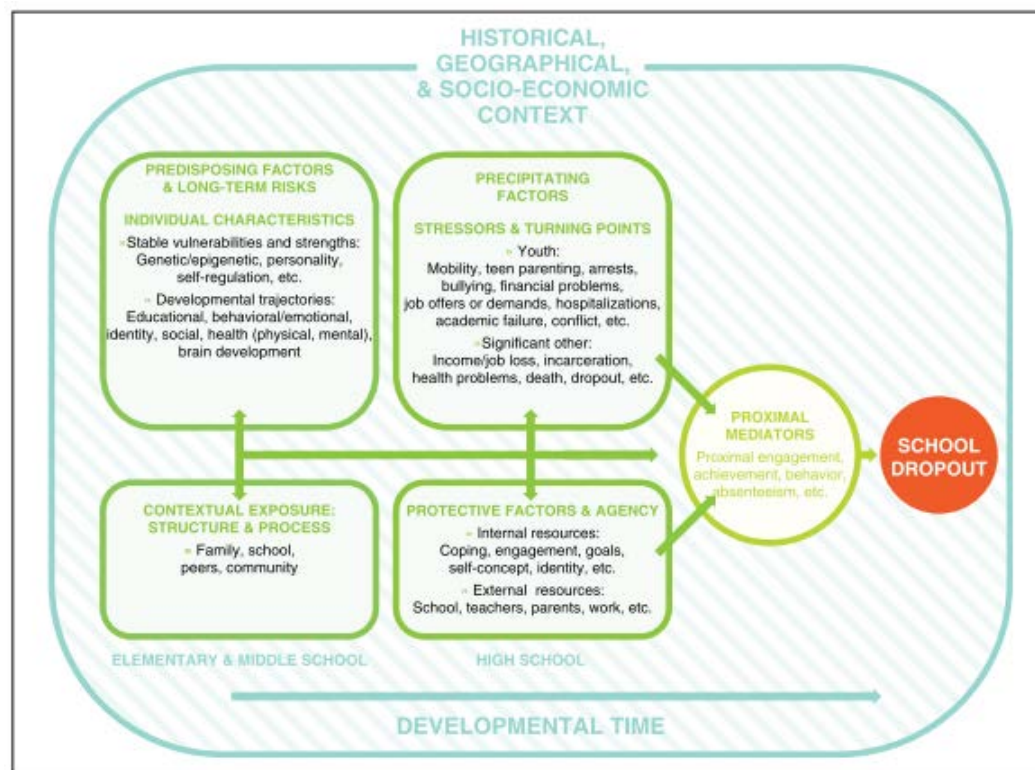
Bradley and Renzulli (2011) offer a pushout or pullout model of disengagement that explains factors that may push or pull a student out of school and provides three possible outcomes: staying in school, being pushed out of school or being pulled out of school. While Bradley and Renzulli (2011) focus on racial differences between white, black and Latino students, this model is of interest due to the push and pull factors. Push out factors discourage students from remaining engaged with school. When a student is pushed out of school, it is often due to a lack of connection with the school, a lack of resources or an oppositional culture. An example in Australia, is young people from low socio-economic backgrounds who may be exposed to more swearing at home and thus swear at school which leads to suspensions and in turn exclusion. Pull out factors relate to a process in which the decision to drop out of school concerns the student doing a cost-benefit analysis (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). The student weighs up their responsibilities and obligations outside of school and compares this to the time and effort required to succeed at school. When the time required to fulfill their out of school responsibilities and obligations is too great, they may

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pull out of school. An example may be caring for a family member with a disability, where the student is unable to attend school at times, leading to a lack of achievement and problems caused by absences. Exploring disengagement through the processes that push and pull young people out of school may provide a unique way of uncovering factors that impact on young people's disengagement from education.

4.2.5 The life course model

The life course model of disengagement provides another process through which to examine disengagement (Dupéré et al., 2015). The model shows the interaction between predisposing factors and individual characteristics, stressors associated with dropping out of high school, turning points in young people's lives, and protective factors and agency which are all unique to each individual. A young person's prospects in education are based on how these unique factors interact to influence the young person's future educational pathway. In addition to the factors listed above, the historical, geographical and socio-economic contexts of the young person are also considered to have an influence on their disengagement from education. This visual model (see Figure 8) offers a summary of the many personal and contextual factors that may impact on a young person's disengagement from education.

Figure 8*The life course model (Dupéré et al., 2015)*

4.3 Interventions for Disengagement from Education

Designing effective responses to educational disengagement remains challenging despite four decades of inquiry, in part because there is no settled consensus on core indicators and because many initiatives target symptoms such as attendance rather than the mechanisms that drive disengagement (Evans & DiBenedetto, 1991; Burns et al., 2008, Gossner, 2025).

4.3.1 Early intervention approaches to disengagement

Early interventions can reduce long-term disengagement when risk factors and indicators are recognised and addressed promptly (Murray et al., 2004). Programmes that target attendance, behaviour, withdrawal, and academic support demonstrate short-term gains (Alexander et al., 1997; Finn & Cox, 1992; Balfanz et al., 2007). For example, a primary school peer-helper programme enhanced self-confidence, punctuality and persistence,

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improved peer relationships and belonging, and produced grade improvements for nearly half of participating pupils (Larrier et al., 2009). These results are consistent with broader syntheses showing that social–emotional learning (SEL), when implemented with quality and adequate dosage, can improve engagement and yield modest academic benefits (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017).

However, the analytical picture is mixed. Many early warning systems restrict “family engagement” to notifying caregivers about risk without partnering with them to address barriers such as transport, caregiving responsibilities or health constraints. In implementations that combine data with home visits, family conferences or case-management, gains in attendance are typically stronger, yet these elements are inconsistently described or evaluated (Balfanz et al., 2007). Generic early warning structures also under-serve the “unexpected events” pathway noted by Evans and DiBenedetto (1991, p. 65). Without trauma-aware universal practices—predictable routines, explicit relational safety, staff training in regulation-supportive interactions—and clear stepped-care referral, trauma-related behaviours risk being misinterpreted as defiance, leading to punitive escalation rather than support. Cultural responsiveness is likewise under-specified. Universal thresholds for triggers such as absences can over-flag marginalised groups and pathologise difference unless criteria and outreach are adapted with community input and bilingual/bicultural liaison. Methodologically, reliance on proxy outcomes, short follow-ups, limited subgroup analyses, and sparse reporting of implementation fidelity and cost-effectiveness constrain confident inference. Critically, aligning the intervention mechanism to the pathway matters: early skill deficits call for targeted academic and social skill scaffolding, whereas underlying problems often require coordinated health and social services that include family partnership (Evans & DiBenedetto, 1991; Burns et al., 2008).

4.3.2 *Student-centred approaches*

Student-centred approaches focus intervention on the learner by leveraging agency, relationships, relevance and skill-building. Listening to student voices, especially those of marginalised learners, can shift classroom power dynamics and align pedagogy with students lived experiences (Allan & Duckworth, 2018). Taking this further, Carrington et al. (2010) trained young people as co-researchers of engagement and disengagement; the measures they developed were subsequently shown to be psychometrically sound, and their findings highlighted the importance of fun, connection, positive student–teacher interactions, co-created curricula and authentic participation (Carrington et al., 2013). Involving pupils in the design of interventions emerged as a particularly powerful way to cultivate value and respect within the school community (Carrington et al., 2010).

Mentoring represents another student-centred strategy in which the active ingredient is a dependable relationship. Studies report associations between mentoring and reduced absence, improved behaviour, enhanced achievement and better social interaction; in one primary programme, two-thirds of teachers reported improved relationships with students (Larmer, 2010; see also Cash, 2011; Ekstrand, 2015; Hancock & Zubrick, 2015; Hill et al., 2005). Work-based education (WBE) and personalised learning increase relevance and agency, particularly when adults listen respectfully, scaffold challenges and provide feedback over time (Deluca et al., 2010; Down & Choules, 2017). Community sports programmes can similarly re-orient aspirations and strengthen ties to school through respectful relationships, albeit often in the face of resource constraints (Morgan & Bush, 2016). SEL-focused programmes, including the Titans' Learning Centre and the Teen Outreach Program®, aim to expand social skills and prosocial behaviours and can build belonging (Main & Whatman, 2016; McBride et al., 2016; Larrier et al., 2009).

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These designs are not without limitations. Parent-inclusive elements are generally limited. Mentoring models that include caregiver check-ins and triadic goal-setting among student, mentor and family tend to show stronger and more durable gains, suggesting that systematic family partnership could improve outcomes across student voice, personalised learning and WBE. While many of these interventions can buffer adversity through stable relationships and increased choice, they are not inherently trauma-informed; explicit attention to safety, predictability, emotion regulation, staff supervision and referral pathways would better support learners on the “unexpected events” and “entry problems” pathways. Cultural responsiveness varies. Student voice and personalised learning are culturally responsive when they legitimise local knowledge, language and identity, and when mentors or co-researchers reflect the communities, they serve. By contrast, tokenistic voice activities or generic mentoring can reproduce dominant norms and marginalise the very students most at risk (Allan & Duckworth, 2018). Questions of scalability and equity also arise: these approaches are staff-intensive and depend on expertise and stable relationships; volunteer mentoring introduces variability and potential harms from poor matches; and WBE requires robust employer networks and careful academic integration to avoid low-expectation tracking.

4.3.3 Systems based approaches

Systems-based interventions seek to alter the way education is organised rather than addressing only individual risk factors. Balfanz et al. (2007) demonstrated a school reform that combined early indicators, attendance, behaviour, failure in English or Mathematics, with pedagogical redesign and multi-tiered supports at universal, targeted and intensive levels. Reported improvements in engagement underscore the importance of addressing pedagogy and student support jointly rather than in silos. An “integrated systems approach” described by Gatfield and Winter-Simat (2019) likewise combined whole-school SEL, explicit safety practices such as check-ins and smaller classes, mentoring, and family

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advocacy. Staff delivered non-standardised, project-based curricula that encouraged creative and critical thinking while working closely with families to enhance students' relationships with school.

Alternative settings represent another systems strategy. Community day schools pair small groups of students with a single teacher across the school day, fostering trust and reducing disengagement; however, many learners still require more targeted supports beyond the relational core (Kennedy, 2011). Flexible learning options grounded in holistic education and a focus on safety were experienced by marginalised students as accepting and respectful and supported re-engagement, but they are not viable at scale as a system-wide solution (Lewthwaite et al., 2017).

Analytically, the strength of parent inclusion varies widely across systems designs. The strongest implementations embed family partnership at every tier—establishing universal communication norms, engaging in targeted problem-solving with families, and providing intensive wraparound support where needed—yet many schools still treat families as recipients of services rather than co-design partners. Trauma-informed practice is more evident in integrated models that emphasise safety, predictable routines, relational practice and SEL, though few report trauma-specific screening, clear referral pathways or staff supervision for vicarious trauma. Cultural responsiveness at whole-school level remains under-specified; while flexible and alternative settings often feel culturally safer to students, they risk segregating learners from mainstream opportunities if reintegration pathways and equitable resourcing are not clear. Finally, although attendance, behaviour and course performance often improve under multi-tiered models, effects hinge on staff capacity and fidelity. Alternative provision can inadvertently concentrate disadvantage if used as a default diversion rather than a purposeful, time-limited intervention with a path back to mainstream settings.

4.3.4 *Australian Evidence*

Australian studies consistently show that re-engagement is most likely when supports are relationship-centred, personalised, and connected to authentic local pathways. National mapping of Flexible Learning Programs/Options (FLPs/FLOs) documents a diverse ecosystem of alternative and flexible provision with reported gains in attendance, retention and post-school transitions, particularly when programs employ individual learning plans, trauma-informed pedagogy and strong wrap-around supports (Te Riele, 2014; Te Riele & Baker, 2016). Independent evaluations of flagship initiatives report positive outcomes for students at risk of early leaving: Youth Connections demonstrated high rates of re-engagement in education, training or employment via intensive case management and brokerage (Dandolo Partners, 2014); Links to Learning reported improvements in attendance, engagement and progression to accredited pathways (Urbis, 2017); Hands On Learning and BackTrack show improved retention and transitions alongside community and wellbeing benefits (Deloitte Access Economics, 2016; KPMG, 2016); and the Clontarf Foundation model is associated with increased attendance and Year 12 completion among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boys through sport-anchored mentoring and sustained school partnerships (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2014). The Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education synthesises these approaches and profiles contextualised exemplars—such as NT Employment Pathways, Aurora College, P-TECH Greater Burnie and Tasmania's SPACE alternative learning program—underscoring the importance of place-based, multi-system supports (Halsey, 2018).

4.3.5 *Implications, gaps and summary*

The foregoing analysis suggests several priorities for strengthening intervention design and research. Parent inclusion needs to move beyond notification towards genuine co-design with families, supported by bilingual liaison, flexible meeting structures and shared

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goal-setting; evaluations should examine family partnership as an active ingredient rather than a backdrop (Balfanz et al., 2007; Burns et al., 2008). Trauma-informed practice should be embedded alongside early warning, with universal routines that promote safety and regulation and clear stepped-care pathways, and with training for mentors and teachers to avoid punitive escalation of trauma-linked behaviour (Evans & DiBenedetto, 1991; Durlak et al., 2011). Cultural responsiveness should be deepened by legitimising local cultural capital in curriculum, assessment and relationships, recruiting and supporting community-representative mentors and staff, and co-designing interventions with communities most affected by disengagement (Allan & Duckworth, 2018; Carrington et al., 2010). Evidence quality would benefit from mixed-methods studies with longer follow-up and outcomes that encompass learning and wellbeing as well as attendance, along with reporting of subgroup effects, implementation fidelity and cost-effectiveness (Balfanz et al., 2007; Taylor et al., 2017). Finally, questions of scalability and equity require attention: resource-intensive models need adaptation guidance for ordinary schools; segregated tracks should not be expanded without reintegration supports; and multi-agency alignment is essential to address extra-school drivers of disengagement (Burns et al., 2008; Lewthwaite et al., 2017).

In summary, early intervention can reduce risk exposure in the primary years; student-centred approaches leverage agency, relationships and relevance to re-engage; and systems approaches align multi-tiered supports with pedagogical redesign and flexible pathways. The strongest designs are those that are place-based, parent-inclusive, explicitly trauma-aware and culturally responsive, underpinned by coherent whole-school practice and sustained relationships.

4.4 Impacts of Parents on Disengagement

This section reviews the literature on the impact of parent engagement in schools on young people's disengagement from education. Notably absent from the disengagement literature are the voices of parents of disengaged young people, a point Hancock and Zubrick (2015) emphasised and the reason for this research. Research involving parents (see Chapter 3) links young people's disengagement in education with parental socio-economic status, ethnicity, parenting style and routines, childbirth order, family size and parent- child attachment. However, few studies look beyond such factors to ask parents about their experience of their young people's disengagement from education. Below I explore the impacts of parental engagement with the school community and then move on to look at the sparse literature identified that examines parental experiences of young people's engagement and disengagement with education.

4.4.1 Parental engagement in schools

Parental engagement in school is examined in light of literature that presents two competing narratives (Luet, 2017). One narrative describes the problems parents experience when engaging with the school, while the other reinforces the view that schools will not improve until parents become more engaged. Much research can be found to support the positive relationship between parental involvement and young people's achievement and behaviour. However, other studies were found that proposed a negative relationship between parental involvement and academic outcomes for young people, or no relationship. Four forms of parental involvement are examined: discussion between the parent and young person, monitoring of the young person by a parent, parental involvement in parent teacher organisations and lastly, educational support strategies (McNeal, 2014).

Discussion between the parent and young person has a larger effect on young people's attitudes, behaviours and achievement than any other form of parent involvement (McNeal,

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2014). Luet (2017) encouraged schools to reframe their concept of parental engagement to encompass the informal ways that parents are engaging with their young people's education. By recognising parents' involvement in discussing school events and learning at home, schools can reduce parental disengagement, which impacts on their young people's disengagement. Parents were identified as young people's first guides through school. When parents show interest and ask questions about what young people are learning, their young people develop the skills needed to succeed at school (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012), which has been linked to reducing disengagement.

Lanza and Taylor (2010) identified that the lack of family routine may be indicative of disengagement from education. Family routines included, for example, regular discussion of school and homework within the family and the expectation that young people would engage in household chores and have regular bedtimes. Young people with higher levels of disengagement and low levels of routines in the family were more likely to engage in delinquent behaviour. Alternatively, young people with higher levels of disengagement and higher levels of routines were less likely to engage in delinquent behaviour. These findings suggest that a valuable intervention for disengagement because of delinquent behaviour may need to include family routines (Lanza & Taylor, 2010).

Parents' expectations about their young people's future is proposed to have a strong influence on engagement in education (Hendrickson, 2012). If parents hold expectations for their young person's education, they are more likely to monitor them, which according to McNeal (2014) improves engagement. When these expectations clash with those of the school, many young people will follow parental advice and guidance rather than that of the school (Hendrickson, 2012). They begin to see school as irrelevant if they feel it is not preparing them for the future which their parents expect of them. Due to this influence, the young people were observed to perceive that the school did not offer quality education. The

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young people did not feel that the teachers understood the pressures placed on them by their families. These perceptions created a culture of resistance (Hendrickson, 2012) that, over time, led to disengagement from education.

Parental involvement in parent teacher organisations and educational support strategies were also indicated to have a positive impact on young people who were disengaging from education (McNeal, 2014). Parents who help with homework, speak informally with teachers, provide transport to and from school, have formal discussions to assist staff with problems with their children and generally motivate their young people to learn were strategies found to assist in reducing young people's disengagement from education (Luet, 2017). The subtler motivational strategies that parents use also greatly influence young people's beliefs about persistence and delayed gratification which influences their engagement in education (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012).

4.4.2 Parental experiences of youth engagement and disengagement from education

To focus on the purpose of this study, to gain an understanding of parent's experiences with their young people's disengagement from education, two studies were explored. One study by Broadhurst et al (2005) uncovered three groups of family circumstances that lead to disengagement as a decision by the parents. The first is those that voluntarily choose to stop their children attending school, the second is a group that faced traumatic circumstances, causing school to temporarily be a low priority, and the last is a group characterised by the family totally withdrawing from all social systems (Broadhurst et al., 2005). All three groups showed personal agency, where frustration with obstacles to remaining involved in education, "have both a cumulative and compounding effect, with concerns that those who might initially present with life course patterns similar to groups one and two may in the face of repeat negative life events present with the sense of defeat manifest in group three" (Broadhurst et al., 2005, p. 118). This study highlights how

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important and complex it is, to fully understand the parents and young people's needs when attempting to re-engage them into education.

In another study, Doyle and Keane (2019) reported on the perspectives of parents of children who leave school early before completing secondary education. Their findings highlight three categories of parents' experiences. The first is feeling let down by school (Doyle & Keane, 2019, p. 76) where parents perceived the school failed their young people. This failure included low academic expectations, inappropriate curriculum and inadequate support. This perception could perhaps result in voluntary absences from school as reported by Broadhurst et al. (2005). The second category related to feeling stigmatised due to the area they lived in. These parents all came from a low socio-economic area known for its gang activity. This category may align with the families in the study by Broadhurst et al. (2005) that eventually withdrew from all social systems. Thirdly, dealing with trauma on a day-to-day basis created a survival mindset, which resulted in education being seen as less important. These parents felt that survival was more important than school (Broadhurst et al., 2005; Doyle & Keane, 2019).

In both studies, the attention is extended to factors far beyond the characteristics of the young people themselves. None of these parents considered that characteristics of the young people were at the heart of the reasons for their school disengagement. This way of thinking demonstrates the importance of considering the family circumstances when supporting young people who are disengaging from education.

4.5 Summary of the Literature

Chapters 3 and 4 explore the literature on disengagement from education. Chapter 3 begins by framing disengagement from education as the act of withdrawing from education which over time can result in complete disengagement and non-attendance (Duffy & Elwood, 2013). It explored levels of disengagement and the dimensions of disengagement. The

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indicators of disengagement were examined, and it was recognised that if schools paid attention to these indicators, they may be able to intervene as early as possible to reduce student disengagement. The deficit perspective was examined and alternative views of disengagement from education were explored. Studying disengagement as a result of a breakdown in the discursive interactions between young people and schools may allow for the exploration of school or governmental considerations that contribute to this situation. The risk factors that contribute to the disengagement of young people from education were loosely grouped into four areas: those associated with parents and families, those associated with the young people themselves and what engages them, those associated with absences and finally, those associated with schools and teachers.

Chapter 4 began with exploring theoretical lenses and models of disengagement providing a way of viewing disengagement from education that may support schools to identify the cause of a young person's disengagement. Interventions to help young people who have disengaged from education are explored. Chapter 4 concluded by examining the impacts of parents or family circumstances on disengagement. While family socio-economic status, parenting style, parent-child attachment and parent education levels are all seen as impacting on young people's disengagement from education, studies that look beyond these factors are limited (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015). Parental involvement studies show inconclusive results, with some suggesting it has a positive effect and others suggesting a negative effect (Luet, 2017).

The literature review across Chapters 3 and 4 has highlighted that many different approaches and foci have been used in the research into young people's disengagement from school. In the discussion in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8, this research will be drawn upon in relation to the findings of this study. The following chapter deals with the research approach taken throughout this study.

Chapter 5: Research Approach

“It is research which aims at description, analysis, and understanding of experiences; that is, research which is directed towards experiential description. Such an approach points to a relatively distinct field of inquiry which we would like to label phenomenography” (Marton, 1981, p. 180).

When deciding on a research approach, it is important to consider all aspects of the research to ensure the approach matches its purpose (Bickman & Rog, 2009). This chapter outlines the research approach I adopted to conduct the study and how the approach matches the purpose of the study. The purpose of this research is to investigate the variety of ways parents experience the disengagement of their young people from education. One research approach that allowed me to develop understanding of parent participants' experiences is phenomenography (Marton, 1981). Hence, this chapter begins by providing an outline of the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenography and explains why I chose phenomenography. An explanation of the methods follows, including detailed information on the participants, study context, data collection and analysis. Lastly, I delineate how I ensured research rigour and the highest ethical considerations.

5.1 Phenomenography

Phenomenography is a research approach that aims to describe, analyse and understand people's experiences of a given phenomenon (Marton, 1981). This approach explores the variance in the ways that people understand their experiences, differentiating between first order perspectives (understanding the phenomenon itself) and second order perspectives (understanding the ways people experience the phenomenon) (Bowden & Walsh, 2000; Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2017; Marton, 1981). This study takes the second order perspective by investigating the lived experience of parents whose young people are disengaging from education.

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Phenomenography is based on the idea that there are only a limited number of ways any phenomenon can be experienced and that these will be related to each other in some way (Marton, 1997). While traditional research aims to describe "the world as it is," phenomenography seeks to describe "the world as perceived" (Gibbs et al., 1982, p. 139), focusing on the notion that people are hermeneutic beings who interpret the world around them based on their experiences (Bowden & Walsh, 2000). Theoretical stance of phenomenography

Phenomenography is an interpretive research approach situated within the qualitative research paradigm. Qualitative researchers commonly adopt one of two perspectives - critical or interpretivist. The critical perspective seeks to evaluate the phenomena itself or the people experiencing these phenomena, while interpretivism seeks to understand people's lived experience of those phenomena (Hammersley, 2013). Given this research focuses on parents' lived experience of their young person's disengagement from education, it is suitable to situate the work within the interpretivist paradigm.

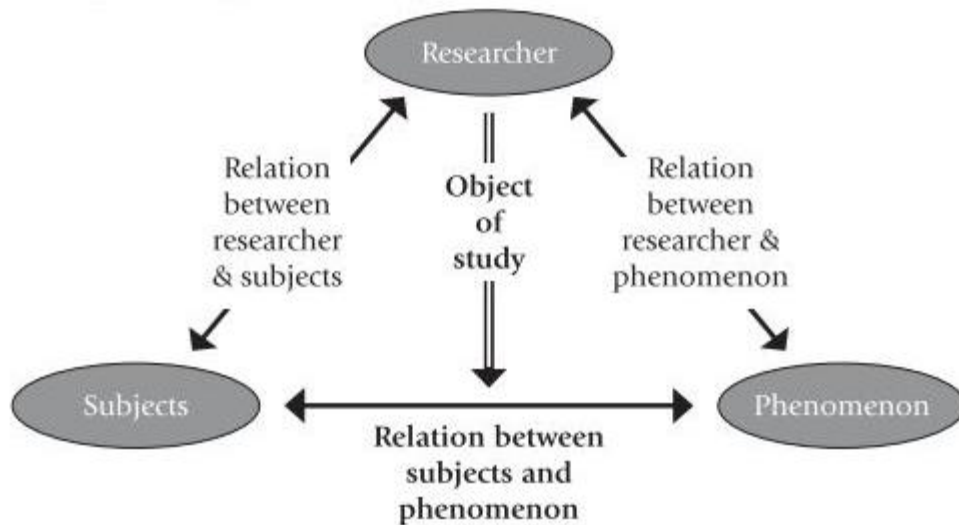
Interpretivism is underpinned by a relativist ontology which presupposes that each person has their own individual, subjective reality constructed through the interaction of language with aspects of the real world (Scotland, 2012; Weber, 2004). Humans "actively interpret or make sense of their environment and of themselves" (Hammersley, 2013, p. 26) in diverse ways influenced by their culture, beliefs and way of life, resulting in numerous perspectives on interpreting the same phenomena. From this perspective, the world is seen as non-dualistic; there is only one world that is perceived as the experience of a relationship between participants and a phenomenon. Interpretivist researchers thus portray the meaning participants attach to the phenomena being studied (Ireland et al., 2008), requiring an exploratory approach that acknowledges their presentation as one subjective interpretation of realities and truths (Hammersley, 2013; Mayan, 2023). To fully understand the social world,

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we must gain an understanding of humanity from the inside, as opposed to only from the outside. In this study, exploring parents' individual interpretations of their young people's disengagement from education allows this insider understanding.

Phenomenography grew out of the work of the Goteburg group that began in the 1970s. This group consisted of Ference Marton, research students Lars Owe Dahlgren, Roger Saüljo and Lennart Svensson, with later contributions from Anders Fransson and Claes-Göran Wenestam (Richardson, 2015). Marton (1981) claimed that phenomenography represents a distinct research approach suitable for understanding how individuals interpret the world around them. Advocating that phenomenography is underpinned by the belief that any given phenomenon can only be “experienced, conceptualized or understood” in “a limited number of qualitatively different ways” Marton (1992) asserted that phenomenography is “designed to discover and describe such differences” (p. 253).

Phenomenography foregrounds the interpretation and understanding of data as fundamentally challenging, as the researcher must set aside their own preconceived ideas and learn to see the world as it is experienced by others (Barnacle, 2005). Relationality—the idea that the world is an interconnected network of people, concepts, ideas and things—is central to phenomenographic research (Bowden & Green, 2005). Figure 7 shows the multiple relationships in phenomenographic research, with the object of study being the relationship between the participants and the phenomena (Bowden, 2005). For this study, a person-centred approach has been used to ensure that the results focus on the variations among the participants' experiences (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Figure 9*Object of study (Bowden & Green, 2005)*

The results of a phenomenographic study are referred to as the outcome space, which focuses on finding a small number of 'categories of description' of the phenomena. While there are typically 4 or 5 categories discovered, it is the hierarchy these categories form that is of interest, creating a structure where categories are logically related to each other, with each higher level encompassing those below it (Tight, 2016).

5.1.1 *Why phenomenography?*

Phenomenography was selected for this study for three key reasons. First, it privileges individual experiences and understandings, allowing each parent's unique perspective on their young person's disengagement to emerge rather than imposing a predetermined framework (Åkerlind, 2012; Bowden & Walsh, 2000). Second, the second-order perspective inherent to phenomenography enables focus on how parents experience disengagement, rather than on the phenomenon of disengagement itself (Marton, 1981). Third, phenomenography's emphasis on variation provides a systematic approach to identifying and describing the qualitatively different ways parents experience this

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phenomenon (Marton, 1997; Tight, 2016), offering insights that can inform support for families navigating educational disengagement.

5.1.2 Types of phenomenographic research

Phenomenography can be conducted in several different ways. These include but are not limited to pure phenomenography (Marton, 1997), developmental phenomenography (Bowden & Walsh, 2000) and the phenomenographic narrative approach (Nazari & Karimpour, 2023). Pure phenomenography focuses on describing and categorising the different ways people experience a phenomenon (Bowden & Walsh, 2000) with a focus on the collective variations. Developmental phenomenology is an extension of pure phenomenography in that it aims to use research findings to inform and improve practice. It considers the practical implications of the research with the aim to influence or inform change to future practice (Bowden & Walsh, 2000). The phenomenographic narrative approach incorporates storytelling and personal accounts into the phenomenographic research process. It focuses on exploring experiences through narratives while still aiming to identify different ways of understanding a phenomenon (Nazari & Karimpour, 2023).

For this study I have chosen a developmental phenomenographic narrative approach. This approach offers a way to describe, analyse and understand parent's stories of the way they experienced the phenomenon of their young people's disengagement from education. As indicated in Chapter 1, parent voice is an area that is markedly absent from the current research on disengagement from education (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015). The findings of this developmental phenomenographic narrative approach have the potential to inform more effective policies and school-based support strategies that schools can adopt to support parents and their young people who are disengaging from education.

5.2 Methods

5.2.1 Research context

This research took place in a regional Queensland city with a population of approximately 200,000 people. The city's key industries encompass retail trade, health and education services, government administration and defence, construction, mining, manufacturing, as well as property and business services (reference omitted to ensure anonymity).

5.2.2 Participants

Participants consisted of seven families, including eight parents; seven females and one male who was interviewed with his wife. Because two of the parents were interviewed together, a total of seven interviews were conducted. All parents appeared to be middle aged; although, no specific questions were asked about the age of the parents, only the ages of their young people. Socio-economic status varied, some parents identified their family income bracket as \$40,000 to \$70,000, others as above \$100,000. I collected parents' education level to help with understanding their own experiences with education. Table 2 provides a summary of the family demographics. One parent, 'Mary' chose to use a pseudonym for her and her son 'Fred' to ensure confidentiality. Further participant details are provided in Chapter 6 within each narrative.

Table 2*Family demographics*

Parent	Young people	Young people's age	Year at school	Family income	Education level of parent interviewed	Education level of other parent
Mary	Fred	15	10	Over \$100,000	Year 12	Diploma
Toni	Jacob	13	8	\$40,000 to \$70,000	Year 10	Year 11
Donna	Declan	14	9	Over \$100,000	Cert 3	Cert 3
Annette	Wilson	15	10	Over \$100,000	Year 12	Year 11
Kelly	Michael	15	10	\$40,000 to \$70,000	Year 12 Cert 3	Year 11 Cert 3
Michelle	Declan Hayden	16 13	11 8	\$40,000 to \$70,000	Diploma	N/A
Alan Anne	Cameron	13	7	Over \$100,000	Tertiary Tertiary	

5.2.3 Schools

The schools attended by the young people in this study varied. Table 3 summarises the key demographic details of the schools attended by the young people whose parents were involved in this study. ICSEA is a scale that measures the socio-educational advantage of students in a school, based on several factors that provide an indication of the socio-

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educational backgrounds of students, including parents' occupation and education, geographical location, proportion of Indigenous students and students with language background other than English (ACARA, 2015). Values higher than 1000 indicates higher levels of educational advantage and values lower than 1000 indicates higher levels of educational disadvantage. Typically, schools range from approximately 500 (extremely educationally disadvantaged backgrounds) to about 1300 (very educationally advantaged backgrounds).

Table 3*School demographics and attendance*

School	Sector	Year Levels	No. of Students	ICSEA	Parents and Students Attending these schools
School A	Independent	P to 12	1131	1096	Alan, Anne and Cameron
School B	State	7 to 12	678	879	Michelle, Declan and Hayden Annette and Wilson – started at this school, returned to this school.
School C	Catholic	P to 12	1976	1019	Annette and Wilson – attended for one year
School D	State	7 to 12	975	964	Donna and Declan Toni and Jacob
School E	State	7 to 12	706	882	Kelly and Michael
School F	State	7 to 12	1519	993	Mary and Fred

5.2.4 Data collection**5.2.4.1 Interviews.**

In qualitative research, interviews are an ideal way of collecting rich and meaningful information. As Hammersley (2013) assert, interviews are “the best means of eliciting

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accounts of people's experience and perspectives" (p. 54). When interviewing participants who may feel vulnerable, it is important to structure interviews to allow the participants to feel safe and comfortable to share their experiences with a researcher (Dempsey et al., 2016). It is important participants have some flexibility to speak on areas that are of importance to them. However, it is also important to keep the interviews on topic which requires gentle encouragement on behalf of the researcher (Hammersley, 2013).

There are various types of interviews. The semi-structured interview is the method of choice of many qualitative educational researchers as it provides a way of both enabling the participants to guide the interview, and permitting the researcher to guide the interview back to the topic as required (Mayan, 2023). Typically, the researcher develops a set of questions to guide the process, while offering flexibility as to when the questions are asked to suit the conversation, and to allow the participants to feel safe and at ease (Mayan, 2023). Semi-structured interviews can be loosely organised to allow participants to retain control of the situation, while offering the researcher flexibility to ask questions where appropriate.

For this research I conducted phenomenographic interviews. Phenomenographic interviews are a type of semi-structured interview. They contain open-ended questions to allow participants the freedom to describe their personal experience of the research phenomena (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998). As with all semi-structured interviews, a phenomenographic approach permits the researcher to probe for more information when required during the interview, with a structure to assist the researcher to remain focused on the topic of the research (Bowden & Green, 2005). Importantly, phenomenographic interviews focus on questions about 'why' rather than 'what' (Bowden & Green, 2005). While phenomenographic interviews tend to include only a few predetermined questions, it is important for the questions to flow with what the interviewee says. All phenomenographic interviews within a study begin with a common question (Bowden & Walsh, 2000). This

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process allows the researcher to build rapport while allowing the participants to guide the conversation (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Bowden & Green, 2005).

Prior to conducting phenomenographic interviews, the interviewer needs to be familiar with asking probing questions. This probing is what allows the researcher to investigate “variations in understandings of the same phenomena” (Bowden & Green, 2005, p. 64). While probing questions are essential to this technique, knowing when to stop probing is just as essential. Bowden and Green (2005) described this as reaching the ‘aha’ moment when the researcher feels they have understood the experience of the participant. For these reasons it is important for beginning researchers to practise their interview techniques.

As mentioned in Section 5.1.2, I used a developmental phenomenographic narrative approach to collect and present the data for this study. This approach enabled me to collect rich details about participants’ experiences, in their own words, capturing their narrative of their experience with their young person’s disengagement. The narratives presented in Chapter 6 assist in developing an understanding of the parents’ perspectives of their young people’s disengagement. In following a phenomenographic interview style, I prepared an interview schedule of questions to be used with all participants. The questions and prompts were designed to be constructive and encourage full explanation by the participants (Bowden, 2005). The initial common question asked of all participants was ‘what does disengagement from education mean to you?’ The answers then guided the use of further predetermined questions (see Appendix A). I asked probing questions to further uncover the parent’s narrative of their young person’s disengagement from education. These questions allowed for the development of understanding and rapport between me, as the researcher, and the parents, as the interviewees (Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2017). Adopting such a rigorous process helped to ensure that my relationship with the phenomenon did not distort the research

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process (Bowden, 2005) and limited any new inputs which could introduce my own perceptions of the phenomena under study.

To authentically hear participants' voices, it is important to allow participants to feel safe enough to express their true opinions (Bowden & Walsh, 2000). To build meaningful understanding of parents' experiences of their young people's disengagement from education, it was essential to make them feel safe so they could express their experiences in their own words. I did this through building rapport, sharing my background and the purpose of the study and by utilising empathy for them as a parent of a disengaged young person; permitting me to elicit the parents' voices, helping them to feel heard and understood.

5.2.4.2 Interview process.

Participants were invited to be interviewed through advertisements in school newsletters (see Appendix B). After gaining ethical approval to conduct the research from both James Cook University and the Department of Education, I contacted all seven high schools in the research area requesting to place an advertisement in their newsletter. The advertisement invited parents to participate in the research and directed them to contact me, as the researcher, directly via email or phone. Three out of the seven schools advertised the project, resulting in a total of seven families responding. All parent responders were included in the interviews as they all identified their young people as disengaged from education. A total of seven interviews were conducted (recall that one interview included a married couple), varying in length from 40 minutes to one hour and 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted in different settings of the parents choosing. Four interviews took place at the participants' home. Two interviews took place in a neutral environment at my friend's house where we had a private space to ensure confidentiality, before beginning the interview. The final interview took place at a school in the participants' office.

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Prior to the interviews, all participants were given an information sheet outlining the purpose of the research and details on how their data would be used (see Appendix C). At the time of the interviews, I discussed the information sheet with the participants to ensure they fully understood the purpose of the research and their commitment. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to commencing the interviews (see Appendix D). Five interviews were conducted with one parent alone; one interview was conducted with a couple who both signed consent forms and spoke about their experiences. The final interview took place with the consenting parent's husband present in the room at the time of the interview; however, he chose not to sign a consent form. This resulted in anything he said being removed from the transcript.

As parent participants self-identified and volunteered to take part in the interviews, no exclusion criteria were necessary. Because this study is an analysis of the parents' understanding of their young person's disengagement from education, the criteria to label a young person as disengaged from education was determined by the parents, rather than their disengagement fitting into any predetermined criteria or set definition.

A simple demographic form (see Appendix E) was also used to collect information about the family. This form asked parents to identify a range of information about their family that literature suggests may influence disengagement from education. This information included socioeconomic status, family size, family dynamics, school transitions, and parents' education levels. This included the opportunity to use a pseudonym for themselves and their disengaged child if requested. . This information is included within each parent's narrative in Chapter 6.

All interviews began with the same question, "What does disengagement from education mean to you?". This aimed to determine the participants understanding of the term disengagement. As much as possible, I consistently used the set of guiding questions

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(Appendix A) for all interviews to help me stay on topic (Bowden & Green, 2005). However, there were times when some participants spoke off topic or took the interview in unexpected directions. On such occasions, I gently used the guiding questions to bring the participants back to the topic. The interviews were structured to allow the parents to terminate at any time if they felt distressed by the recollection of their young people's school experiences. One participant required several breaks as she was overwhelmed with emotion. This participant continued with the interview as she felt it was important for her to tell her story. All parents thanked me for providing the opportunity to tell their story, with one stating afterwards that it was "good to feel heard" (Kelly).

5.3 Data Analysis

Phenomenographic data analysis is an iterative process that consists of two stages. The first stage involves selecting quotes that are relevant to the research question being investigated. Before and after selection, the researcher becomes immersed in the data to build an understanding of the context from which the quotes are taken. The second stage commences when the quotes are removed from their individual interview context and the focus is placed on the meanings embedded in all the data. The analysis then switches between these two stages, constructing a set of categories of description (Bowden & Walsh, 2000). In interrogating the data in this manner, the aim is to uncover the similarities and differences in participants' experiences of the phenomenon in question (Åkerlind, 2012).

When analysing the data in a phenomenographic study, it is important to control the process to ensure all findings are related to the data collected (Bowden, 2005). Therefore, all evidence is drawn from the interview transcripts. No new data is introduced as it would corrupt the data. It is important to bracket (or isolate and consider) the researcher's relationship with the phenomenon. By doing this, the researcher contains any influence from disrupting the results. Selection of the categories of description is done independently,

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without attempting to create a hierarchy or structural links between the categories. If attempting to form these links before the categories are agreed on, there is a potential, once again, to distort the results due to the researcher's relationship with the phenomenon (Bowden, 2005).

There are two aims in phenomenographic data analysis. The first is to develop categories of description that show the different ways in which the phenomenon is experienced. The second is to present the ways in which these categories of description are related to each other in a hierarchy or typology (Christiansen, 2011). The key to this analysis is to explore the ways in which the experiences of the phenomenon differ from each other. Statements that stand out in the transcripts are scrutinised for the deeper meaning that lies within them. Similar statements are then brought together through an iterative process. Categories are constantly refined as they are compared to other categories (Åkerlind, 2005).

The process of reading, re-reading and then repeating the reading is the most important yet time consuming part of the data analysis (Green, 2005). To build familiarity the interview transcripts must be repeatedly read in full. The more familiarity that is developed with the data, the more meaning that will be drawn out of the data and the easier it will be to develop the categories of description. The first set of categories will most likely be discarded, but they will offer an entry point into the data and the iterations that follow will eventually uncover the categories of description that are sought (Green, 2005). Below I explain how I enacted this understanding to analyse the research data.

5.3.1 The process of analysing the data

Data analysis involved two iterative phases, phase one involved searching for categories of description and phase two is where I compared and contrasted parental stories to the literature.

5.3.1.1 Searching for categories of description.

In following this iterative process to data analysis, I began by reading each interview transcript thoroughly and re-reading it to explore its meaning. The initial readings of the transcripts required much time and note taking to ensure I was fully immersed in the data. After these initial readings, I again re-read the transcripts. I recorded my first thoughts on categories from each individual interview transcript in a word document with quotes extracted demonstrating the category. I also took handwritten notes in a journal to record initial ideas. I constantly referred to the notes during the analysis process.

As I engaged deeply with the transcripts and reflected on my notes, distinct categories began to emerge from the data. The original categories of description I found were mental health concerns, diagnoses or life experiences, and the emotions of frustration, distress, persistence, acceptance, determination, exasperation and feeling pressured. To assist the process of developing the categories of description, I researched a definition for each category from the research. This refined my understanding of the categories of description and ensured that the participants' words reflected the chosen definition of the category. For example, I originally had a category called exasperation, however, the process led to the removal of exasperation as I found it was too similar in meaning to frustration. Finally, I arranged the categories into a hierarchy developed by determining the number of participants who experienced each category and how each category related to the others.

5.3.1.2 Comparing and contrasting parent stories with the literature.

The next phase involved comparing and contrasting the parent stories with the literature reviewed in Chapters 3 and 4. I began with the dimensions of emotional, behavioural and cognitive disengagement (Chapter 3) as an organising structure to explore how the parents described their young people's disengagement from education. This involved once again reading each transcript, searching for examples of the three dimensions

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within the parents' words. This was done to determine which dimension was most prevalent in the parents' narratives of their young people's experiences. Understanding the most prevalent dimensions of disengagement added to the parent narratives and assisted in understanding the ways in which these young people disengaged from education.

Next, I explored the young people's level of disengagement from education (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015). As explained in Chapter 3, some young people disengage from education entirely, while others remain engaged in education but disengage from a school. Young people also remain in school but can disengage from the classroom. Finally, some young people just disengage from the content being taught. Exploring the level of disengagement of the young people helped me to understand the parents' experiences more completely. I did this by searching the transcripts for evidence of disengagement from the content, classroom or school. I continued in this vein, comparing and contrasting the parent stories with the literature reviewed in Chapters 3 and 4, and presenting the commonalities and contrasts in Chapter 7.

Presenting both the commonalities and contrasts with the literature, I then explored all sections for themes. The key findings that emerged from this process were a research-practice gap, delayed recognition of student disengagement and a lack of school support for both parent and a lack of support for parents from schools when their young people were disengaging. These findings are also presented and discussed in Chapter 7 to answer Research Question 3: How do parent's experiences compare to existing literature addressing disengagement from education? This revealed some of the key findings which allowed the researcher to develop some implications for schools coming from this study.

5.3.1.3 Isolating the Researcher's Relationship to the Phenomenon.

As mentioned at the beginning of Section 5.3, when conducting a phenomenographic study, it is expected that the researcher will bracket (i.e., isolate) their own personal ideas and

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beliefs from the process of the analysis. This is to ensure that personal perspectives do not influence the researcher's understanding of the participants' words (Ahmed et al., 2020; Bowden & Walsh, 2000; Tight, 2016). To this end, I listened to the recordings of the interviews many times, and manually transcribed interviews verbatim, noting sections that I did not understand. This repeated listening to the recordings let me to develop a holistic understanding of the parents' words and emotional responses. When initially analysing the interview data, I repeatedly referred to lines in the transcribed interviews to ensure there was evidence of the phenomenon that I was referring to.

I was drawn to this research topic due to my personal and professional experiences. When listening to these parents, I empathised with their experiences as a parent who had similar experiences and as a professional who had experience helping many parents like the ones in this study. Therefore, to isolate this influence from the research was challenging. Nevertheless, I managed to do this by consulting with both university supervisors and a work colleague with over 30 years' experience in education. To add further rigour to the data analysis process, I engaged a critical friend from outside education, to ensure that there was no educational bias in the ways I was interpreting the parent's words. When I was unsure of any interpretation, I would ask these people to read the transcription and listen to small sections of the recordings to gather their collective insights into the meaning of the participants' words. In this way, I bracketed my personal beliefs, values and understanding of the participants' experiences to ensure that this did not impact on or influence interpretation of the data.

5.4 Validity, Credibility, and Transferability of the Research

All research requires validity, credibility and transferability to ensure that the research is robust and meaningful. Validity is a check on how well the research findings reflect the phenomenon studied (Bickman & Rog, 2009). There are numerous ways of assuring validity,

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including choosing appropriate research methods that align with the research question and aim; using triangulation; and conducting respondent validation. Credibility refers to whether the findings make sense and accurately represent the data (Bickman & Rog, 2009).

Therefore, the credibility is about the confidence that can be placed in the findings. To ensure credibility the researcher must also consider if the sample is representative of the real-world population that experiences the phenomenon being studied (Bickman & Rog, 2009).

Transferability refers to how transferable the findings are to other settings (Bickman & Rog, 2009).

To ensure validity, I drew on my supervisors' expertise during data analysis to ensure that the data was examined in meaningful ways. I also asked a trusted colleague to listen to my interpretation of the data and look at the transcripts to see if they agreed with my interpretation. Using these processes, the data was interrogated continuously, with university supervisors offering their insights and my colleague offering their own insights. Where our interpretations varied, I went back to the original transcripts and re-examined participants' words to ensure my analysis was accurate. Finally, I consulted with supervisors and my colleague again to ensure a shared understanding of the data.

I applied three strategies to ensure credibility. Firstly, the interviews involved prolonged engagement with the participants lived experience of disengagement. By allowing them as much time as needed to express their experiences in their own words and in their own time, resulted in authentic data (Collier-Reed et al., 2009). Next, I applied persistent investigation of the data by repeatedly comparing and contrasting the transcripts to the recordings to ensure the data presented in the study was as credible as possible. Finally, I employed triangulation by consulting with my colleague and supervisors to ensure my interpretation of the data was accurate as outlined above (Collier-Reed et al., 2009; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Mayan, 2023).

Assuring transferability in phenomenographic studies is difficult due to the contextually specific nature of the data. It is essential, therefore, to consider the contextual and situational factors that may impact on the participants' experiences (Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2017). Whilst this research does not have transferability due to the contextual dependency of the data, the results can provide a baseline for other larger studies in the future. Further, it is important to recognise that the ultimate judgement of transferability often lies with the reader, who can determine the extent to which the findings are applicable to their own context (Collier-Reed et al., 2009). To this end I discussed the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenographic research and provided detailed accounts of the research context, participants, and methods used.

5.5 Ethics

To conduct this research, I followed ethical guidelines outlined by James Cook University (JCU), in line with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2023). Ethics approval was gained from the James Cook University Ethics Committee on 23 January 2019 (Approval Number H77643). To comply with the ethical requirements of the university, I undertook the following processes. No data collection took place prior to receiving ethical approval. The participant information sheet was written in plain English. As researcher I ensured that I clearly explained the purpose of the research, emphasising that participation was voluntary, and sought clarification of understanding from the participants. I explained what the data would be used for and that there would possibly be publications resulting from the study but that any identification details would be anonymised. I did this prior to the interviews commencing, at which time the participants also completed the informed consent form. A copy of the information sheet was left with every participant. As I anticipated that some parents would find discussing their young people's disengagement from education distressing, the

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information sheet included contact information of services the parents could access for support with their young people's disengagement from education and the contact details of JCU's Counselling team, if required. During the initial phase of the interview, participants were informed they could stop the interview at any time. Throughout the interviews, two parents did become distressed and were offered the opportunity to stop, however, they both wanted to continue as they felt it important to have their story heard.

One parent, Toni and her son, Jacob, were previously known in a professional capacity to the researcher prior to Toni's contact offering to be interviewed. This parent saw the advertisement in the school newsletter and reached out independently. The Researcher did not draw on her previous knowledge of the parent or young person and maintained a professional approach during analysis of the interview transcript.

5.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has set out the research approach adopted for this study. I have explained what phenomenography is, why it was a suitable approach for this study and why and how phenomenographic interviewing was used as a data collection method. As the purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of parents' perspectives of the phenomenon of their young people's disengagement from school, I justified the developmental narrative phenomenographic approach. This chapter has also presented the research methods, including participant and school information, details about the participant recruitment, and the data collection and analysis processes. I explained steps to ensure validity and credibility, as well as the inherent limited transferability of phenomenographic research. Finally, I outlined steps taken to ensure the implementation of the research in accordance with the conditions and requirements of the ethics approval.

Chapter 6: The Parents' Stories

“Storytelling is a uniquely human experience through which people make sense of past experience, convey emotions and ultimately connect with other people” (Christiansen, 2011, p. 289).

To present the results of this study, I decided to provide a narrative of each of the interviews to capture the human experience of disengagement from education. The reason for this decision was to bring the participants' experiences of the phenomenon of 'disengagement from education' to life. I believed that presenting this information in transcripts would make the reading difficult. As human beings, we are predisposed to understanding the world through narrative (Haden & Hoffman, 2013). The parents were encouraged to tell their stories, offering their unique experience, and helping them to convey the emotions they experienced when their young people were disengaging from education (Christiansen, 2011). The narratives below represent the stories gathered through the interviews completed.

Each of the parents' stories begins with exploring their own experiences, attitudes and opinions about education. These are often mentioned in the literature as impacting on a young person's engagement or disengagement from education. The story continues by outlining parents' perceptions of the young people's experiences that lead to disengagement from education. The parents' experiences of their young person's disengagement are then outlined, followed by a description of the ways this disengagement impacted the parent and young person. Each narrative concludes by discussing the categories of description that emerged from analysis of the interview data. As mentioned above in Section 5.3, the categories of description are the outcome of a phenomenographic study and provide an understanding of how the phenomenon of disengagement is experienced by these parents. Each category of description experienced by the parents is presented and discussed at length.

6.1 Mary's Story

6.1.1 Mary's experiences and opinions about education

Mary is the mother of Fred, aged 15. She is married and has two children who both live at home. Fred's sister is 19. Fred is in Year 10 at high school. Mary did quite well at school and enjoyed school. Her classes had less children in them than Fred's classes, and regardless of being at all different ages, the students all worked in together. She felt pressure from her mother to take science subjects while at school, regardless of her interest in more creative activities which is where her passion lies. Mary believes that "you should always be learning." She thinks it is "very important to finish Year 12" but believes her children should keep their "options open." Both Mary and her husband reinforce the idea that there are many avenues to a career and people should be guided by their interests. Mary encourages her children to find their passion and do what they enjoy. Mary stated that she does not put "that massive pressure of having to be an A student" on her children. However, she feels that school is focused "more on academic [learning] than on growing to be the best person you can be."

6.1.2 Mary's perceptions about Fred's experiences leading to disengagement

Fred's experiences of primary school were positive, he loved it, however, high school was not so easy for him. He was a part of one of the first cohorts in Queensland to go to high school in Year 7, where in previous years, students had moved to high school in Year 8 after completing Year 7 at primary school. This transition into high school had a "massive effect" on him. Mary is unsure if this was due to his age or his academic abilities. The school Fred attended streamed students into classes based on their academic results. He was a "C average" student, so "ended up in classrooms with perhaps more disruptive kids." Mary states Fred reported the teacher would spend the lessons yelling at the students, which took

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all the fun out of school for Fred. He became very distressed about having to go to school resulting in Mary and her husband exploring support outside the school. This support was “to try and help him get through what he was feeling.” Due to Fred’s perception of poor teaching, they “changed schools for Year 8,” which was “neither here nor there.” Mary described Year 8 as a “tough year” due to Fred not being “overly confident” and in a new school. Mary feels the teachers have a “massive impact” on him, if they gain his respect, and are engaging, “he can be an A student.” Alternatively, if there is no respect, he will “just turn off completely.” Fred’s struggles with school damaged his self-confidence. He went from being a happy-go-lucky child in primary school, to questioning everything. He became complacent about life, not caring about anything. Fred struggles with the school’s focus on achievement and results. He sees not getting the best mark as failure. Mary asserts this has left him not caring about school, he just seems to not want to try and doesn’t feel that he is good enough.

6.1.3 Mary’s experience of Fred’s disengagement

Mary describes disengagement from education as a child, having no interest in school and not wanting to attend school or learn at school. She goes on to say that even when attending school, disengaged children are not taking any notice of what is being taught. Mary considers Fred to be disengaged because he often does not listen in class, does not seem to care about school, avoids homework and becomes upset in the morning when having to go to school.

Mary describes her experiences of Fred’s disengagement as “devastating.” She was heartbroken when Fred was upset about school. Now however, she finds his ongoing disengagement frustrating. She wants the best for him and does not want him to burn any bridges. She feels that the teachers’ pedagogical style is the biggest influence on young people. Mary considers that a teacher needs to bring the students into the learning, into the

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class. If a teacher can relate to the children, and draw them into the learning, she feels that the result would be different and so much better.

6.1.4 How disengagement impacted Mary and Fred

Mary states that she decided to get some professional help for Fred as his disengagement was impacting his mental health. They started with the school where they had some difficulties when they attempted to seek help. Mary spoke to the Year Coordinator who arranged for Fred to see the Guidance Counsellor. After the first meeting, Mary reports Fred came away feeling good about it, feeling that she really listened and gave him some great advice. However, when Fred went back to see her two to three weeks later, “she had no recollection of their previous chats.” Fred stated that it was a waste of time, that she didn’t care about him at all.

Mary explains that Fred is still struggling with engaging with education and with finding his place in school and building relationships with teachers. Recently, Fred was in tears regarding his future educational pathway. He was enrolled in ATAR subjects (the academic stream in Australia) for Years 11 and 12, and he was feeling a great deal of pressure. He did not want to do the ATAR subjects, so Mary and Fred sat down together and discussed changing to a vocational stream. When they approached the school, the teacher who knows Fred well was supportive of the change. Mary feels that Fred is greatly influenced by the teachers. If a teacher takes some time to gain his respect and talk to him, he will engage and do the work. However, if a teacher does not respect him, he will take out his laptop, watch movies and disengage.

6.1.5 *Categories of description*

6.1.5.1 Experiences of frustration.

Mary often talks of frustration regarding Fred's disengagement from education. She is frustrated due to Fred's lack of interest in school. He frequently goes to class and just talks, not listening to the teacher at all. Fred's avoidance of homework and reluctance to go to school also frustrates Mary. In the last two years, Fred has seemed to not care at all about school, which Mary has found difficult. When she has to talk to school staff, she feels like she is just wasting her time as they are not listening and are not helpful. Mary expresses frustration at Fred's lack of respect. However, she also expresses her understanding of it, as Fred talks about how the teacher stands in front of them, often shouting at the class, and the students just shut down.

6.1.5.2 Experiences of Distress.

Mary and Fred both experienced distress in relation to school. Mary explains her experience of Fred's disengagement as "devastating." She arranged for Fred to see a psychologist in the hope of helping him to work through his feelings about school. Mary wants the best for Fred and wants him to keep every door open for his future, yet she feels that Fred is just closing doors. Even though it is distressing for Mary, she is very supportive of Fred and solution focused in her engagement with him.

Fred has been distressed many times. Just going to school would see him become cranky and upset. Upon attending secondary school, Fred's self-confidence dropped, and he started to question everything. At one stage, he didn't seem to care if he got out of bed in the mornings. Fred can get wounded easily and also quite angry. When this happens, he withdraws and doesn't want to talk about the situation at all. One evening he burst into tears and started talking about the amount of pressure he was feeling in regard to the senior years. This outburst resulted in Mary and Fred sitting down and reassessing their plans for Years 11

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and 12. They decided to move him into vocational subjects to reduce the pressure of ATAR.

Mary just wants Fred to keep his options open and not burn any bridges.

6.1.5.3 Experiences of Determination.

Mary expresses her determination to get Fred through his last two years of school. She states that she thinks it is “very important” to complete Year 12. Mary does not focus on the ATAR score. However, she feels it is important for his future to have the senior certificate. She doesn't put pressure on Fred to be an A student but sees the completion of Year 12 as keeping his options open for the future and wants Fred to have this opportunity. Mary encourages Fred to follow his passion in relation to his future. Throughout the interview, Mary expresses her determination to get Fred through his education and allow him to have many avenues open in relation to his future.

6.2 Toni's Story

Disclaimer: I have a pre-existing relationship with this family. As the Guidance Officer at a primary school, I supported Jacob when he returned to school and offered advice to Toni about seeking psychological support. Later, Jacob was a part of a program which I coordinated, and I supported him on a one-to-one basis during his transition to high school. Toni contacted me directly when she saw the advertisement in the high school's newsletter and offered to be interviewed for this study.

6.2.1 Toni's experiences and opinions about education

Toni is the mother of Jacob, aged 13. Jacob is enrolled in Year 8 at high school but he does not attend school. Toni is married and has two older children who no longer live at home. Toni attended one of the top state high schools in Australia, which was a very strict school, with rigid rules around uniforms. She was an A+ student who loved school. Her family then moved to North Queensland, where she felt the private school, she attended was

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about a year behind the curriculum of what she had experienced at her previous school. Her results dropped from A+ to D as she maintained she was bored. She then talked her parents into moving her to a state school, where she got “lost in the system” and “gave up in Year 10.” When asked how her education compared to Jacob’s, she stated it was a lot different as her father would make her “sit at a desk and work on things” until she was “near tears” before he would sit down and help her to work it out together. Toni feels that she and her husband are unable to support their children with education because things have changed so much. Toni reports that she and her husband have a very high opinion of education. Even so, she considers that the young person’s mental health is more important than being pressured to engage in education. She acknowledges that this mindset is due to her own mental health concerns. Jacob’s two older siblings left school early to get jobs.

6.2.2 Toni’s perceptions about Jacob’s experiences leading to disengagement

When Jacob started Prep, Toni believed he was too young, but she felt pressured by family to enrol him at school. However, he loved his first school. Toni stated that “he really enjoyed it.” When Jacob was in Year 5, the family moved home, and Jacob changed schools. He did not enjoy going to this second school at all and had a lot of problems there. Going to school mostly involved his sister dragging him to school and the Principal locking him in his office to allow him time to calm down. Jacob feared the community, “he was scared of going outside the front gate.” When Jacob began at the local high school he attended perfectly for two weeks and then “Bam! Back into it again, stress and all that. And now I can’t get him to go at all.”

6.2.3 Toni’s experience of Jacob’s disengagement

When the family moved to the new area and school, Toni had a “breakdown” and was struggling. She explains that turning 40, becoming a grandmother and moving to a new area

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impacted on her mental health. On reflection, Toni considers that the school was very good, with no indication of bullying, and the Principal and classroom teacher both supportive. Toni reports Jacob was scared at night and still sleeping with his parents at this stage.

Toni identifies the area as not “a nice place to live.” Jacob does not confide in many people and has never told Toni what he feared. However, she states there was often a lot of noise at night, smashing bottles and dogs barking, saying they “were constantly on your toes, you know, making sure you were locked up.” The families’ two dogs were stolen twice in the time they lived in this area.

In less than a year, the family decided to move back to the area they had previously lived in. This meant that Jacob was able to return to his first school. At the time Toni felt that going back to this school would solve Jacob’s disengagement from education. However, he experienced anxiety and depression from the death of his grandfather shortly after his return and a few months later, the death of his uncle. There was a lot of “arguing and fighting” to get Jacob to attend school. Once there, he was supported by two staff members, one who he looks up to, and the other who supported and guided Toni throughout the remainder of Jacob’s primary schooling. Toni reports communication with the primary school was excellent. Even though she would not speak with the Principal due to them not getting on, she feels that the Deputy Principal, the Chaplain, the teachers and Guidance Officer supported her well.

According to Toni, on moving to high school, despite interviews with key staff prior to enrolment, Jacob just became a number. She was frustrated with communication with the high school, feeling that she needed to go through so many people attempting to advocate for support for Jacob but she was not listened to. She feels that the expectation of him attending full time was unrealistic, but that was recommended as his best option, regardless of his anxiety. Toni feels Jacob is disengaged from the school, but not from education, as he likes

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to use YouTube to teach himself things online. She states that he wants “life experiences” not “desk experiences.” The family are now considering home schooling for Jacob to help ensure he has the basic learning he needs.

6.2.4 *How disengagement impacted Toni and Jacob*

When Jacob began to not want to go to school, it made Toni feel “horrible.” She states they were both in tears every day and still finds it upsetting to think about. Toni feels that schools have turned into places where young people are expected to sit at a desk or computer all day and do work. Schools don’t allow the young people to have fun anymore and the young people don’t seem to really know right from wrong. Toni feels that Jacob tries to conform, to do as expected. However, she also considers he is an individual and wants to be his own person, which impacts on his disengagement.

Toni found Jacob’s disengagement from school frustrating and upsetting, yet in a strange way, also a relief. She believes that not focusing on getting him to school is reducing the pressure on all the family. She senses that there is a lot of pressure about school: the pressure of taking him there as well as the pressure of the school itself. She feels that he doesn’t experience the stress and anxiety when she is not trying to push him to go to school. Toni just cares about Jacob being happy, she wants to see him smile more. She believes that they will take one day at a time and work through things together. Despite her relief, Toni appears somewhat defeated and lacks the motivation to help Jacob re-engage with education.

6.2.5 *Categories of description*

6.2.5.1 Experiences of Frustration.

Toni describes the entire experience as frustrating. “I just feel the whole system in the past twelve months has just let us down. We don’t seem to be getting anywhere.” She compares Jacob’s high school with when she went to school, feeling that in her day, people

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always knew who to go to for support, but now there are so many different staff members that people get lost. Toni finds it frustrating that Jacob is just a number, lost in the school system.

6.2.5.2 Experiences of Distress.

Toni finds Jacob's whole school experience distressing. "Every day we'd be in tears, and it still hurts." She describes Jacob's sister dragging him into the school grounds and the Principal having to lock him in his office to keep him at school and allow him time to calm down. Toni expresses that her heart would break because Jacob was so sad and depressed and at times said that he wanted to kill himself. During the interview, Toni was clearly distressed and became upset and teary.

6.2.5.3 Experiences of Pressure.

Feeling pressured featured in Toni's narrative. Jacob finds the pressure of school overwhelming. Toni feels that schools want all the children to be the same and that Jacob does not conform, he wants to be himself, which made school very hard for him. Toni and Jacob both find the pressure of school distressing. For Jacob, Toni explains the pressure to conform is too much for him, "he can't handle the pressure." For Toni, the pressure is a result of her feeling that it is her responsibility alone to get him to school.

6.2.5.4 Mental Health Concerns and General Life Experiences.

Toni has experienced a "breakdown" and feels that her poor mental health could be why Jacob struggles with his own mental health concerns. She also describes the loss of his grandfather and shortly afterwards his uncle as major events that affected Jacob during these difficult years and impacted on "all of us." Jacob has seen therapists; however, Toni does not feel this was very helpful. Jacob's anxiety causes him to feel sick in the stomach and vomit sometimes. Toni states "it's hard to tell what's real and what's not." Toni feels that because of their mental health concerns and the family grieving the death of Jacob's grandfather and uncle, she and Jacob have been very pressured and distressed.

6.3 Donna's Story

6.3.1 Donna's experiences and opinions about education

Donna is the mother of Declan, aged 14. She is married and has two older children, both daughters, aged 18 and 16 who both live at home. Donna is employed in a school which impacts on her ability to support her children at times. Declan is in Year 9 at high school. Donna describes her schooling as a time when she struggled a lot. Primary school was a time when she felt her teachers were just done and had nothing more to give. It also felt like it was just a drill for her Year 7 teachers, they had done the same role for so long and they were over with it. Donna experienced bullying at school by the teachers more than the students.

At high school, Donna feels she was just thrown into a class with everyone else; there were 15 Year 8 classes. While Donna states she could socially adapt, she also says whilst initially it wasn't a problem, that it became one later. She describes walking into a maths class where the teacher had given up, instructing the students that wanted to learn to sit up the front and those that didn't to go to the back. This is where Donna states that students "fall through the cracks", give up and "sit up the back and be a dickhead."

Donna feels she was disengaged from school. Regardless of her experiences with school, Donna values education. However, for her children, she wants to see them succeed more than she did. She tries to reinforce this mindset to them to be more aware and take control over their future and sees school as essential to this.

When asked about the similarities and differences between her own and her children's experiences at school, Donna says that it was different for her because she handled bullying much better than her children. She feels her children's diagnoses and challenges make it more difficult for them. From Donna's perspective, school has not been a good experience for her and her children.

6.3.2 *Donna's perceptions about Declan's experiences leading to disengagement*

When Declan was young, he couldn't wait to get to school. Donna states "He is a learner, and he thrives to learn." However, he doesn't find learning easy and won't put in an effort. When he is not interested in something, he does not engage in the learning. Disengagement for Declan looks like not trying, not making any effort and giving up before he even attempts the work.

At high school, there are some subjects he just "can't wrap his head around." Declan will not even think about these subjects, he refuses to try so he never discovers if he can do well in them. If he thinks he can't do something or he doesn't like it, he just won't try. However, if you give Declan a computer game, he will keep working on it until he gets it right because these interest him. Donna believes that Declan is only disengaged from some subjects at school, not from school as a whole.

For Declan, his disengagement from school began as he entered high school. His first semester's report card showed Donna that there was something wrong, although she states that the problem was only with the subjects he had not taken before. When she asked Declan what was going on, he said that the subject was boring and the teacher was grumpy. Donna did not approach the school at that time, as she felt the subject was unimportant for Declan's future. Her reasoning was that it was one of the trial subjects that students take in Year 7. If they are not interested, they never have to do again.

Donna tried to engage with Declan more around his education and push him a little harder, but he hated it. Every afternoon she would try to ask what he learned but she felt that she was "boring the crap out of him." Declan doesn't speak much about anything unless he's very passionate about it. He would say, "nothing's new, I've got no homework, I didn't learn anything, I know everything already." Donna still tries to engage with him but has no luck. Declan is very fixed in his beliefs and opinions. If he is passionate about something, he will

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speak his mind regardless of consequences. He gets into trouble at times at school because of this.

Due to the academic and behavioural problems at school, Declan was engaged in a number of therapies. In Years 7 and 8 he took part in equine therapy and went to Headspace. Headspace workers came into the school, engaged him with psychological therapy and got him engaged in a drum circle to teach him some social skills. This did work. It helped him to “fit into the system a lot better” and “fit in better with his peers.” Donna feels that this year, Year 9, has been much better. Declan loves the subjects he is learning this year and it seems to be a “better space for him.” Donna feels the school communicates well and they follow through on incidents. The “punishment fits the crime” and is “fair for both parties that are involved.”

6.3.3 Donna's experiences of Declan's disengagement

To Donna, disengagement means the children are not interested in learning or participating in certain subjects at school. She considers Declan disengaged because he can't get top marks and when he does not want to, even attempt the work or put in extra effort.

Schooling for her children has not been easy for Donna. The experiences of bullying at school were quite severe for both Declan and his oldest sister. Declan has a diagnosis of attention deficit disorder. Donna believes he may be on the autism spectrum; however, he does not quite meet the threshold for a diagnosis. Donna describes Declan as being “a lot more integrated into society” than her oldest daughter who has multiple diagnoses.

Donna believes that some of Declan's disengagement can be attributed to her parenting but some also to his lack of flexibility. She states that he is a “spoilt brat by Mummy.” She feels she may “mollycoddle him a lot, a little bit being the baby and what not.” However, because Declan finds it difficult to relate to things that he has no interest in or connection to, it is hard for him to make friends, because “if people aren't like-minded, he

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won't engage." Donna states that "even growing up playing sport and that if we didn't win, it wasn't on." Declan feels he needs to be the winner and succeed in everything.

She confesses to being partly at fault as she always steps in to pick up the pieces when she feels she needs to. The children are capable and will do for themselves when Donna is not with them. She acknowledges, "they are a lot better behaved when I am not around." She feels she has always done too much for her oldest and youngest, while the middle child is strong and independent, working two jobs and getting As at school. Donna states, "she doesn't need my help, so I have babied the other two."

6.3.4 How disengagement impacted Donna and Declan

The impacts on Donna are that she felt hindered by her employment at a school and unable to help support Declan regarding his disengagement. When asked what message she would like to give the education system, Donna explained that she thought there needed to be more consistency in the way problems and challenges are handled by schools. She believes that there are inconsistencies in the way the rules and guidelines are followed by staff, which allow some things to be ignored, and not followed up. Donna believes that school administration is not always aware of the reality in relation to behaviours in the school. As an example of this inconsistency, she explains that bullying is either not taken seriously or alternatively, the school's reaction is extreme. Her young people are often ignored or asked to change their stories when reporting bullying, to fit what the teachers wanted to hear, so much so, that they stopped telling the teachers about what they saw. When asked why, they stated, "what's the point?" They feel the teachers will not do anything about it. Donna feels her young people gave up and were at times miserable at school. She did not hear about many of the bullying incidents her young people experienced until weeks or sometimes years later, which she feels is very sad. As she works at the school, Donna also feels hampered by

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her employment status and unable to speak her mind, which has led to frustration with the education system regarding Declan's disengagement from education.

6.3.5 *Categories of description*

6.3.5.1 Experiences of Frustration.

Donna is frustrated by Declan's experiences with disengagement from school. She feels he does not put in enough effort and has no interest in any aspect of school. When Declan thinks he cannot accomplish a task, he will not even try. Due to her employment at the school her children attended, Donna felt frustrated by her inability to speak out regarding the bullying incidents her children were involved in. She expresses frustration regarding a lack of consistency regarding the rules and guidelines in the school. Donna describes Declan as miserable at school and feels she is unable to help him, which frustrates her.

6.3.5.2 Experiences of Distress.

Donna has experienced distress in relation to Declan's disengagement and other incidents in the school. She describes one time when Declan was "pushed to the ground and had his head punched in on the back of the head", resulting in a concussion. Donna describes this as traumatising for her. She felt she could not do anything as she was an employee of the school her children attended. Donna asked her husband to talk to the school administration as she felt she could not speak openly. In this case, she considers the school staff handled the situation as best they could, although there were inconsistencies among staff members. Donna related another example of her oldest daughter witnessing an incident. When she reported what she saw, she was told that was not what she had seen and that she had to change her story. Donna implies that she could not speak up for her children, saying she let her husband handle it "so that it didn't come back on me."

6.3.5.3 Experiences of Determination.

Donna expresses determination in that she has never given up on her children. She obviously cares a great deal for them and wants them to experience success in education. She states, "I try to enforce being more um, I don't know, aware, and having control over their futures." With Declan, Donna tries to "engage a bit more and push a bit harder, just to see how he's, you know, travelling and that."

6.4 Annette's Story

6.4.1 Annette's experiences and opinions about education

Annette is the mother of Wilson, aged 15. Annette is married and has two sons older than Wilson, the eldest having recently moved out of home. Wilson is in Year 11 at high school. Annette's second son, Lawson is working towards his trade qualification at a technical college. Both boys have experienced disengagement from education to some extent, and Annette speaks at times about Wilson alone, and at other times about both boys. Annette completed Year 12 at high school, Wilson's father completed Year 11. The family value education, feeling it is the only way to "get anywhere in today's society." Annette reports her experiences at school were fine, "you went to school" and "you did your work."

6.4.2 Annette's perceptions about Wilson's experiences leading to disengagement

Wilson experienced eye problems in primary school. However, she recounts, "early on we had his eyes checked and they said he was fine." In Year 4, Annette suspected Wilson had dyslexia so took him for a behavioural eye test. The specialist identified that Wilson was "blind as a bat" and couldn't see distance well. Even though Wilson was prescribed glasses, he would not wear his glasses because when he put them on, he was bullied. He simply refused to wear them even though he could not see the board properly.

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Annette reports that Wilson's disengagement was more evident in high school, she stated that she thinks the students at high schools have little discipline. She reports that they "can walk around, do what they want and walk out of the classrooms." They backchat and swear at the teachers and have physical fights at school. She considers "they get away with murder at school." Annette feels that education is based entirely around NAPLAN testing. When the school contacts her, it is because Wilson is doing badly on something that will be on the test. Wilson did very well at school until Year 10. He knows that he is not going to university, so he just does not care about studying anymore. He was an A student prior to Year 10, but now he does not hand in drafts, even though the teachers email him. He says he will only hand in the written task when it is finally due.

6.4.3 *Annette's experiences of Wilson's disengagement*

For Annette, disengagement means that her two sons do not want to go to school or put in any effort. Annette feels that main contributors to her son's disengagement are that the teachers do not care about her sons' work. The teachers' attitude is that the boys do not care, so the teachers do not put in the effort to support them. She complains about the influences of the music they listen to, "it's all bloody rap, swearing and depression shit." She explains that Wilson will text her from class to come and pick him up early because he does not want to be there, or he needs to go to the toilet. Annette picks him up and signs him out of school to keep the peace.

Annette feels disempowered in relation to her son's education. Annette recounts that the boys came home from school with a phone number for Kids Helpline. Her perception is that they were told their parents could not do anything about their disengagement and that they know that they can get away with not engaging at school or with homework. Annette's boys would often make claims such as "you can't make me do that" or "I'll ring this number" when she attempted to persuade them to do their homework. She states that she had told

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them, “Okay, pack your bags, off you go and see how far you get.” Annette feels the school staff do not care.

Annette considers that the schools need more discipline. She believes the school should be locked during school hours. She reports driving by and seeing young people outside at the park smoking, in their school uniforms. Annette says she sees school students walking back into school just before the end of the day. She admits parents receive text messages informing them if their children are absent from classes. She thinks smaller classes could be a great benefit as her older son, Lawson, had smaller classes, which seemed to work better for him. She feels there is a need to return to basic education, concentrating more on maths and English.

6.4.4 How disengagement impacted Annette and Wilson

Annette mentions that young people get lost in the education system. When encouraged to talk more about this, she remarks that Wilson became lost in the system due to his eyesight problems, which she admits was partly her fault for not picking up on it earlier. She recalls that Wilson “wrapped his Year 1 teacher around his finger and got away with everything and still does.” She feels that he has not learned all that he should. For example, he does not know his 12 times tables. She considers that her sons will never use algebra and Macbeth outside of school and can’t see why they need to learn about these topics. Annette feels that the education system focuses on the students that want to go to university. In her opinion, NAPLAN is a major focus and if students do not do well in it, or do not take the test, they are not helped. Annette believes there needs to be more assessment to identify where students need support and suggests that a teacher aide in the class could support them better to engage in the subject content and prevent them from being lost in the education system.

6.4.5 *Categories of description*

6.4.5.1 Experiences of Frustration.

Annette often expresses frustration regarding the lack of support from the school. She describes an interview with one of Wilson's teachers that summed up her experience with the school. The teacher was very frank with Annette, admitting she was new to the school and still getting her bearings. She acknowledged that she could not control the students. She told Annette that she spent her time concentrating on those that were playing up, which disadvantaged the others because she could not give her attention to them. Annette was abrupt with this teacher and complained to the Principal but was unable to move Wilson out of her class. Annette states that the school does not really listen to her.

Annette's frustration with her son's lack of commitment to school was also evident. Annette explains that Wilson will not study to improve his results, he feels that a pass is all he needs in English, maths and science. Annette and her husband made the decision to move Wilson from a state high school to a private Catholic school for a short time hoping he would be more supported and engage better in his education. However, the school did not have a selection of subjects that interested him, so they moved him back to the state school.

6.4.5.2 Diagnoses.

Annette reports how Wilson's eye problems were the catalyst for his disengagement. The dyslexia was not diagnosed until Year 4, by which time he had already experienced many problems, which seems to have led to his disengagement. Wilson's reluctance to wear the glasses prescribed for him also impacted on his journey through school.

6.5 Kelly's Story

6.5.1 Kelly's experiences and opinions about education

Kelly is the mother of Michael, aged 15. She is a single mother with two children, both living at home. Her oldest son is 17. Michael is in Year 10. As a child, Kelly attended a number of schools in Queensland, moving quite frequently due to parent employment and shifting from year level to year level with different moves. Kelly found school challenging socially. She was the only female in one of the classes, so she often spent time with the boys. She found different schools were teaching at different levels, which was also challenging. Kelly explained that when she attended school, the consequences of bad behaviour were obvious to everyone and these fitted the behaviour, mentioning detention and "scab duty" (picking up rubbish). Kelly places a high value on education, especially within the workforce. She feels schools put too much focus on literacy-based learning, and not enough on hands-on skills and practical learning.

6.5.2 Kelly's perceptions about Michael's experiences leading to disengagement

When Michael started school, Prep, he disengaged from education immediately. With a diagnosis of autism, he struggles with speech and communication. Michael would become frustrated and, unable to communicate this in any other way, he would physically push other children. The school staff consistently viewed Michael's behaviour as aggressive, rather than recognising his frustration and helping him learn social skills. Kelly feels that the staff simply found it easier to remove him from the situation, with the result that he never learned the skills to help him appropriately engage socially with others.

6.5.3 Kelly's experiences of Michael's disengagement

Kelly describes disengagement from education as not being a part of or involved in the classroom environment. She considers that this disengagement flows over into the

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community and society as a whole. She relates that Michael habitually “sits on his phone, with his head down,” not connecting at all with the teachers. He tends to become defiant, leave the classroom and eventually shut down completely. Kelly has found supporting Michael with his education extremely challenging.

Kelly felt that the primary school was better for Michael. With one teacher for the whole year, she could see his growth and the difference it made for him. However, high school was quite different. Initially, the school administration “took the high road”, telling Kelly “How it was going to be”, rather than working with her and listening to her. Kelly reports that she has had to fight hard throughout Michael’s school years. She had to go over the Principal’s head at one stage, approaching the Regional Office of Education and finally contacting the Ombudsmen before she received any acknowledgement.

When Michael started high school, Kelly approached the school to pass on the information, strategies and skills that had been used successfully in primary school. A high school staff member told her “They do not deal with helicopter parents, and they have their own way of dealing with children who are on the autism spectrum.” Kelly was quite shocked by this and initially took a step back to see how things went with this new way of dealing with Michael. She felt there was little success for him during Year 7 and that 45 days of suspension in one year was “beyond a joke.” She then received a letter from the school stating that he was struggling with his academic subjects and offering to support him. This upset Kelly, so she “put on her Mummy pants” and went to the school with the intention that she could help the school to understand how best to support Michael. When she received no support from the school, she then approached the Regional Office of the Education Department and asked for specialists in autism to be involved.

There were some moments of success and some positive engagement strategies evident, but they were not consistent. Kelly mentions one maths teacher who found a

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successful strategy for Michael: providing him with small sections of work at a time, rather than larger worksheets with many words. The teacher gave Michael lots of positive praise, which resulted in him doing well in maths that year. In most classes, however, when faced with large sections of text, Michael becomes overwhelmed, puts his head down and disengages or, alternatively, plays on his phone. Kelly feels Michael became stuck in a loop of “melt down, reaction, consequences, punishment,” which continued to be repeated throughout his schooling. She states that she has had to “be in their face” and stand her ground. Kelly spoke about times when Michael experienced bullying. These experiences have contributed to Michael’s disengagement from education.

6.5.4 How disengagement impacted Kelly and Michael

When Kelly discusses the impact of Michael’s disengagement on herself and him, she becomes quite upset. Kelly needed to take two breaks throughout the interview to calm herself down and stop crying. Although I offered to stop the interview, she insisted on continuing, wanting to tell her story.

Kelly has worked very hard with Michael to support him to engage in education. He has attended many specialist appointments, and she has always followed through with various therapies at home. She states that she adapted to this way of life, it became the norm. This consisted of one appointment after another, followed by endless home therapies that she did herself. In her opinion, the school staff never appreciated her knowledge of her son’s diagnosis and abilities. Michael has also experienced depression and has threatened suicide.

Kelly described the impact that Michael’s disengagement has had on her employment and finances. She was never able to hold down a full-time position as she often needed to take time off due to her son’s repeated suspensions. Kelly explains this as having a massive financial impact on her, describing it as emotionally draining.

6.5.5 *Categories of description*

6.5.5.1 Experiences of Frustration.

The lack of support from the school has been an ongoing source of frustration. Michael's inability to communicate his needs at school created many difficult times for Kelly. Her interactions with school staff were often frustrating. She reports that one a staff member told her she needed to seek support for Michael and herself from outside the school. She was told that the high school did not deal with "helicopter parents", suggesting that staff did not need to become aware of what she knew about her son's needs. This response trivialised what she had intended to convey to them. Kelly describes these events as "Frustrating. Um, emotionally draining is the biggest one, constantly battling."

6.5.5.2 Experiences of Distress.

Kelly finds herself questioning her parenting. She feels responsible for Michael's struggles. She questions where she went wrong and was always looking for ways to fix the problems. Kelly was distressed while sharing her lived experience, which took an emotional toll on her and resulted in the need to take breaks through the interview.

6.5.5.3 Experiences of Determination.

Kelly has fought to get Michael the best educational experience available. "I had to fight, and I had to fight hard. Um, to have to go above a Principal and go to regional, to then have to go above them, and actually have to contact the Ombudsmen, to get something, an acknowledgement something needs to change." She describes how she had to be "in the face" of school staff to get any success. She has been determined to advocate for her child to ensure that the situation would change and has experienced some success.

6.5.5.4 Experiences of Acceptance.

In many ways, Kelly has accepted the current circumstances for Michael and herself regarding school. She states that "you become used to [it], you adapt, it becomes the norm."

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Kelly remarks that she did not notice how badly the situation had deteriorated until someone else pointed it out to her. At these times Kelly would stop and reflect, “and then I sit back and go, ‘oh, I never really thought about it, I just do.’”

6.5.5.5 Diagnoses.

Throughout the interview, Kelly shares her experience of Michael’s diagnosis, subsequent treatments and lack of understanding from the school staff. Kelly is a strong advocate for her son, becoming upset at times as she shares her story. Kelly knows a great deal about Michael’s needs and condition. She has always been ready to share her knowledge of what was best for him with the staff, however they often were not ready to hear her.

6.6 Michelle’s Story

6.6.1 Michelle’s experiences and opinions about education

Michelle is the mother of Declan, aged 16, and Hayden, aged 13, both at high school. She is a single mother of four children, with two living at home and the two older ones having moved out. Declan is in Year 11, and Hayden is in Year 8. At school, Michelle was the quiet achiever who worked quietly at the back of the classroom. She feels she was reasonably successful at school and passed all subjects and year levels. However, many external influences impacted on her ability to engage in education. Michelle reports that school was “the saving grace” that helped her get away from her home environment. She was her own guide and found schoolwork fairly easy. Michelle feels school is vital to succeed in life because today people need a good education as well as the “smarts.” It is “almost getting to the point where you need to have a degree to push trolleys around the carpark.” Michelle considers that no matter how many academic qualifications people have, this does not guarantee them a job.

6.6.2 Michelle's perceptions about Hayden's and Declan's experiences leading to disengagement

Hayden was a very sick baby but did well at primary school. He began to disengage when he started high school. He had a difficult transition from primary to high school and really struggled for months. This was when he experienced his mental health concerns. Michelle feels the substantial change from primary school with one teacher and one class to many classes with different teachers overwhelmed Hayden. Michelle removed Hayden from band practice and other extracurricular activities and started taking him to counselling. She feels his mental health is gradually improving and his progress academically was reasonable until this term.

Hayden has one teacher for two subjects for whom he does not work well. Hayden does not like the teacher, so he switched off and refuses to engage in his classes. When he tries to walk out of the classroom, the teacher pulls him back and lectures him. He tends to fool around in class for that particular teacher. Michelle has attempted to discuss this with both Hayden and the teacher but without any particular impact. Michelle feels that the disengagement had a lot to do with peers in the classroom. When they act up, he will join in, which displeases the teacher.

He is quite smart and has teamed up with another student of equal ability in these classes. Once they complete all their work, they start chatting, which upsets the teacher who then "begins to battle with them." Michelle believes that because Hayden and his friend are bored, this leads to the disengagement. She perceives that the teacher then picks on them, which makes them try less and less. At one stage, this teacher told Hayden he would never pass his maths test. This prompted him to work hard, for which he received an A "just to shove it in the face of the teacher." Michelle feels the teacher refused to listen when she was

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telling him Hayden was bored and needed something to engage him. She reports that the teacher constantly lectures Hayden about his attitude.

Declan has always been difficult at school. If he does not understand something or does not want to learn something, he plays up. He has struggled from Prep. It was not until Year 3 or 4 that Michelle felt sufficiently frustrated that she approached the school and the Department of Education for assistance, but she felt they did not want to help her. When she took Declan for private assessments, he was diagnosed with ADHD, auditory processing disorder, dyslexia and anxiety. Taken together, this meant that he could not learn at the same level as the others in the class. When he entered Year 8, Michelle recalls he had “the most amazing maths teacher” who understood him fully and helped him to learn in his way. This teacher, who taught him both maths and science, experienced similar conditions to Declan and was able to frame the material so he could understand. Michelle asserts that Declan has a higher than average IQ and works well when information is explained in ways he can comprehend.

Michelle reports that this year Declan has really struggled with his maths teacher. She feels that immediately he walks into the classroom, the teacher is “at his throat.” Declan has asked for help from his teacher but received none. The teacher refuses to help him, often telling him “It is in the curriculum” and instructing him to find out information himself. However, when Declan attempted to do this, the teacher blocked him from using the computers. Three times this year Declan has failed maths. Michelle reports this teachers’ behaviour has been reported to the Principal, and in her words, is “being addressed in very strong ways.”

Michelle states that Declan only really needs to pass maths and English this semester and as he has failed both, she is not impressed. Declan was removed from some subjects earlier in the year as he was not engaging with them. Michelle reports that for one subject

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where the students were doing a drone project, Declan initially engaged well. She states that the teacher broke his drone, which upset him. The teacher states that Declan was to blame, but he refuses to accept this and “yells and screams a lot at home about it.” He does not like this teacher much. Nevertheless, he does the work in this subject as he likes the subject.

6.6.3 Michelle's experience of Hayden and Declan's disengagement

Declan has experienced many behaviour management interventions and suspensions from school. In Year 9, Michelle gave him a choice between boarding school and becoming an Airforce cadet. He chose cadets, which improved his behavior and approach to school for about six months. Michelle reports that Declan has been a bully at home. However, most teachers relay he is well mannered at school. Michelle states that she often getting phone calls about his behaviour. She reached a stage where she would not answer the phone as she was “afraid.”

Michelle describes disengagement from education as not wanting to be at school at all, not wanting any part of it, not learning and being disruptive in the classroom. Declan is disengaged because he is “not learning, just not engaging.” She considers Hayden disengaged because he will refuse to engage in the classroom, switches off, does not want to be in the lesson, walks around the classroom and “fool arses around.”

Michelle has engaged substantially with the school staff and tells stories of both good and bad experiences with them. Michelle reports last year's Deputy Principal was very supportive and helped her a lot. This year's Deputy Principal she describes as brilliant. She can email him her concerns, which he takes seriously and acts on.

Her negative experiences are centred on teachers that do not get along with her sons, or do not support them in the way she expects. One teacher often cancels appointments. On one occasion this teacher has said that she does not care about Declan's issues. Michelle is considering dropping Declan from the ATAR stream at school but is concerned that this may

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limit his future opportunities. She feels that if she supports the teacher, she is in conflict with her children while if she stands up for her children, she is seen as not supporting the teacher. She tries to mediate between them but feels like this is just a waste of time as neither side listens.

While Michelle sees a great deal of value in education, she states there is considerable pressure on young people today and “everything is about achievement.” She feels that they are inundated with expectations from teachers, peers and society. Michelle explains that social media has added to this pressure. She describes the pressure of having to have the latest iPhone or play station. Young people feel the need to be part of a crowd, which is difficult due to what she perceives as substantial bullying and victimization. She frequently states that even with the best university degree, this does not guarantee a job.

6.6.4 How disengagement impacted Michelle, Declan and Hayden

The impacts of disengagement have created a complex web of challenges for both the boys and Michelle, with each family member experiencing distinct but interconnected difficulties. Hayden's struggles manifested primarily through mental health concerns that proved particularly challenging for Michelle to navigate, ultimately requiring psychological intervention to help him regain his footing. Meanwhile, Declan's multiple diagnoses created ongoing barriers to his school engagement, though Michelle notes some improvement in certain areas as he has matured. The cumulative effect of these challenges placed Michelle in a state of constant vigilance, describing herself as being "on speed dial" from the school and sometimes feeling afraid to answer the phone. The relentless nature of these difficulties took a significant emotional toll, as Michelle explains: "And oh, it was just phenomenally horrible and there would be tears weekly, going what now, you know." This cycle of crisis and response created an atmosphere of chronic stress that permeated the entire family dynamic.

6.6.5 *Categories of description*

6.6.5.1 Experiences of Frustration.

The entire experience of disengagement has been frustrating for Michelle. She has tried repeatedly to get help for her sons, but often has felt let down by the school staff and the education system. Michelle's discussion around the constant phone calls from school regarding Declan's behaviour highlight this frustration. She reports she was "on speed dial" but did not know what to do about it.

Several times through the interview, Michelle hints that life at home is difficult. She describes herself as being "caught in the middle" of the battles with the teachers. Michelle also feels that teachers' attitudes have been the cause for a large part of both of her son's disengagement. While she does not lay all the blame on the teachers, her stories relating to some teachers' treatment of her sons are quite negative.

Michelle wants teachers to understand that disengagement is not always the fault of the young person, saying that some teachers need to "take a long hard look" at their own practice and attitude towards students. She feels that teachers are responsible for considerable belittling and degrading of students. She expresses that in her opinion, "if that's going to be your attitude, you don't deserve to teach." To a substantial extent, Michelle feels that her sons are disengaging because of the attitude and behaviours of the teachers.

6.6.5.2 Experiences of Distress.

Michelle finds the constant battling with her children and the school distressing. Declan attributes the blame for his problems to people other than himself. He often shouts and screams at Michelle because she attempts to mediate between him and the teachers. She feels that school is extremely hard to manage for students today. Michelle discusses her fear of answering the phone, worrying what her sons have done. She describes the whole experience as distressing with overwhelming stress at times.

6.6.5.3 Diagnoses.

Michelle explains that the conditions which Declan has been diagnosed with have made life hard for her. “With ADHD and the auditory processing and the dyslexia and he’s always been difficult” ... “all the way through school.” Her frustration and exasperation shone through when she was talking about her struggles to get Declan support and obtain a diagnosis. Michelle had to pay a substantial amount for him to be diagnosed privately as the school was not forthcoming with help. “I approached all sorts of other places that didn’t want to help me, so then I forked out half my right kidney to go and have him assessed privately. To find out that yes, he did have some major issues. He had issues with ADHD, he had issues with auditory processing disorder, he had issues with dyslexia, he has issues with anxiety. And all of those, as one, created the fact that he couldn’t learn on the same level as the others.”

6.7 Anne and Alan’s Story

6.7.1 *Anne and Alan’s experiences and opinions about education*

Anne and Alan are the parents of three children. Their youngest son, Cameron, is 13 years old and in Year 7. Cameron has two older sisters, aged 17 and 15. They value education very highly, believing that while not “every kid needs to go to university, we would like them to do the best they are capable of.” They consider that education is not measured by the grades but concerns people putting in the effort to reach their potential. For Alan, education is about “learning stuff.” He feels that the results at the end are less important than the mechanics of learning and what students take away with from engaging with the process.

When Alan began to talk about his experiences at school, he became emotional. He described school as a “mixed bag.” Alan has dyslexia, so language development was difficult, however he excelled at the sciences. Alan sometimes wondered why he was at

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school. He remembers having “nonsensical interactions with teachers.” He has a broad knowledge base which he has learned over time from mastering “this reading caper.” He was emotional when attempting to describe his own educational experiences. At times through the interview, Anne began to speak on Alan’s behalf, explaining that today he still struggles with written communication, but oral communication is where he can show his strength.

Anne’s school life was very different from Alan’s. Primary school was a positive experience for her, with some negative social aspects. She recalls that as she was relatively happy within herself, she found ways around any rivalries. She attended boarding school for her secondary education, which was largely positive. While learning did not come easily to Anne, she was a “high achieving person” so she worked hard to reach her goals. “School was school, we went there, we learned, you respected the teacher, you did the work, you had fun on the side.” Anne knew she wanted to go to university, so she made substantial efforts to get there.

As parents, their educational experiences were both somewhat different and somewhat similar to their children’s experiences. Anne feels her experiences were slightly different as she had it easy, with no internal challenges, but she states that “Alan’s was very different.” Alan never answered the question about his experiences of education directly, apart from replying “absolutely” in response to a question about understanding his children’s struggles. During much of the interview, Alan interwove his own story in with that of Cameron’s experiences.

6.7.2 Anne and Alan’s perceptions about Cameron’s experiences leading to disengagement

Alan first noticed that Cameron was struggling in Year 1. Alan refers to Cameron’s “gifts of dyslexia”, a good memory and a fairly broad curiosity. He draws on his own experiences here, stating that his source of knowledge was books, magazines, encyclopedias

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and libraries, whereas Cameron's source is YouTube videos. Alan feels this is to his "detriment" as he does not have the chance to discover the benefits of reading. Alan states that "for him, the easiest way to access is that sort of audio-visual thing rather than the written word."

Anne believes that starting school earlier and the earlier expectation of "self-learning" did not help Cameron. Anne describes Cameron's challenges with education as stemming from a lack of "concrete knowledge." She explains that without a solid knowledge base, he is unable to identify that what he is reading does not quite make sense. This results in him not being able to discern between the facts and what is in the information he is reading. Anne feels that with the amount of "reflective learning" expected at schools now, this has exacerbated Cameron's problem of discerning reliable sources. This is because he does not have a broad knowledge base to work from. She explains that he becomes overwhelmed and stops putting in any effort.

Together, Alan and Anne agree that even mathematics has become a reading exercise. They emphasise the effort required by Cameron to understand a maths problem. Alan feels that these problems are "almost like an essay." They explain the various steps needed. First there is the effort required to break down the question and understand what the words mean. Then more effort is required to understand the question. Following this, there is the effort of formulating an answer and then struggling to write it when Cameron has difficulty with spelling. Anne describes him as changing "from a kid who would quite happily come out with these amazing descriptive sentences to the most basic one word, two word answer." They consider that the amount of effort required to write an answer in a paragraph is too much, so he opts for one or two words where he can, as he is "mentally exhausted."

6.7.3 *Alan and Anne's experiences of Cameron's disengagement*

Disengagement means a lack of interest, motivation and even the desire to do well. Alan feels that sometimes it is “the sense that you’re invisible in the classroom.” Anne states that “they have somehow along the process been given the idea that they won’t achieve” Anne feels that Cameron is disengaged because he does not fit the school expectations, he feels that he is not smart so he will not apply any effort. Alan says that Cameron is bombarded with lots of options, like using I pads for accessing text books, which doesn’t suit his learning style and there is not enough repetition to accommodate his learning needs. Cameron has a “sense of failure” and a self-imposed label of being “slow” and “dumb.”

6.7.4 *How disengagement impacted Alan, Anne and Cameron*

Alan found Cameron’s experiences at school heart-wrenching and painful. He is critical of current teaching methods and shows a considerable depth of understanding about how to support his son because of his own experiences with dyslexia. Alan does not want to see Cameron using his dyslexia as an excuse. Alan describes helping Cameron with his schoolwork as “like trying to run in treacle really.” He feels that the use of iPads in the school impacts negatively on Cameron’s ability to write. Alan considers this as not improving his fine motor skills and spatial planning, which he describes as “annoying.” Alan feels that Cameron’s challenges have contributed to his disengagement but also talks about the negative influence of peers and teachers.

Anne feels that the problem lies more in the school, with no time for repetition to reinforce learning. She explains her experiences with Cameron’s disengagement as going “through a lot of heartache.” She explains that as parents, they push him to try things that they consider he will ultimately like. Both Anne and Alan feel for other children similar to Cameron whose parents do not make “the emotional investment” to help their children.

6.7.5 *Categories of description*

6.7.5.1 Experiences of Frustration.

Anne expresses frustration in that the school is not recognising the problems Cameron has been experiencing. She finds it frustrating that students are not given the opportunity to work with others who experience similar challenges. Anne feels that if Cameron was working with others like him, he might find a sense of success. She believes the school staff do not give enough extra time or repetition that “these sorts of kids” need. Anne states, “he went from a kid who would quite happily come out with these amazing descriptive sentences to the most basic one word, two-word answer. Because there’s just too much effort involved to think about how I must write a paragraph or two words, he would go the two words.” She found this mindset very frustrating.

Alan describes his frustration with trying to help Cameron overcome his difficulties. “It’s like trying to run in treacle really. You know it’s going to get shallower, and you know it, but it’s just a matter of time when you think ‘I wish I could either scream, burst into tears or run away, or better still do all three’.” Alan explains that at times Anne makes it worse for Cameron, he perceives her as judging him negatively when he can’t do the work. “If Anne comes near Cameron, you get a raft of ‘I hate Mum’, all of those types of things.”

6.7.5.2 Experiences of Distress.

Both parents express distress in different ways. Alan became quite emotional and shed some tears in relation to the similarities between his experiences and Cameron’s. The differences also caused him distress, as he feels Cameron has been robbed of the opportunity to learn due to the school’s reliance on iPads as a teaching tool. Anne states, “it’s a nightmare at times, just, I get through the end of each school term and just go, ‘oh God!’”

6.7.5.3 Experiences of Acceptance.

Acceptance of the situation was evident in the way Alan and Anne spoke of Cameron's disengagement. Anne states, "I believe somewhere along the process, learning has been challenging. I think uh, peers may have placed ideas or opinions upon him that he's, you know, not smart, or whatever." Alan expresses similar sentiments, "when he runs into a bit of a barrier it doesn't take much for the emotional shutters to come down and [at] that particular point there's no point, you just go and do something else." Alan describes Cameron as "an amazingly verbal child, he'll give you lovely, lovely descriptions of all sorts of things". He then goes on to explain that when Cameron needs to write, the sheer effort involved in trying to record those words in writing is overwhelming to him. He explains this as "trying to work out which way you stack all these stupid things called letters to form words." For Cameron, Alan perceives this as mind numbing.

Alan expresses acceptance of Cameron's situation. He describes how Cameron asked him why he wasn't in the class with all the other dyslexic kids for math. Alan explained to Cameron that he is very good at math, and it is important that he doesn't use his dyslexia as an excuse. Alan attempts to share with Cameron the unique gifts that he feels he has due to his dyslexia. Alan attributes his gift of good memory, ability to see the big picture, and eloquent speech, to his dyslexia, and he hopes that as Cameron grows up more, he will see this. He does admit however, that Cameron will certainly have some challenges and that he needs to use more mental effort than others to achieve success.

6.7.5.4 Diagnoses.

Alan has dyslexia, just like Cameron. He explains that for him, looking at text is like looking at a bowl of "alphabet soup." Anne feels that Cameron struggled to adjust to the school as he is not a fluent reader, and things take a little longer for him to master, which Anne feels is not allowed for in the curriculum. Anne feels Cameron attempts to "find an out

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of not doing it, or he'll put up all the barriers" to avoid work. She feels the root of his problem concerns the amount of effort he needs to put in to learn.

6.8 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the research findings in the form of parent narratives about their experiences of their young people's disengagement, then identified categories of description. The parents interviewed all described their experiences in their own words, yet there are similarities between the narratives. The notable similar ways that parents experienced their young people's disengagement involved frustration, distress, determination, acceptance and pressure. There were stories of diagnoses, mental health concerns and major life experiences that impacted on the young people, leading to their disengagement from education, but these were not the primary focus of this study and are not spoken of further in the study, they are included here to ensure that the full experiences of parents are presented. These narratives were analysed, and this analysis is presented in Chapters 7 and 8 below.

Chapter 7: Learnings from Comparing Narratives with the Literature

“It seems the school system is run on strategies that promote obedience, control and the need to ‘work hard’. In the context of misplaced practices like these, disengagement, distress and a desire to ‘escape’ the classroom – and sometimes even life – at the earliest chance are all too common. We have to challenge and change the social context of our schools if we are ever to make a significant difference” (Street, 2018, p. 35).

Chapter 6 presented the findings in the form of parent narratives and categories of description which reflected parents' experiences of their young people's disengagement. This chapter builds on to Chapter 6 by offering a comparative analysis between the parent narratives and the literature reviewed in Chapters 3 and 4. The above epigraph underpins the findings presented in this chapter and serves as a conceptual anchor for the material discussed. The schools attended by the young people in this study employed strategies that focused on obedience, control and working hard (Street, 2018). While there is no explicit evidence that directly links these strategies to the young people's disengagement, the narratives reveal a clear pattern that these young people were disengaging from education and at times, wanting to escape school life. This chapter begins by examining the parent narratives through the lens of the disengagement literature presented in Chapters 3 and 4 and finishes by identifying three key learnings that emerge from this comparison.

7.1 Comparing and contrasting parent stories with empirical literature

7.1.1 Disengagement from education – defining the meaning

Chapter 3 explained that disengagement from education involves a wide range of thoughts, feelings and behaviours that represent both a process and an outcome (Duffy & Elwood, 2013; Dupéré et al., 2015). Disengagement from education can be understood as a gradual process of withdrawal from active participation in learning. This process may

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manifest through a continuum of behaviours, from passive non-compliance—such as being physically present in the classroom but refusing to complete tasks or participate in activities—to more overt forms of disengagement, including disruptive behaviour and, ultimately, chronic absenteeism or complete non-attendance (Ekstrand, 2015; Finn & Cox, 1992; Henry et al., 2012).

The findings from this study both align and diverge from existing literature. The parents in this study similarly described disengagement as a gradual process. Their accounts reflect many of the same dimensions identified in the literature, such as, being disinterested in the work, having no motivation, passive non-compliance, minor misbehaviours like talking in class or moving around the classroom, more disruptive behaviours, leaving the classroom, not wanting to attend school through to non-attendance. For example, Mary, Donna, Anette, Alan and Anne, all explained disengagement as lacking interest in school, having no motivation to learn, not taking any notice or listening in the classroom, avoiding work and not wanting to attend school. Kelly extends on these ideas by saying that Michael became defiant, shut down and often left the classroom. Michelle speaks about both her boys' disengagement as involving disruption in the classroom and fooling around. Alan felt that disengagement involved being invisible in the classroom while Anne described it as a feeling of 'why bother'. Toni focused on the frustration she felt and how upsetting the process of disengagement was for both her and Jacob, without explaining what it looked like. While the parents describe disengagement in terms of the young people's emotions, behaviours and cognitions, they also do so in terms of their own emotional responses to the process of disengagement that their young people experienced (discussed further in Chapter 8).

However, the key difference that emerged from the parent narratives is how they conceptualised disengagement primarily as a process, rather than an outcome. Unlike definitions that frame disengagement as a final state or the far end of the disengagement

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continuum (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015), parents did not see disengagement as an outcome, nor did they describe disengagement as not attending school at all. Even when Toni spoke about Jacob not attending school, she did not think he was disengaged from education as he continued to educate himself by engaging online to learn about things that interested him from the internet, including bicycle maintenance and repair, and survival skills.

7.1.2 *Levels of disengagement*

As Chapter 3 indicated, levels of disengagement from education can manifest at four levels: disengaged from education completely, from a school, from the classroom or from the content (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015). Based on insights from this research and my professional experience in schools, identifying the specific level of disengagement from education a young person is experiencing can provide schools with targeted guidance to support the young person to re-engage. For example, if the young person is disengaged at a classroom level, the school may apply classroom practices that are more engaging or more connected to the young person's interests. In this study, parents described their young people as disengaged at three of the four levels – school, classroom, and content, but none described complete disengagement from education. This distinction is important because it suggests that despite significant challenges faced, there remains a foundation for building re-engagement, provided appropriate supports are in place.

Four parents, Mary, Toni, Annette, and Kelly describe their young people as disengaged at the school level, where the school itself becomes a source of anxiety or aversion. This was evident in young people not wanting to attend school, and high levels of demonstrated distress when expected to go to school. For example, Mary simply said that Fred experienced distress when he had to go to school, Annette also stated Wilson did not want to go to school. Toni described her and Jacob being in tears every day.

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Disengagement at the classroom level was also a recurring theme. Four parents, Mary, Michelle, Kelly and Alan, speak of their young people being disengaged at the classroom level. This was apparent in the narratives when parents described their young people as withdrawing in the classroom by putting their head on the desk, talking, moving around the room, arguing with teachers, or leaving the classroom. Two of these parents, Mary and Michelle, directly attribute this disengagement to ineffective pedagogy and strained teacher-student relationships, stating that their young people were swearing or arguing with teachers, and that they were bored in class. In contrast, Kelly and Alan, attribute the disengagement to unsuitable classroom environments and the effort required from their young person, who resists making any effort. Kelly reported that Michael struggled with classroom noise and dense texts, leading him to withdraw and disengage. Alan explained that Cameron's dyslexia made reading and comprehending texts difficult, requiring a great deal of concentration. This resulted in Cameron feeling stupid, defeated and unwilling to keep trying.

Five parents, Mary, Donna, Annette, Kelly, and Alan, directly speak of their young people disengaging from the content. This level of disengagement was marked by the young people perceiving that the content was either too difficult or had little relevance to them. Mary explains that Fred expressed disinterest in the content being taught. Donna discussed because Declan could not wrap his head around some content he would just give up. Annette speaks of Wilson not finding subjects that interested him. Kelly explains that Michael becomes overwhelmed when presented with large sections of text, so he puts his head down or plays on his phone. Similarly, Alan describes the cognitive effort required for Cameron to understand a maths problem was so great that it left him exhausted and unwilling to persevere.

7.1.3 Dimensions of disengagement across levels

In Chapter 3, I explored three dimensions of disengagement from education – emotional, behavioural and cognitive (Fredricks et al., 2004; Hancock & Zubrick, 2015; Wong et al., 2024). The parent narratives reveal that these dimensions do not operate in isolation but manifest across the different levels of disengagement identified in section 7.1.2, creating complex patterns of educational disconnection.

Emotional disengagement was evident across multiple levels in the parent narratives. At the school level, emotional disengagement manifested as overwhelming anxiety and distress about attending school itself. Mary described how the school environment had "crushed Fred's self-confidence to the point where he did not care if he got up or not the next day," while Toni reported daily emotional breakdowns where both she and Jacob would be in tears every morning before school. This school-level emotional disengagement created a fundamental aversion to the educational institution as a whole.

At the classroom level, emotional disengagement appeared as frustration with teachers and feelings of not being understood or valued. Parents described their young people expressing anger toward specific teachers or feeling emotionally unsafe in particular classroom environments. At the content level, emotional disengagement was characterized by apathy toward learning materials and a sense that the curriculum held no personal meaning or relevance, leading to feelings of disconnection from the learning process itself.

Behavioural disengagement manifested differently depending on the level at which it occurred. At the school level, behavioural disengagement was most evident through attendance issues and school avoidance behaviors, though notably, none of the parents in this study reported complete non-attendance. At the classroom level, behavioural disengagement was more commonly reported, with parents describing their young people walking around the classroom, resting their head on the desk, back chatting teachers, not completing work and

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walking out of class. For example, Annette explained that Wilson frequently argued and back-chatted teachers, while Kelly reported that Michael becomes defiant and leaves the classroom or puts his head down on the desk.

At the content level, behavioural disengagement appeared as avoidance of specific learning tasks or materials. Michelle recounted how Hayden would disrupt the class when faced with particular subjects or teaching approaches, while Kelly described Michael's tendency to disengage behaviorally when presented with dense texts by putting his head down or using his phone.

Cognitive disengagement emerged as the most pervasive dimension, appearing across all levels and reported by all but one parent. At the school level, cognitive disengagement manifested as a fundamental questioning of the value of education itself. Donna explained that Declan "does not believe he learns anything at school," representing a wholesale cognitive rejection of the educational enterprise.

At the classroom level, cognitive disengagement was evident in students' unwillingness to invest mental effort in classroom activities, often triggered by pedagogical approaches that didn't match their learning needs. Alan described how Cameron's dyslexia made classroom reading tasks so cognitively demanding that he would become "mentally exhausted and unwilling to continue," leading to cognitive withdrawal from classroom participation.

At the content level, cognitive disengagement was characterized by students making little effort with specific subjects or tasks, often because the content was perceived as too difficult or irrelevant. Mary reported that Fred "does not care anymore" about academic content, while Annette spoke of Wilson "not completing drafts of work and submitting incomplete work without caring about the quality."

The parent narratives reveal that disengagement dimensions rarely operate independently at single levels. Instead, they create cascading effects where, for instance, cognitive struggles at the content level (such as Cameron's difficulty with reading) can trigger emotional disengagement at the classroom level (feelings of being "stupid and defeated") and ultimately lead to behavioural disengagement at the school level (reluctance to attend). This interconnected pattern suggests that effective re-engagement strategies must address multiple dimensions across various levels simultaneously, rather than targeting isolated aspects of disengagement.

7.1.4 Indicators of disengagement

Many of the indicators of disengagement outlined in Chapter 3 were evident in the parent narratives and examples are offered in the subsections below. These indicators of disengagement, when present, are significant because they impact a young person's ability to remain engaged in education.

7.1.4.1 Early failure to achieve.

Early failure to achieve was evident in four parent narratives (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Martins et al., 2022; Watterson & O'Connell, 2019). This failure was often attributed to the young people's diagnosed disability which hindered their ability to succeed in school. . For example, Annette reported that Wilson struggled with learning in the early years due to his vision difficulties. Kelly spoke of the communication difficulties Michael experienced from Prep, which led to behavioural difficulties and him being isolated and not achieving. Michelle described that Declan has always been considered difficult, with multiple diagnoses that were not discovered until Year 4, making his early years at school a struggle. Alan and Anne briefly discussed Cameron's early difficulties, which were later attributed to dyslexia.

7.1.4.2 Disconnecting from school norms.

As outlined in the literature, disconnecting from school norms includes behaviours like not engaging in education, not achieving, refusing to conform to school expectations, misbehaving, not listening to the teacher and not following instructions or being compliant (Balfanz et al., 2007; Galvan et al., 2011; Martins et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2019). Such behaviours were evident in six parent narratives. These parent narratives revealed difficulties adjusting to the achievement-oriented culture of school, pressure of conforming, refusal to listen to the teacher or engage in class activities, lack of commitment to school, non-compliance and inappropriate behaviour. For example, Mary describes how Fred struggled with school norms, finding the school focus on achievement very difficult. Toni explains that Jacob felt pressure to conform. Donna explained that Declan was also disconnected from school norms, he often refused to follow instructions or listen to the teacher if he was not interested in the content. Annette noted that Wilson lacked commitment and made little effort to improve his results. Kelly described how Michael's communication difficulties and poor behaviour resulted in his non-compliance. Finally, Michelle spoke about how Hayden turns off and refuses to engage in class, while Declan's disconnection was more about inappropriate behaviour, non-compliance and speaking to teachers disrespectfully.

7.1.4.3 Poor student – teacher relationships.

Poor student – teacher relationships were a recurring theme in the parent narratives, aligning with literature that links such relationships to disengagement through behaviours like swearing at teachers, not listening to them and being disrespectful (Gossner et al., 2025; Hendrickson, 2012; Katsantonis, 2025). Martins, et al., (p.815, 2022) “reported positive relationships between SE (school engagement) and teacher-student closeness, relatedness, and support”. Four parents spoke of poor student – teacher relationships which manifested as mutual disrespect, where the teacher spoke harshly, and the young people swore at the

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teacher. Mary described the influence teachers have on Wilson, stating that when teachers were respectful and engaging, he performed well. Annette spoke about Fred swearing at teachers and emphasising that “it all depends on the teacher”, suggesting that the quality of the relationship influenced his behaviour. Michelle constantly referred to the influence of the teachers' relationships with both Declan and Hayden, explaining how it impacted either positively or negatively on their attitudes and behaviour in class. If the boys thought the teacher did not like them, or if they spoke rudely to them, they would refuse to work and disengage. Alan alluded to Cameron's struggles with some teachers, though he spoke more explicitly about his own negative experiences with teacher relationships in his own schooling, which was tumultuous.

7.1.4.4 Student mobility.

Student mobility emerged as a pivotal indicator of disengagement, particularly as parents sought a better school fit for their young people, or needed to change schools due to housing concerns (Degroote et al., 2020; Gasper et al., 2012; Jones, 2024; Stamp et al., 2022). The difficulties associated with adjusting to a new school contributed to disengagement from education. Three parents discussed the impact of mobility between schools. Mary described Fred's challenges after changing schools, noting that Year 8 and the first year in a new school, were particularly difficult. Toni described the change of schools for Jacob as devastating, explaining that Jacob experienced no success at his new school. She identified this move as the turning point when he started to disengage. Annette took Wilson changing schools as normal. Wilson started at one high school, then moved to what was perceived as a “better” school but ended up moving back to the original school.

7.1.4.5 Self-handicapping.

Self-handicapping was evident in several parent narratives, aligning with the literature that describes it as a cognitive-behavioural strategy whereby individuals create or attribute

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obstacles to performance in order to protect their self-esteem from potential failure (De Castella et al., 2013). The young people in this study used self-handicapping to deflect the cause of their failure away from themselves and on to teachers or subjects. Four parents' narratives reflected behaviours consistent with self-handicapping. Donna shared that Declan, often said the subject is boring, or that it sucks, and that the teacher is a grumpy old man, all in an apparent attempt to deflect his failure in certain subjects. Michelle noted that Declan blamed everybody and everything but himself, refusing to take any responsibility for his failure in subjects. Alan and Anne described how Cameron would deflect by labelling himself as dumb and question why he was not placed in the class with all the dumb kids.

7.1.4.6 Behaviour problems, absences, academic failure and lack of commitment.

Behaviour problems, absenteeism, academic failure and lack of commitment were described by parents as contributing to their young people's disengagement from education, consistent with findings in the literature (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2012; Gossner, et. al., 2025; Mac Iver & Messel, 2013). These indicators appeared in six parent narratives. Mary speaks about Fred's inability to get good marks. Toni spoke of her difficulties getting Jacob to attend school, resulting in chronic absenteeism, largely driven by anxiety. Annette describes Wilson often texted her from class to come and pick him up early because he did not want to be there. She also noted he stopped trying and did not care if he failed the subjects that he deemed unimportant. Kelly discussed Michael's many suspensions, behavioural difficulties and academic failures. Michelle described how both Declan and Hayden failed or performed poorly in subjects where they did not respect the teacher. She also alluded to Declan's many suspensions from primary school. Alan and Anne spoke of Cameron experiencing academic failure at school, which contributed to his disengagement.

7.1.4.7 Peer group expectations.

Peer group expectations and reinforcing their own social status were only mentioned by one parent as an indicator of disengagement, aligning with findings in the literature that highlight the influence of peer dynamics on student behaviour (Galvan et al., 2011; Gossner, et.al., 2025). Michelle discussed how both Declan and Hayden were heavily influenced by their peers, often prioritising social peer expectations and social status. In her narrative, Michelle spoke of how Hayden and Declan would interact with their peers and muck around in class and pay no attention to the teacher, in an effort to fit in and maintain social status.

To sum up, most indicators of disengagement were present in the parent narratives with only one indicator, defensive pessimism, not apparent. Defensive pessimism is where young people set low expectations for themselves to avoid disappointment (De Castella et al., 2013). Its absence in the narratives may reflect parents' perceptions, rather than the actual absence of this behaviour in their children. The abundance of other indicators of disengagement, as supported by the literature, underscores that indicators may be valuable in identifying young people at risk of disengaging from education.

7.1.5 *Deficit perspectives of disengagement*

As discussed in Chapter 3, deficit perspectives of disengagement blame the young people or their parents for the young person's disengagement from education. When school staff adopt a deficit perspective, it can negatively impact young persons' behaviour and attitudes to school, which will potentially have long term negative impacts on their engagement with school. All parents interviewed for this study reported encountering deficit perspectives on their child's disengagement.

7.1.5.1 Young people not fitting the system.

One parent in this study explicitly described the ways the school perceived their young person as not fitting within the education system, with three others implying similar

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experiences. When young people are seen as not fitting the system, they struggle to find their place at school, often leading to academic difficulties (Allan & Duckworth, 2018; Gossner et al., 2025). Annette described how Wilson's attitude towards school changed during Year 10 after a teacher recommended that he not pursue going to university, reflecting a deficit perspective that he was not a good fit for further education. This led to Wilson no longer putting in an effort with his schoolwork. Donna shared that therapy helped Declan to "fit into the system a lot better". Although Kelly and Michelle did not mention the concept of fitting into the school explicitly, their accounts of the difficulties their young people experienced due to their diagnoses suggests that there was not a good fit between their young people's needs and the school.

7.1.5.2 Deficits in power.

Deficits in power were evident only in Michelle's narrative when she spoke about Declan. Deficits in power result from a break down in the relationship between the young person and the school or staff, or when the young person has no agency or control over their education, or a lack understanding and appropriate attitudes and is subject to disciplinary processes (Gossner et al., 2025; Hayes, 2005; Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018; McBride et al., 2016). Michelle described Declan as constantly battling with the teacher from the minute he walked in the door until the teacher just sent him out of the classroom, often involving disciplinary processes such as suspensions. She also relayed an incident involving a drone that Declan was using at school. He claimed that the teacher broke it and then blamed him. These experiences suggest that Declan may be attempting to regain his sense of power by asserting his voice and seeking to be heard.

7.1.5.3 Blaming and labelling.

Blaming and labelling young people emerged as significant themes in Mary, Kelly and Michelle's narratives. Blaming and labelling students takes place when the label affixed

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to the student is interpreted by the teachers as evidence that the student is the problem, regardless of whether a formal diagnosis is in place or an emotional or behavioural issue exists (Atweh et al., 2008; Caslin, 2021; Lewthwaite et al., 2017). This perspective marginalises students by framing them as having deficits. Mary describes how Fred was treated differently by teachers, attributing this to his poor behaviour and how the school applied the label of having behavioural difficulties. She noted the label negatively impacted his ability to engage meaningfully in the classroom, as teachers were focused on controlling him, rather than supporting his learning. Similarly, Kelly speaks about Michael's marginalisation, stating that he was regularly suspended for behaviours that were characteristic of his autism. Michelle tells of her struggles to have Declan diagnosed, only to find that once diagnosed, the school struggled to implement any teaching strategies that met his needs. In each case, the labels placed on these young people, marginalised them at school and contributed to their disengagement from education.

It is interesting and notable that all three deficit perspectives of young people were evident in this small sample of parent narratives. When school staff perceive young people as having some form of deficit compared to their peers, these students often become marginalised. They are viewed as not fitting the school system (Allan & Duckworth, 2018) or lacking power (McBride et al., 2016) or as having behavioural or diagnostic labels that lead to the application of school disciplinary policies without consideration of individual circumstances (Lewthwaite et al., 2017). Such marginalisation contributes significantly to young peoples' disengagement from education (Caslin, 2021).

7.1.6 Reframing disengagement

As shown in Chapter 3, alternative perspectives to disengagement serve to reframe the issue by shifting the focus away from the individual—namely the young person, their family, or socio-cultural background—and towards broader institutional, policy, and societal

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influences. This reframing challenges deficit-based discourses that blame or pathologise young people and instead emphasises the structural and contextual factors that contribute to disengagement (Atweh et al., 2008; Lewthwaite et al., 2017). By reframing disengagement, schools can mitigate deficit thinking, thereby fostering more equitable and inclusive educational environments. The section below reframes disengagement by examining a range of alternative perspectives.

7.1.6.1 Claiming agency and resisting the school norms.

Evidence of young people claiming agency and resisting the school norms (Allan & Duckworth, 2018) emerged consistently across all parent narratives. This was evident with parents reporting behaviours like young people not conforming to school norms, avoiding work, actively misbehaving and lacking commitment to school. For example, Mary discusses how Fred does not listen to the teacher and avoids completing homework. Toni described Jacob as not conforming to school expectations. Donna stated Declan refuses to try and has behavioural problems. Annette spoke of Wilson's lack of commitment to school, misbehaviour, and contacting her to leave school early. Kelly said that Michael becomes defiant and leaves the classroom. Michelle spoke of Declan fighting to be heard in the classroom and Hayden misbehaving in class in response to the teacher's perceived control. Reframing these behaviours as the young people claiming agency and resisting school norms, rather than as acts of misbehaviour or defiance, shifts the focus away from blaming the student and their family (Allan & Duckworth, 2018; Galvan et al., 2011; Watterson & O'Connell, 2019). Instead, it reframes disengagement as an intentional response to school factors that impact on disengagement.

7.1.6.2 The School as a poor fit.

Four parents spoke of the school as a poor fit for their young people. Reframing this issue from young people not fitting into school, to the school failing to fit the needs of the

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young people, removes the focus away from deficits in the young people themselves (Benner & Wang, 2014). For instance, Annette described how Wilson's disengagement from school worsened after a teacher recommended that he not pursue university education. This reflected a deficit-oriented view embedded in the school system, positioning Wilson as inherently unsuited to higher education rather than questioning the school's capacity to support diverse learners. Donna explained that Declan's therapy helped him to "fit into the system" implying that the school system remained inflexible, requiring the student to adapt rather than the school adjusting practices. Similarly, Kelly and Michelle discussed challenges their children faced due to their diagnoses suggesting a systemic failure to accommodate neurodiverse learners. These accounts point to a misalignment between student needs and the school structures and practices, suggesting that disengagement may stem from institutional rigidity rather than individual shortcomings.

7.1.6.3 Discursive relationships.

Breakdowns in the discursive relationship between young people, parents and the school (Atweh et al., 2008) were evident in six of the narratives. These breakdowns were reported through explanations of teachers yelling, a lack of respect and interest in students, parents feeling unheard, and poor teacher-student relationships. Mary described Fred feels distressed by a teacher who yells continuously and said he feels disrespected by teachers. Toni explained that Jacob feels like he has just become a number, perceiving the school has no interest in him as an individual. Donna finds it difficult to engage Declan in conversation about school. Annette's narrative was full of examples of a lack of discourse between the school and parents. She expressed various opinions about what she perceives the school is doing wrong, and that she never feels heard by the school. Kelly described Michael's communication issues often result in suspensions, due to teachers misinterpreting his actions as misbehaviour, rather than as a need to be heard and understood. Similarly, Michelle

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described her own struggles with school communication and noted that both her boys felt disrespected by teachers, which resulted in poor teacher-student relationships. These narratives highlight how disengagement can stem from a breakdown in mutual understanding and communication, reinforcing the importance of respectful, responsive, and inclusive dialogue between schools, students, and families (Gatfield & Winter-Simat, 2019).

7.1.6.4 School factors.

Gossner et al. (2025) identified many school factors that impact on young people's disengagement from education. Those evident in the parent narratives include, conflicting priorities, rigid systems, not meeting student learning needs, teachers' pedagogy, and the behaviour management policy of the school. Mary's story refers to poor behaviour management and pedagogy when she describes the classroom environment Fred experienced. Toni speaks of Jacob becoming just a number, suggesting a rigid system that did not support his attendance. Donna also recalls the system as rigid and the school as having conflicting priorities that impacted on the behaviour management used within the school. Annette and Kelly directly speak about the school not meeting their young people's learning needs.

7.1.6.5 Combination of individual and system factors.

Five parents discussed disengagement as resulting from a combination of individual and system factors. This aligns with Brown and Rodriguez (2009) study which identified associations between individual-level behaviours and school-level conditions. In the parent narratives individual-level behaviours included truancy, oppositional interactions with teachers, and negative perceptions of school staff which gradually accumulated to disengagement (Gossner et al., 2025). At the school level, conditions included a perceived indifference by school personnel. For example, Mary discussed Fred's experience with a Guidance Officer who remembered nothing of their previous discussion, leaving him feeling that the Guidance Officer did not care. Annette explained that Wilson truanted by leaving

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early. Kelly described how staff at Michael's school do not listen to her concerns, reinforcing a negative perception of the school. Michelle spoke of both Hayden and Declan misbehaving and having oppositional interactions with teachers, further illustrating tensions between individual responses and institutional conditions. Hence, these accounts highlight the importance of recognising how disengagement can emerge from interactions between personal experiences and broader system factors (Gossner et al., 2025).

7.1.6.6 Curriculum lacking value.

For five of the young people disengagement can be understood, at least in part, as a response to a curriculum perceived as lacking value (Ekstrand, 2015; Gossner, et al., 2025). Mary recounted that Fred expresses disinterest in the content being taught, indicating a disconnect between the curriculum and his interests or aspirations. Similarly, Donna described how Declan struggles to grasp certain concepts and, as a result, ceases to engage, suggesting that the curriculum fails to accommodate his learning needs. Annette noted that Wilson is unable to find subjects that capture his interest, highlighting the limited scope and appeal of curricular offerings. Kelly observed that Michael disengages, either by shutting down or turning to his phone, when faced with large volumes of text, signalling cognitive overload and a lack of curriculum differentiation. Alan described the extensive cognitive effort required of Cameron to complete a maths problem, from reading and comprehension to written output, as overwhelming, ultimately leading to mental exhaustion. Collectively, these accounts suggest that the curriculum held no value for the young people, and that it failed to engage, support, or reflect their capacities and interests (Gossner et al., 2025), contributing to their disengagement from school.

7.1.6.7 Missing reframed perspectives.

Some of the reframed perspectives on disengagement were not evident in the parent narratives. These include cultural consciousness, and young people's future time

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perspectives. Cultural consciousness (Gallant, 2011) and young people's future time perspectives (Burns et al., 2021) were absent from parent narratives. Hence, it is not possible to comment on the extent to which these perspectives may impact the young people's disengagement, in this study.

7.1.7 Risk factors of disengagement

As outlined in Chapter 3, the literature identifies many risk factors associated with student disengagement. These factors are associated with the family context, young people's engagement patterns, absence from school, and institutional practices of schools and teachers.

7.1.7.1 Young peoples' engagement patterns.

Five parents discussed risk factors associated with the ways young people engage with school. The narratives reflected several documented risk factors, including poor academic achievement (Evans-Whipp et al., 2018), streaming and tracking (Dumont et al., 2017), negative attitudes towards school (Makarova & Herzog, 2013), relationship breakdowns with peers (Martinot et al., 2025) and early skills deficits (Martins et al., 2022; Watterson & O'Connell, 2019). Mary discussed Fred's negative attitude towards school and noted that streamed classes early in high school contributed to his disengagement. Interestingly, Mary also described that Fred being moved from the academic to the vocational stream appeared to support his re-engagement. Donna describes that Declan's disengagement is impacted by his negative attitude towards some subjects and his experiences with poor academic achievement. Kelly spoke of multiple factors affecting Michael, including poor academic achievement, negative attitude towards school, struggles with peer relationships and early skills deficits. Michelle's narrative included all the risk factors in this area, discussing subject failure, concerns about Declan staying in the academic stream, both boys' negative attitude towards school, peer relationship breakdowns, and Declan's early skills deficits. Alan and Anne spoke mostly of Cameron's poor academic achievement and early

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skills deficits, which are exacerbated by his dyslexia and leads to missing important content.

These narratives illustrate how multiple, overlapping risk factors can interact to shape patterns of disengagement, highlighting the need for schools to have awareness of these risk factors.

7.1.7.2 Absences from school.

Five parents discussed risk factors associated with absences from school, including poor attendance and suspensions (Beauchamp, 2012; Gossner et al., 2025; Mac Iver & Messel, 2013). Mary spoke about Fred not wanting to attend school, indicating a pattern of school avoidance. Toni discussed that Jacob misses a lot of school due to anxiety and ongoing family challenges. Annette spoke of Wilson texting her to pick him up early. Kelly reported that Michael received 45 days of suspension in Year 7. Similarly, Michelle stated that Declan received a lot of suspensions in primary school. These accounts highlight how both voluntary and enforced absences can contribute to disengagement, disrupting learning continuity and weakening students' connection to school.

7.1.7.3 Institutional practices of schools and teachers.

Several risk factors associated with schools and teachers were evident in the parent narratives. These are ineffective pedagogy (Lumby, 2012), poor teacher-student relationships (McGrath, 2009), an irrelevant curriculum (Ekstrand, 2015), and problematic power dynamics within the school (McGrath, 2009). May spoke of ineffective pedagogy in terms of teachers yelling at students. Annette criticised a narrow focus on NAPLAN testing without considering student interests. Both Kelly and Michelle were concerned that teachers are not able to effectively support their young people's learning. Poor teacher-student relationships particularly featured in Michelle's narrative, where both her boys experience conflict with teachers. Donna discussed the relevance of the curriculum, explaining that Declan was required to take a lot of irrelevant subjects in the first year of high school. Power dynamics

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also featured strongly in Michelle's narrative when she spoke of Declan clashing with the teachers, which reflected a struggle for autonomy and respect.

7.1.7.4 Risk factors absent from narratives.

There are a number of risk factors identified in the literature that were absent from the parent narratives, particularly those related to parental background. Factors such as low parental education levels (Burns et al., 2021), negative parent attitudes towards schooling (Gossner et al., 2025), and low socio-economic status (Balkis et al., 2016), are often cited as risk factors for student disengagement. However, these did not fully align with the experiences of the parents in this study. All parents had post-secondary qualifications and expressed positive attitudes towards education. Only two parents identified as coming from low socio-economic backgrounds. Family dysfunction was largely absent, only appearing briefly in Michelle's story, where she mentioned conflict with her sons at home. Additionally, while school absences and suspensions are widely recognised in the literature as risk factors for disengagement, the parents in this study considered these more as consequences of disengagement rather than its causes. This distinction suggests a need to consider how disengagement manifests differently across contexts.

7.2 Comparing and Contrasting Parents' Stories with Theories and Models

In Chapter 4, I examined a range of theoretical concepts and models of disengagement. Below I analyse the extent to which these theoretical concepts and models are reflected in the parent narratives, identifying points of alignment and where the theories were not evident in the data.

7.2.1 *Intelligence*

De Castella and Byrne (2015) found that young people who believe intelligence is fixed are more likely to avoid challenging tasks, interpret failure as confirmation of low ability, and engage in self-handicapping behaviours such as procrastination or reduced effort to protect their self-worth. Across the parent narratives, only Anne's discussed intelligence in relation to their young person's disengagement. She described how Cameron had labels such as not smart or dumb placed on him by peers, and that Cameron had internalised such labels as fixed truths about his abilities. This internalisation reflects that Cameron may have a fixed mindset, where he believes his intelligence is unchangeable. This mindset may potentially contribute to his disengagement from education by diminishing his motivation (Chen, 2025).

7.2.2 *Resilience and buoyancy*

Lumby (2012) found that both resilience and buoyancy play important roles in reducing educational disengagement. Resilience helps young people overcome severe and sustained adversity (Wang, 2020; Salmela-Aro et al., 2021), while buoyancy enables them to manage everyday challenges (Martin & Marsh, 2008; Salmela-Aro et al., 2021). Together, these capacities support continued engagement by helping students recover from both significant and minor setbacks in the school environment. All parents' narratives included examples of young people who lacked buoyancy and resiliency (Lumby, 2012). Mary described how the school has crushed Fred's self-confidence, noting that he perceives anything less than the best mark as failure and often does not seem to care if he gets out of bed. Toni explained that Jacob lacks resilience when faced with moving to a new home and school. He fears going outside the front gate and is often dragged to school by his older sister. Donna discussed how Declan will just give up and refuse to try. Annette also spoke of Wilson not caring about school. Kelly explained how Michael becomes overwhelmed and withdraws. Michelle spoke of Hayden and Declan as not caring and bored with school. Alan

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and Anne discussed Cameron as lacking effort and having a sense of failure. These collective examples suggest how a lack of resilience and buoyancy may contribute to disengagement, as young people struggle to cope with school and broader life challenges (Salmela-Aro et al., 2021).

7.2.3 Attachment

School attachment, closely related to concepts like school connectedness and bonding, is rooted in attachment theory and refers to the emotional connections students form with peers and school staff. These connections foster a sense of belonging, safety, and support, which are linked to greater self-confidence, adaptability, positive emotions, and improved academic outcomes (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Gil et al., 2021; Libbey, 2004). A lack of school attachment features in all parents' stories. Parents discussed their young people as not wanting to attend school, expressing little interest in school life, and being generally disengaged. For example, Mary explained how just going to school makes Fred cranky and upset. Toni said that Jacob finds the pressure of school difficult. Donna described Declan as having difficulties making friends. Annette discussed how Wilson lacks commitment to school. Kelly noted that Michael does not connect with his teachers. Michelle explained how Hayden and Declan have peer problems and poor relationships with teachers. Alan and Anne describe Cameron as a square peg trying to fit into a round hole, highlighting his sense of not fitting in at school. These examples illustrate how weak emotional bonds with school can contribute to disengagement, reinforcing the importance of fostering strong, supportive relationships with teachers and peers, within educational settings (Di Lisio, et al., 2025).

7.2.4 Power

Power is a useful lens for understanding educational disengagement, as students often feel disempowered within school structures where authority is concentrated in the hands of

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teachers and principals. When student behaviours resist or fail to meet institutional expectations, the students are frequently pathologised rather than seen as attempting to regain agency (Allan & Duckworth, 2018; Lewthwaite et al., 2017). Disempowerment can lead some students to withdraw, while others assert themselves in an effort to be heard. This is the case with Michelle's son, Declan, who fights with teachers who he considers as disrespecting him. His confrontational behaviours can be interpreted as attempting to regain power.

7.2.5 Social and linguistic capital

Allan and Duckworth (2018) argue that a lack of social and linguistic capital—defined as the unspoken norms of school communities and the ability to express oneself through reflection and dialogue—can contribute to student disengagement. Without these forms of capital, students struggle to navigate school systems (Allan & Duckworth, 2018; Wang & Hofkens, 2020). While no parent spoke explicitly of social or linguistic capital, three parents' narratives, Toni, Donna and Michelle, suggested that these could be absent. Toni spoke of Jacob missing a lot of school, which could limit his opportunity to learn the norms of his high school. Donna discussed Declan holds fixed beliefs and opinions which get him into trouble, perhaps indicating difficulties learning new school norms. Michelle described Declan's inability to learn in the same way as other students, which may indicate challenges in learning the relevant social and linguistic capital required to successfully navigate the school system. These examples suggest that a lack of social and linguistic capital may contribute to the young people's disengagement by limiting their ability to participate fully in the school community.

7.2.6 Hopelessness theory of depression

The hopelessness theory of depression suggests that ongoing low academic achievement can lead students to develop a sense of learned hopelessness. In such cases,

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young people feel personally responsible for their failure and believe further effort is futile—ultimately contributing to educational disengagement (Au et al., 2010). This theory is reflected in the narratives of Michelle, Alan and Anne where they spoke of the impact of early difficulties with achievement leaving their young people with a sense of hopelessness. Michelle described Hayden and Declan as experiencing mental health issues. Alan and Anne spoke of Cameron being overwhelmed by the cognitive effort required to decipher the text information he is required to learn. These accounts suggest that for some young people mental health issues and cognitive overload reflect how the hopelessness theory of depression could be applied to their situations.

7.2.7 *Self-determination theory*

SDT offers a framework for understanding how classroom environments influence students' motivation and engagement by focusing on the fulfilment of their psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When teachers support these needs, they nurture students' inner motivation and foster their self-determination to engage, thereby reducing the risk of disengagement from education (Reeve, 2012). All parents in this study speak of teachers or school staff who failed to adequately support and nurture their children to success. Mary described Fred's discouraging experience with a Guidance Officer who failed to remember him on his second visit. Toni found it difficult to find a staff member to support Jacob at the high school. Donna spoke of a teacher that Declan perceives as grumpy and not interested. Annette discussed how Wilson is discouraged because teachers just yell at him. Kelly described her struggles in securing school staff to support Michael. Michelle spoke of Hayden and Declan as having difficulties with teachers. Alan and Anne described the teachers as disempowered, limiting their ability to support students. As suggested by self-determination theory, without supportive teachers to nurture the young people's self-determination and fuel their motivation to succeed, young

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people are more likely to disengage from education. These parent narratives suggest that school staff failure to meet young people's psychological needs can contribute significantly to educational disengagement.

7.2.8 *Self-worth theory*

Self-worth theory suggests young people prioritise maintaining a sense of self-acceptance (Covington, 1984). When they perceive themselves as academically incompetent, they may engage in protective behaviours such as defensive pessimism and self-handicapping to protect their sense of self. These behaviours can contribute to disengagement from education, although self-worth is also shaped by factors beyond the school environment (De Castella et al., 2013; Van der Putten, 2017). As discussed above in Section 7.1, four parents, Donna, Michelle, Alan and Anne, described behaviour in their children that align with self-handicapping to defend their poor academic outcomes. This includes giving up easily, avoiding effort, or disengaging from tasks where success is uncertain. Such behaviours may reflect attempts to protect their self-worth in the face of ongoing academic challenges.

7.2.9 *Missing theories*

The theories that are absent from the narratives are also of interest. In particular, no parent spoke about school-based wellbeing initiatives, despite their recognition in the literature as a powerful way to reduce disengagement from education (Evans-Whipp et al., 2018). This omission may suggest that such initiatives are either not present, not visible, or not perceived as meaningful by parents or young people. It is also possible that young people do not value school wellbeing lessons, and therefore do not discuss them with their parents, which limits parental awareness of such initiatives.

7.2.10 *Models of disengagement that fit with the data*

In Chapter 4, I reviewed several models that have been used to understand disengagement from education. . Based on my professional background, I propose that these models can be used by schools to develop understanding of the multifaceted nature of a young person's disengagement from education as they offer valuable frameworks for expanding understanding about the young person's disengagement. While all models have a slightly different focus, they offer insights into possible reasons for a young person's disengagement from education. Providing examples of how the models can be applied to interpret the parent narratives, I outline their relevance and potential use in schools.

7.2.10.1 Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012; Bronfenbrenner, 1986) is structured as a series of nested, interacting systems, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, , macrosystem and chronosystem, that influence a young person's development through their relationships and environments.

At the microsystem level, the immediate environment surrounding these young people, particularly their families, act as a positive influence on their engagement in school. Some parents were supportive and encouraging towards their young people engaging with school, while others struggled with their own issues, and were less able to provide support.

The mesosystem involving interactions between different microsystems like the young people, parents and school, emerged as a consistent source of difficulty. Parents described difficulties with communication and a lack of understanding between the parents and the school, which exacerbate their young person's disengagement.

The exosystem, involving broader societal contexts that directly influence young people, is a driver for keeping these young people at school. It is a societal expectation that

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young people attend school and achieve to the best of their ability. This expectation is reflected in all parent narratives, regardless of their young person's level of engagement.

The macrosystem level, involving cultural and historical contexts, can also be seen in the parent narratives. The parents expressed strong beliefs in education and are determined to keep their young people at school. School attendance is a strong part of the Australian culture. Additionally, the parent's own historical context appeared to influence the young people's disengagement to some extent. Some parents experienced mobility, bullying, poor teacher-student relationships, being distressed and disengaged during their own schooling which influenced their reactions to their young people's experiences.

The chronosystem brings together transitions, evolving relationships and specific interactions. Parents described difficulties with transitions to high school, changes in peer relationships and student-teacher relationships and specific interactions between their young people and school staff, as well as their own interactions with school staff. Together, the four layers of influence demonstrate how Bronfenbrenner's model can be used to understand the complex, interconnected factors contributing to educational disengagement.

7.2.10.2 The frustration self-esteem model.

The frustration self-esteem model of school dropout (Finn, 1989) provides a unique way to understand the process via which young people can begin to disengage from education. According to this model, repeated academic failure can cause frustration, which can lead to behavioural issues. For example, Michelle described how Declan struggles to learn and fails to achieve academically due to his diagnoses, his academic failure leads to frustration with teachers which, in turn, lead to escalating behavioural issues. The primary focus of the school's response was on the behaviour, which then lead to further academic failure and further frustration. As disciplinary actions increased, a cycle of escalating behaviours and suspensions followed. This negatively impacted Declan's self-esteem, and he

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disengaged from education. If the school had been aware of this model, they may have recognised the beginning of this cycle and intervened early enough to disrupt his pathway to disengagement.

7.2.10.3 The participation-identification model.

The participation-identification model (Finn, 1989) describes a process where a young person begins to withdraw from participating in school activities, which over time leads to a lost sense of belonging to the school. This lack of belonging leads to further non-participation and eventually to disengagement. Kelly's narrative exemplifies this process. Over time, Michael withdrew from participation at school over time, shutting down, and refusing to engage. His lack of participation contributed to a lost sense of belonging to the school, and this has led him to disengage from the classroom. Kelly's narrative illustrates how the participation-identification model can help explain the progression from initial withdrawal to full disengagement.

7.2.10.4 The Pushout – Pullout Model.

A further model of disengagement is the pushout – pullout model (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011), which offers a useful framework for understanding the external and internal forces that contribute to student disengagement. Recall, pushout factors refer to school-based practices and conditions that alienate students, while pullout factors involve external circumstances that draw students away from school. All parents in this study spoke about pushout factors contributing to their young person's disengagement. These included suspensions, behaviour management practices, poor classrooms discipline, and a lack of meaningful student-teacher relationships. Toni is the only parent who spoke about pullout factors, where she alluded to family problems that pulled their family's priority away from school attendance. Examining whether students are being pushed out by schools or pulled out

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by external pressures can offer valuable insights for schools interested in understanding and addressing disengagement.

7.2.10.5 The Life Course Model of Disengagement.

Finally, the life course model of disengagement (Dupéré et al., 2015) considers historical, geographical and socio-economic contexts along with predisposing factors, vulnerabilities and past social experiences of the young person. By understanding the complex interplay of these elements, schools can design interventions to reduce disengagement that are better tailored to the needs of the young person. For Toni, in the case of Jacob, several predisposing factors that contributed to his disengagement are anxiety, depression, fear of the community and co-sleeping with his parents. The contextual factors Toni mentions are community fear and being treated as a number in high school. The precipitating factors are mobility between schools and transition to high school, the mental health problems Toni experienced, and the death of Jacob's grandfather. The protective factors are support from teachers and families, as well as Jacob's desire to educate himself when not attending school. The proximal mediator evident in the narrative is absenteeism due to his sickness and anxiety. All of these factors impacted Jacob's disengagement. If the school had recognised and addressed these factors earlier, they may have been more successful in re-engaging Jacob.

7.2.11 Interventions evident in the data

The literature identifies a range of different interventions that aim to address disengagement from education, including early interventions, student-centred interventions, and systems interventions. Interventions are most effective when the indicators of disengagement and the pathways leading to the disengagement are identified to inform the how the intervention is designed (Allan & Duckworth, 2018; Carrington et al., 2013; Gossner et al., 2025). Interestingly, only one parent, Toni, spoke about school interventions to re-

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engage Jacob. This includes staff taking an interest in Jacob and offering support, though Toni did not specify how this support was offered. Beyond Toni's account, no other parents reported formal school-based interventions. The lack of formal interventions from schools in this study raises the question of how seven families with disengaged young people can share their stories without any mention of formal school-based interventions for disengagement.

7.3 Parental Engagement in Schools

As discussed in Section 4.4, parental engagement in education is complex, shaped by competing narratives that either highlight the challenges parents face when engaging with schools or argue that school improvement depends on greater parental involvement (Luet, 2017). Luet (2017) advocates for the recognition of informal parental engagement, such as talking about school at home, as meaningful contributions to student success. These informal interactions can counteract parental and student disengagement, with parents acting as the student's first guide through school (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012).

Discussions about school between parents and their young people is consistently highlighted in the literature as having the strongest impact on the attitudes, behaviour and achievement of young people (McNeal, 2014). In this study, all parents, except Kelly, spoke of discussions they had with their young people about school. For instance, Mary recounted a discussion with Fred regarding moving to the vocational stream of subjects. While Toni did not explicitly state that her and Jacob discussed school, her awareness of how school impacted Jacob suggests that such conversations took place. Donna discussed how she attempted to engage Declan in conversations about school and homework but did not have much success. Annette explained how teachers email her when drafts are due, and she then discusses this with Wilson. Michelle discussed how she also tries to discuss school with Hayden and Declan, but often to no avail. She feels that she is stuck in the middle between Hayden, Declan and their teachers, attempting to help both teacher and young person

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understand each other. Annette explained that she feels frustrated with Cameron when trying to help him with his schoolwork, while Alan explained that he assists Cameron with schoolwork, but it is difficult for them both. These narratives illustrate the varied ways parents attempt to engage with their children's education, reinforcing that recognising informal, home-based parental involvement can be a meaningful form of engagement.

The literature acknowledges that parental expectations can sometimes clash with the schools' expectations, leading to student disengagement (Hendrickson, 2012). However, all parents in this study expressed the importance of school and the desire to see their young people engage in education at school for the benefit of their future. Mary believes young people should always be learning and stressed the importance of Year 12 completion. Toni holds a high regard for education but stressed that a young person's mental health was more important. Donna wants her children to succeed in life and sees education as essential to life success. Annette reported she values education and feels it is the only way to achieving in society. Kelly highly values education and sees it as directly connected to future work opportunities. Michelle stated that education is vital to succeed in life. Alan and Anne state all young people should do the best they are capable of at school. Alan explained that the mechanics of learning are very important for young people's futures.

Regardless of how vital parental engagement is all parents in this study described challenges in their engagement with the schools their young people attended. The problems ranged from too much contact to a lack of communication. Michelle felt overwhelmed by the school's continuous phone calls to a point of not responding to their calls. However, Toni struggled to find the right person to talk to in relation to Jacob's disengagement and she felt that he had become just a number. These experiences reflect a broader issue of misalignment between schools and families, suggesting that even when parents are committed to their child's education, systemic barriers can hinder effective collaboration.

7.4 Emerging insights and tensions between literature and narrative

The parent narratives in chapter 6 complicate several dominant ways of thinking about student disengagement. Across cases, the phenomenographic categories of frustration, distress, determination, acceptance and pressure are clearly visible. Yet, when read alongside common theoretical framings of engagement (for example, models that emphasise individual motivation (Finn, 1989) and the behavioural–emotional–cognitive dimensions (Wong et al., 2024); ecological accounts that stress family background; and inclusion policies that presume identification leads to support), these stories surface important tensions. In short, the parents' accounts foreground the immediacy of relational pedagogy (Jones, 2024), assessment regimes and institutional routines as proximal drivers of disengagement in ways that existing theory tends to background.

First, the narratives repeatedly locate the pivot point of engagement in the quality of teacher–student relationships and day-to-day pedagogy rather than in students' or families' deficits. Mary's description of Fred as “an A student” with teachers he respects, and completely switched off when respect is lost, recurs in Michelle's accounts of her sons' high-variance engagement across different teachers, and in Hayden's experience of being energised by challenge when a teacher told him he would not pass. Such stories sit uneasily with theories that privilege stable individual traits or family capital as primary determinants. They align more closely with relational perspectives (e.g., the importance of relatedness (Davies et al., 2025), autonomy and competence (Wong et al., 2024)) while also highlighting a tension between those perspectives and school practices that communicate compliance, streaming and constant comparative achievement (e.g., ATAR/NAPLAN) as the dominant currencies of value (Street, 2018).

Second, the narratives distinguish “engagement with school” from “engagement with education or learning.” Toni's insistence that Jacob is disengaged from school but not from

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education, preferring YouTube, hands-on experiences and potentially home schooling, signals a misfit between institutional forms of learning (desk work, whole-class pacing, full-time attendance expectations) and the ways some young people remain intellectually active outside school. This challenges school-centric measures of engagement and suggests that what is read as 'disengagement' may sometimes be a form of resistance (Allan & Duckworth, 2018) to pedagogical formats that feel irrelevant, unsafe or overwhelming.

Third, the promise of inclusion through diagnosis and policy stands in tension with parents lived realities. In theory, early identification and reasonable adjustments should scaffold participation (Gossner et al., 2025). In practice, Kelly's account of repeated suspensions despite autism-informed strategies, Michelle's struggle to secure assessments and accommodations for Declan's ADHD/auditory processing/dyslexia profile, and Anne and Alan's depiction of 'math as a reading exercise' for Cameron underscore how literacy-heavy curricula, device-mediated instruction (e.g., iPads) and inconsistent enactment of supports can re-create barriers. Similarly, policy shifts and accountability regimes (e.g., the Year 7 transition timing; NAPLAN focus; streaming) emerge in the narratives as structural contributors to disengagement rather than neutral backdrops.

Fourth, a notable new insight is the protective parenting visible in several stories. Parents weigh attendance and attainment against mental health and family wellbeing, sometimes accepting reduced attendance or alternative pathways (e.g., Mary's move to vocational subjects; Toni's relief when school pressure eases) to prevent harm (Heyne et al., 2019). This introduces a tension with attendance-driven re-engagement logics: for these families, stepping back from school can be a deliberate, caring strategy rather than a sign of indifference. Re-engagement may therefore need to be paced, negotiated and health-led, not simply enforced.

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Fifth, the narratives surface the gatekeeping role of perceived respect and credibility in classrooms. Respect is not a generic injunction to “try harder”; it is relationally earned by teachers through responsiveness, clarity, fairness and follow-through (Di Lisio et al., 2025). Where students experienced public belittling, shouted control, or inconsistent systems (e.g., guidance that lacked continuity; rules applied unevenly; broken promises), disengagement deepened. Where teachers chunked tasks, reduced literacy load, offered timely feedback and recognised strengths, engagement rose—even among students with longstanding difficulties. This suggests that theories of engagement should more fully account for the moment-to-moment moral economy of classroom interactions.

Finally, the parents' positionalities matter. Donna's dual identity as school employee and mother created a silencing effect that limited her advocacy; Kelly's employment and finances were destabilised by suspension-driven care demands; Annette felt systemically disempowered by “you can't make me” dynamics and helpline messaging. These accounts sit in tension with policy frames that position parents as the primary lever for re-engagement, without recognising how school actions and system settings constrain what parents can do.

Taken together, these tensions and insights sharpen the contribution of the narratives: they suggest that disengagement, as experienced by these parents, is less an individual deficit and more an emergent property of the relationships, routines and regimes that structure young people's daily encounters with schooling.

7.5 Learnings from the Literature

7.5.1 Learning 1: the research-practice gap in addressing student disengagement

While there is considerable research available to guide schools in identifying indicators of disengagement, the risk factors of disengagement, implementing interventions, and adopting alternative ways of viewing disengagement, the experiences shared by parents interviewed for this study suggest a significant gap between research and practice. Despite

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availability of evidence-based strategies, the parents' narratives suggest that schools did not apply such practices.

To effectively intervene in student disengagement, schools can recognise disengagement as early as possible, and then use targeted, tailored interventions to support young people to re-engage. However, managing disengagement is complicated by a large number of indicators and risk factors which pose major challenges for schools when attempting to use best practice principles (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015). This complexity is further expanded by competing theories and models of disengagement, which can overwhelm school staff already overwhelmed with heavy workloads and professional learning expectations. While there are many programs and initiatives designed to reduce student disengagement (discussed in Chapter 3), many schools face the additional challenges of limited resources and staff. Alongside this, systemic pressures often prioritise academic outcomes (State of Queensland, 2022) rather than supporting young people to remain meaningfully engaged in education.

Although there is much literature that frames disengagement from education as resulting from student and/or parental factors, this study suggests that the barrier to engagement may well lie with the system of education itself. This includes ways schools function to maintain unequal power relationships between staff and students, transitioning between schools (Benner & Wang, 2014), push and pull factors within schools (Lee & Burkam, 2003), school cultures and adult relationships (Ekstrand, 2015), and internal school structures (Gallant, 2011)). These alternative ways of framing disengagement are present in the experiences of the parents interviewed for this study suggesting that if schools attempted to address these issues alone, they may have been better positioned to reduce the disengagement of these young people. As Allan and Duckworth (2018) argue, disengagement from education may represent a young person's attempt to reclaim agency in

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a system that marginalises their voice. The experiences shared by this study's parents reflect many of these perspectives, indicating that if school had addressed these systemic and relational factors, they may have been better positioned to reduce disengagement and support re-engagement.

7.5.2 Learning 2: delayed recognition of student disengagement

The narratives of disengagement shared by the parents in this study reveal that there is a deeper story behind every young person's journey of disengagement which mostly remained unrecognised by the schools. Regardless of numerous indicators and risk factors, as outlined in earlier sections, schools they attended did very little to proactively support young people or their parents to reduce disengagement.

The delayed recognition by schools presents a missed opportunity. If the schools had recognised the risk factors and indicators of disengagement earlier on, they could have enabled staff to implement timely, targeted interventions to re-engage young people in education. Instead, a lack of responsiveness led to the young people being lost in the system.

This learning underscores the importance of schools being equipped not only with the knowledge of disengagement indicators but also with the capacity and commitment to act on them. Recognising and responding to these signs early could significantly improve the likelihood of re-engaging young people before they become lost within the system.

7.5.3 Learning 3: lack of school support

All parents in this study felt unsupported in different ways by the schools their young people attended. Parents described a range of experiences from feeling ignored when seeking assistance from the school to feeling overwhelmed by the continuous negative contact. Despite efforts to engage, all parents reported problematic engagement between themselves and the schools as their concerns were either ignored or inadequately addressed. The parents'

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narratives highlight a need for schools to find the balance between too much negative contact and insufficient support or no contact. Effective school support requires timely and constructive communication, as well as authentic relationships with families (Department of Education, 2024).

7.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the parent narratives collected for this study include many commonalities and differences with the existing literature on disengagement from education reviewed in Chapters 3 and 4. A large portion of themes reported in the literature were supported by the parent narratives collected for this study. However, what was a particularly interesting finding was the absence of evidence-based interventions being implemented by the schools in response to the young people's disengagement from education. This gap suggests that while schools may have access to research identifying indicators, risk factors, theories, models and alternative perspectives on disengagement, this knowledge is not applied in practice. The comparison of parent narratives to the literature reviewed revealed three key learnings. Firstly, there is a research-practice gap between what is known about disengagement and how schools respond and address it. Secondly, there is delayed recognition of student disengagement by schools, which limits the effectiveness of potential interventions. Finally, a lack of school support leaves parents feeling isolated in their efforts to help their young people remain engaged in education.

Chapter 8: Categories of Description

This chapter builds on Chapter 6, where I captured the categories of description that represent the different ways each parent in this study experienced their young person's disengagement from education. In this chapter, I examine how each category of description is expressed across all parent narratives, identifying both similarities and differences in meaning. I then relate the categories to broader literature comparing and contrasting them with previous research. As explained in Chapter 5, categories of description “represent the range of ways that the group as a whole sees the phenomenon” (Bowden & Green, 2005, p. 14).

Figure 8 below presents the categories of description that emerged from analysis of the parents' narratives, illustrating both the hierarchical structure and the complexity within each category. This visual representation demonstrates the progression from the most universally experienced category (frustration, reported by all eight participants) to the least common (pressure, experienced by only one participant).

The visual also highlights the dimensional complexity within categories: frustration manifested in three distinct ways, distress and determination each appeared in two different forms, while acceptance and pressure represented single-dimensional experiences. Representative quotes are included to illustrate the authentic voice of participants within each category, providing concrete examples of how these experiences were articulated.

Notably, while the three most prevalent categories (frustration, distress, and determination) align with existing literature on educational disengagement, the two least common categories (acceptance and pressure) appear to represent novel insights not previously documented in the research. This hierarchy not only reflects the frequency of experiences but also suggests varying levels of complexity in how parents navigate their young person's disengagement from education.

Figure 10*Parents Experiences of Disengagement*

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Each category of description is explored below. For each category, I first offer a definition and description that outlines its key features. I then discuss the similarities and differences found across parent narratives to demonstrate the variations within each category. Following, I situate the categories of descriptions within previous research to explore how the categories that emerged from this study fit into or challenge previous findings. Interestingly, categories in previous research are usually used to describe young people's experiences, rather than the parents' experiences, as is the case in this study.

8.1 Frustration

Frustration was experienced by parent participants in three different ways: frustration with their young people, the school or education system, and with themselves. For this study, I define frustration as the feeling of being upset, irritable or angry as a result of being unable to change or achieve something (Brennan, 2020). This definition captures the most frequently reported experience reported by parents as they managed their young person's disengagement from education.

8.1.1 Frustration with their young person.

Parents experienced their young person's disengagement from education primarily as a source of frustration directed towards their young person. Parents in this category describe feelings of being upset, irritated and angry in response to their child's avoidance of school or perceived lack of effort. For example, Mary described her frustration with her son's lack of enthusiasm and his avoidance of school, stating "I just wanted the best for him, to keep every possibility open for his future". Donna and Annette express their frustration with their sons' apparent lack of effort and unwillingness to go to school. In Annette's words "He just doesn't want to go to school, he doesn't put any effort in".

8.1.2 *Frustration with the School or Education System*

Parents were also frustrated with the school and education system. In response to the question, “What does disengagement mean to you?”, Toni stated, “Frustration, pure frustration!”. She shared her experience of finding the right staff member to talk to and the frustration she felt at being passed from one person to the next, feeling like they simply did not care. Donna also experienced frustration with the staff and the school. She reported the teachers cover things up and that schools are inconsistent in the way they apply consequences following behaviour incidents. Similarly, Annette was frustrated with the staff, school and education system, mostly due to the school’s perceived inability to control the young people; claiming the school has “lost discipline”. Kelly also told of her constant battling with the school, staff and education system as the primary source of her frustration. Michelle’s frustration was palpable, in her voice and her tense body, when she spoke of the struggles with the school and her frustration with being caught in the middle between her sons and their teachers. She had tried to mediate between the boys and their teachers to get them to understand each other, however, both groups refused to accept responsibility, instead blaming each other. Alan and Anne both expressed frustration with the education system, though Anne distinguished her frustration from the teachers themselves, who she said, “are just doing what they were told.”

8.1.3 *Frustration with themselves*

Two parents expressed frustration with themselves. Donna, for instance, expressed frustration with herself, saying “I am my children’s worst enemy”. Alan spoke of having to work ‘through the collection of the frustrations’ with Cameron when helping him to do his work.

8.1.4 *Frustration in Previous Research*

Frustration is an emotion often associated with disengagement from education. Writing about young people, Allan and Duckworth (2018) reported those who are disengaged from education feel frustrated by a lack of voice or agency in the school, as well as by a lack of support. Similarly, Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir (2012) linked low academic achievement to feelings of frustration for the student, which can ultimately result in disengagement from education. Of interest is that the parents in this study also felt frustrated by a lack of voice and support. This finding extends existing understandings by highlighting that frustration is not limited to young people; it also significantly affects parents navigating their child's disengagement.

8.2 Distress

Distress was experienced by parents in two different ways. Firstly, in response to their young person's disengagement from education. Secondly, during the interviews themselves as parents recounted their personal experiences. For this study, I define distress as . encompassing psychological and emotional strain experienced in response to educational challenges (Chyu & Chen, 2022). This definition represents the emotional upheaval experienced by parents as they witnessed and navigated their child's disengagement from education.

8.2.1 *Distress Reported in Response to their Young People's Disengagement*

Some parents spoke of the distress they experienced at different times in relation to their young people's disengagement from education. Mary, for example, reported she felt distress when her son was really upset, speaking of his distress as much as her own. Toni described the distress she experienced with the daily struggles to keep Jacob engaged with school, stating that her heart broke when she realised how depressed Jacob was and hearing

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him say he wanted to kill himself. Kelly described how Michael's multiple suspensions distressed her because they were emotionally draining as well as financially damaging.

Michelle's story of being caught between her son and the teachers also portrays distress. She explained that for her, the effects were phenomenally horrible and stressful, and she would be in tears weekly. Alan's distress lay in his words as he explained that watching his son being challenged by his dyslexia was "just wrenching".

8.2.2 Parental Distress during the Interviews

The interviews themselves reveal parents' feelings of personal distress. Mary's tone shifted noticeably when she talked of the effects on her son's self-confidence. Toni's voice broke and she lapsed into tears at times, when speaking about her own struggles with mental health concerns and their effect on Jacob. Donna's distress became obvious when her voice cracked, and her eyes became teary as she described bullying incidents with two of her children and referred to herself as her children's worst enemy. Kelly needed to take several short breaks and one longer ten-minute break during the interviews to manage her distress. Her distress was particularly evident when discussing Michael's autism and the challenges of navigating a text-heavy school environment. She also became tearful when recalling Michael's suicide threats. Michelle's distress was clear when she teared up as she spoke about the difficulties with trying to obtain a diagnosis for Declan. She stated the Department of Education did not help, neither did the child mental health services at the hospital, noting she had to go to great expense to pay for a private diagnosis. Michelle's distress was evident when talking about her son's inappropriate behaviours and the school's frequent calls, to the point she felt like the school had her on speed dial. For Alan, telling Cameron's story of disengagement was distressing, especially as he drew parallels between his own schooling and Cameron's experiences of disengagement from education. He cried at times, and at other times was lost for words. Alan's personal experience of dyslexia gave him unique insight into

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understanding Cameron's distress. When Alan became distressed, Anne stepped in to speak on his behalf, perhaps offering him time to regain composure. When Alan related Anne's responses to Cameron and how she spoke to him when trying to help him, his gestures like shrugging elbows and hands, and words expressed his distress, saying "Anne doesn't realise the tone and the language that she uses when she's talking to Cameron".

8.2.3 *Distress in Previous Research*

Most of the literature predominantly focuses on young people's distress, describing distress as a common experience for young people who are disengaging from education. For example, Gatfield and Winter-Simat (2019) associated distress with the behaviour's indicative of disengagement. Vallée and Ruglis (2017) highlighted the experience of distress for one young person who was experiencing academic failure. However, there is limited research on parental distress in this context. I could only find one study that described parents' distress. In this one study, Doyle and Keane (2019) highlight how schools' deficit-based perceptions of both parents and students can contribute to parental distress. My study builds on this demonstrating that parental distress is closely linked to their young people's distress as well as school inadequacies to recognise their young person's disengagement and to listen and support them. Parent participants reported distress due to their young people's distress, as well as in response to the inadequate ways schools responded to their young people's behaviour. Their distress was further exacerbated by their own and their young person's mental health struggles and the difficulties they experienced securing appropriate school support and accommodations for their young person's diagnoses.

8.3 Determination

Determination as a category also emerged in two different ways: parents' determination to keep their young people engaged in education, and their determination to

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find the right support for their young person. For this study, determination is defined as persistence, resilience, and sustained motivation to overcome academic challenges despite obstacles (Reeve, 2012).

8.3.1 Determined to Keep their Young People Engaged in Education

Kelly, Mary and Donna all talked about how determined they were to keep their young people engaged in education. Kelly's determination is evident through her constant battling with the school and the education system to give Michael the best opportunities. She demonstrates determination by going all the way to the Ombudsman for Education to get the support Michael needed. Mary was equally determined in ensuring that her son finished school. She changed Fred from an academic to a vocational stream to better suit his needs and keep him in school. Donna, determined to see her children succeed, consistently engages with Declan, encouraging him to push harder to succeed in school.

8.3.2 Determination to Seek Support for their Young Person

These parents also showed determination when seeking support for their young people. Kelly showed determination in regularly engaging with Michael's therapy sessions, seeing therapy as the only way to give him the best possible opportunities in life. Mary's determination led her to seek assistance and support for Fred to make changes where needed. For example, she took Fred to see a psychologist and she changed his school to try to get a better fit for him. Donna's determination played out in terms of all the extra opportunities she encouraged Declan to take up. For example, going to Headspace, engaging in drum circle and equine therapy.

8.3.3 Determination in Previous Research

There is limited mention of determination in the literature on disengagement from education. Broadhurst et al. (2005), in a study on students missing from school systems,

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discussed how one parent's determination helped overcome frustration in relation to her young person's disengagement with schooling. Similarly, (Munford & Sanders, 2016) in another study into foster parents as a positive influence on keeping students engaged, highlight the determination of caregivers to overcome obstacles and challenges to keep their young people engaged in education. Findings from the two studies align with the findings of this study where determination emerges as a significant way in which parents support their young people's continued engagement, despite the challenges they face.

All parents in this study demonstrated a firmness of purpose: to help their young person succeed in life, with education viewed as essential to that success. Determination emerged as an important characteristic, enabling parents to persist in the face of many challenges and emotional stress. Determination served to keep this study's parents persisting to advocate for their young people. Similarly to Munford and Sanders (2016) findings, it is probable that the determination of these parents played a significant role in preventing their young people from entirely disengaging from education. Determination in this study suggests that it can be a counterbalance to school challenges, as it arises in response to school failures, such as lack of support and rigid school structures that did not support the young people. Determination may be a protective factor against complete disengagement.

8.4 Acceptance

Acceptance emerged as a category that was experienced in only one way. For this study, acceptance is defined as "the voluntary adoption of an intentionally open, receptive, flexible, and nonjudgemental posture with respect to moment-to-moment experience." (Hayes et al., 2012, p. 282.). Acceptance shone through clearly in Alan and Anne's narrative, who were quite open and receptive to the idea that school would be difficult for Cameron. Similarly, Kelly was open, flexible and nonjudgemental in regard to constantly needing to

advocate for Michael at school. In both these parent narratives, acceptance implies recognition of the realities they faced.

8.4.1 Parent's Experiences of Acceptance

Among all the narratives, acceptance is a characteristic primarily experienced by Alan and Anne, Kelly also expressed some acceptance. The whole tone of Alan and Anne's interview reflects a tone of acceptance, framing Cameron's struggles with education as just a part of their family life. They express acceptance in relation to Cameron's diagnosis of dyslexia and the school's response to Cameron's case. They recognise Cameron is dyslexic, that they cannot change the diagnosis and focus instead on learning to live with it. They also acknowledge their acceptance of the school's management of Cameron's diagnosis and disengagement. Rather than blaming anyone, they accept that things are the way they are, including the school and the support Cameron has received. Similarly, Kelly demonstrated acceptance in acknowledging Michael's autism, his ongoing need for therapy, and struggles he faces at school. For her, these difficulties are a norm she has come to accept.

8.4.2 Acceptance in Previous Research

To date, there appears to be limited research on the concept of acceptance in disengagement. However, acceptance emerged as a distinct category of description in this study, reflecting how some parents come to terms with their young person's disengagement from education. Its inclusion as a category is formed on the basis of the data collected, and in professional experiences supporting parents whose young people were disengaged from education, acceptance often surfaced as a response.

While underexplored in disengagement literature, acceptance has been examined in studies involving parents of children with autism. For instance, Abd Latif et al. (2025) explored parental acceptance of their child's diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, however,

they were exploring the acceptance of the diagnosis rather than acceptance of difficulties with education. Weiss et al. (2012) found that as child problem behaviour increased, parental acceptance of their diagnosis decreased. These findings, though situated in different domains, support the relevance of acceptance as a valuable lens through which to understand parental responses to challenging circumstances, including educational disengagement.

8.5 Pressure

Pressure emerged as a category that was experienced in one way. For this study, pressure is defined as a stressful condition occurring when a person must meet urgent external demands or expectations, and as expectations or demands that a person must behave in a certain way (Weiten, 2013). While only one parent, Toni, explicitly and repeatedly spoke of feeling pressured, other parents' interviews showed subtle indicators of feeling pressured. For example, Michelle spoke of being on speed dial from the school and not knowing how to help the situation, suggesting an underlying aspect of pressure. Despite limited occurrence, I consider it is important to include pressure as a category of description as it highlights a unique way that Toni experienced their young person's disengagement from education.

8.5.1 One Parent's Experience of Feeling Pressured

Pressure was a defining feature of Toni's narrative. She referred to feeling pressured eight times throughout her interview. Each mention was embedded within her broader narrative of Jacob's disengagement from education. When Toni explained what disengagement meant to her, after saying "pure frustration" she mentioned that the pressure is still there. When asked what the pressures were, she replied, "the pressure is getting him back to school". Toni explained that Jacob doesn't want to go to school, because he didn't like the pressure of school. When asked about the family's opinions of education, Toni responded that she felt mental health was more important than education, not wanting her children to

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feel pressured at all. When she described Jacob having to be dragged to school by his sister, Toni repeated that Jacob didn't like the feeling of pressure that he experienced when having to go to school.

8.5.2 *Pressure in the Literature*

Similar to the category of acceptance, research in this area is sparse or emerging. Although only one participant explicitly spoke about pressure, the frequency and emotional weight of Toni's references to pressure suggest that it may be a more common and underexplored aspect of parental experience. Its emergence as a category of description in this study points to the need for further research into how society and institutional expectations contribute to parents' emotions when supporting their disengaged young person.

8.6 Chapter Summary

The categories of description outlined in this chapter offer a nuanced understanding of how this study's parents experienced their young people's disengagement from education. Frustration emerged as the primary and unifying category that all parents experienced. Distress was also a common experience, with only one parent not clearly exhibiting or expressing distress while telling their story. Determination was evident in three parents' narratives. These parents actively fought to keep their children engaged, to some extent, in education. Acceptance of how things were was expressed by three parents in their narratives. Finally, pressure was expressed by one parent, who felt pressured by society and school personnel to get her young person to school. Among these, frustration and distress were the most pervasive categories that impacted on these parents' experiences of their young people's disengagement from education.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This thesis consists of nine chapters. To begin, Chapter 1 set the stage for the research by introducing the aim and context for the study. Chapter 2 provided a brief review of the literature around engagement in education. Extending on this, Chapters 3 and 4 delved into the literature on disengagement from education. Chapter 5 presented the phenomenographic approach employed to conduct the study, and the methods used to collect and analyse data. Chapter 6 presented the study's findings, bringing parent voices to the fore through narratives that conveyed their lived experiences of their young people's disengagement. Chapter 7 shared the key learnings that emerged from analysis of the narratives. Chapter 8 presented the categories of description derived from this study. This final chapter begins with answering the research questions, followed by a set of key messages from parents. I then discuss the implications of the study, acknowledge its limitations, and conclude by providing recommendations for further research.

9.1 Answering the Research Questions

9.1.1 In what ways do parents experience their child's disengagement from school?

This study identified five distinct ways that parents in this study experienced their child's disengagement from education: frustration, distress, determination, acceptance and pressure. These five categories of description form the outcome space of this phenomenographic study, capturing the qualitative variations in how parents experience the educational disengagement of their young people.

9.1.2 What variations exist among parents' experiences?

Parents' experiences of their young person's disengagement from education were diverse and multifaceted. The variations that exist between the parent's experiences include, variations in the categories of description that each parent experienced, variations between

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the categories of description and variations within the categories of description. Below I explain each variation.

The categories of description were not experienced by all parents. Frustration emerged as the most common experience with all participant parents describing their young person's experience of disengagement from education as frustrating. Distress was similarly prevalent, affecting all but one parent, Annette, who did not report this experience. Determination to maintain their young people engaged with education featured in the narratives of three parents. Acceptance was discussed briefly by Kelly, and more extensively by Alan and Anne. Finally, pressure was experienced by only one parent, Toni, who reported feeling pressured by the school.

The categories of description represent distinct experiences for parents. Frustration was explained by parents as a sense of irritability or anger from being unable to change their young person's disengagement from education. Distress, however, was described as a great deal of worry or sadness in response to their young person's disengagement and was also evident during the interviews when parents' voices cracked, they cried, their eyes teared up, or at times they were lost for words, gesturing helplessly. In contrast, determination was expressed as a resolve to keep trying, a firmness of purpose to either keep their young person engaged with education, or to find them the right support. The experience of acceptance involved parents acknowledging that their young person was disengaged from education and coping with it as best they could. Pressure was described as feeling compelled by the school and society to make the young person attend school, and the sense of having to do something that they did not want to do. Each of these categories of description represent a uniquely different way that parents experienced their young person's disengagement.

There were variations within three of the categories of description. While all parents experienced frustration, its source differed. Some parents (Toni, Donna, Annette, Kelly

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Michelle and Anne) were frustrated with the school, others (Mary, Toni, Annette, Kelly, and Michelle) with the staff, some (Toni and Michelle) with the education system, a small number (Mary, Donna, Annette and Alan) with their young people, and one (Donna) with herself. Similarly, distress was a shared experience with different origins. For some (Mary, Toni, Kelly, Michelle and Alan), distress emerged in response to their young person's disengagement. For others (Toni, Donna, Kelly, Michelle and Alan) it arose during the interviews when speaking of their young person's experiences with disengagement from education. Also, determination was experienced by three parents' (Mary, Donna and Kelly) in two different ways. Firstly, they were determined to keep their young people engaged in education and fought hard with both their young people and the school to do so. Secondly, they were determined to seek the right support for their young people. In contrast, acceptance and pressure were limited to a single interpretation.

Diagnoses and life experiences also negatively impacted six parents' (Toni, Annette, Kelly, Michelle, Alan and Anne) experiences of their young people's disengagement, specifically mental health, bereavement, and learning and developmental diagnoses. Toni's son Jacob initially struggled with anxiety and depression following family deaths. Annette's son was diagnosed with dyslexia, Kelly's son with autism, and Michelle's sons with multiple diagnoses including ADHD, auditory processing disorder, dyslexia and mental health conditions. Alan and Anne's son was also diagnosed with dyslexia. While these diagnoses and experiences impacted on the parents and young people, they were not related to the primary focus of this study, which was how the parents' experienced disengagement from education.

These variations underscore the differences experienced by parents when their young people disengaged from education. It is important for school administrators and staff to understand that there is no one way that parents experience their young people's

disengagement. Understanding diverse experiences can help schools provide more authentic support for families facing disengagement from education.

9.1.3 How do parents' experiences compare to existing literature addressing disengagement from education?

The experiences shared by the parents in this study reveal alignment with and divergence from the existing literature on educational disengagement. Prior research indicates that children from families with lower socio-economic status, single parent households, or parents who hold negative attitudes towards education, have had adverse educational experiences, or do not support their young people's education are more likely to experience disengagement from education (Balkis et al., 2016; Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012; Coles et al., 2023; Gossner et al., 2025; Hancock & Zubrick, 2015; Piscitello et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2024) However, this pattern was not consistently reflected in this study.

Of the seven families interviewed, two were single parent families and three identified as being in the lower income bracket identified for this study (between \$40,000 and \$70,000), which may indicate lower socio-economic status. Despite these varied circumstances, all parents held very high opinions about education and deep concern about their young people's disengagement; unanimously expressing education was very important for their future. This suggests that socio-economic status and family structure may not necessarily influence disengagement from education as much as previously thought.

Many of the themes identified in the literature—such as indicators, risk factors, and the complex interplay of personal, relational, and systemic influences—aligned with the lived experiences of the parents. However, a striking point of divergence emerged around the application of research-informed practices within schools. Despite the current state of knowledge available from the research, there was a notable absence of evidence-based interventions in the school responses to young people's disengagement as described by the

parents. This highlights a potential research-practice gap, where schools appear to have access to relevant frameworks and evidence-based research but fail to translate them into meaningful action.

9.2 Key Messages for Schools from Participants

At the end of each interview, I invited parents to offer key messages for schools on how to better support young people who are disengaging from education. Their responses were brief; however, they echoed themes present throughout the narratives. The key messages are as follows:

- **Improve discipline and consistency:** Some parents expressed concerns about a lack of discipline and consistency in schools. Annette felt that schools lack discipline. Throughout her interview, Annette spoke of undisciplined classrooms, with students walking around inside the room, doing what they liked and even leaving the room. She commented there were lots of students outside the school grounds during school time. Donna emphasised the need for consistency, declaring that everyone in a school should follow the same rules and guidelines. She was of the opinion that there was a lot of inconsistency in the way bullying was handled.
- **Invite and value parent voice:** Several parents highlighted the importance of schools genuinely listening to and collaborating with parents. Alan expressed concern that speaking up about Cameron's struggles would have repercussions for Cameron. Toni wants school administrators and staff to understand that what parents really want is for their young people to be happy and for schools to work with parents to reduce their young people's disengagement.
- **Curriculum relevance:** Parents questioned the relevance of some of the curriculum taught. Both Donna and Annette questioned the relevance of the

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curriculum and commented that all content should be purposeful. Donna partly blamed Declan's disengagement on his disinterest and lack of enthusiasm for many subjects. Annette stated there is a need to return to the basics of maths and English, arguing that students learn about subjects, like algebra and Macbeth, that they will never use after leaving school. She perceived her son did not have a grasp of core skills.

- **Strengthen school and parental collaboration:** All participants perceived that their knowledge of their young people was disregarded by schools. Kelly strongly believes schools should listen to the parents and collaborate, particularly when it concerns young people with disabilities. She asserted that schools should nurture young people's strengths rather than focus on their disability.
- **Foster stronger teacher and student relationships:** Parents advocated for teachers to form more meaningful relationships with students, including taking young people's perspectives seriously. Mary would like to see teachers speak with young people rather than at them. She said this was more conducive to drawing them into the learning. For Michelle it is important that schools do not automatically blame young people when relationships and learning break down; that in cases where things are not working, there should be a thorough analysis of teaching methods and an evaluation of classroom practices.
- **Promote teacher leadership:** Parents wanted teachers to have greater influence in decision-making by, for example, empowering teachers to influence leadership to make systemic changes to support student engagement. Anne reported frustration when she spoke to teachers about Cameron's disengagement only for the teachers to advise her that they themselves were

not able to make any changes, insinuating that changes could only be made by leadership.

In summary, the parental insights outlined above align with best practices found in the educational literature. However, based on participant parent's lived experience, these practices were inadequate in their children's schools. Yet for the parents in this study, the above practices can significantly impact student engagement in education. Whilst the majority of studies on disengagement from education focus on school and student perspectives, these parental messages provide a unique perspective. Incorporating parent voices can inform and strengthen policy, decision-making and practice, ultimately leading to better support for students disengaging from education.

9.3 Implications for Educators

The findings of this study highlight several important implications for school leadership and education staff seeking to address student disengagement. However, recognizing these implications is insufficient; for teacher professional development to be effective, learning opportunities must provide structured activities that allow teachers to understand, practise and reflect on the implications of new approaches (Boeskens et al., 2020). This section addresses implications through the lens of implementation science, an approach that includes capacity-building and infrastructure development as critical components of successful implementation, supporting practice, organisational, and systems change (Fixsen et al., 2015; Metz & Bartley, 2012).

9.3.1 Bridge a research-practice gap to broaden understanding of disengagement from education

A key challenge identified in this study is a gap between research and school practices regarding disengagement. The research reviewed recognises that disengagement is a

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complex, multi-dimensional and context-specific phenomenon with a wide range of definitions, indicators and pathways. However, this study uncovered that educators may hold a much narrower view, which limits their ability to identify at-risk students and intervene effectively. The experiences shared in this study underscore that disengagement cannot be reduced to a single set of risk factors, and it can affect students regardless of family background or circumstances. Prioritizing the professional development of teachers, particularly in the field of education, becomes crucial, with effective planning for teacher professional development and synthesizing successful strategies and approaches necessary to achieve the ultimate goal of enhancing teacher performance (Aldahmash et al., 2019; Lewis, 2023).

It is important to recognise that schools and teachers are experiencing significant pressures, including demanding workloads. At global, national, and state levels, there are strong policy commitments to meeting the diverse needs of all students through inclusive and equitable education. Globally, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) calls for equitable and inclusive access to quality education and continuous learning for all individuals by 2030, emphasising that no child should be left behind regardless of background or ability (UN, 2025). UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Reports and the 2022 *Leave No Child Behind: Global Report on Boys' Disengagement from Education* further stress the importance of responding to diverse learner needs, particularly those at risk of exclusion (UNESCO, 2022). Nationally, Australia has reaffirmed its commitment to inclusive education through the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, which promotes excellence and equity and recognises the need to support every young person to reach their full potential (Department of Education, 2020a). The Disability Standards for Education 2005 (revised 2020) legally mandate that students with disability have the same access to education and training opportunities as others (Department of Education, 2020b). At

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the state level, Queensland's Department of Education is guided by its Inclusive Education Policy (The State of Queensland (Department of Education), 2025) and Student Learning and Wellbeing Framework (Department of Education and Training Queensland, 2018), which together promote inclusive practices, early support, and positive learning environments that meet the full range of student needs. These policies collectively reflect a multi-tiered commitment to fostering inclusive, supportive, and adaptive education systems for all learners.

Embedding research into practice is essential for improving educational outcomes, fostering innovation, and addressing complex student needs (Brown, 2017). Education research provides evidence-based insights into what works, why it works, and under what conditions it works. When systematically embedded into classroom practice, this research becomes a powerful tool for informed decision-making. However, competency drivers—factors necessary to develop and improve staff efficacy; include selection, training, coaching, and use of fidelity data, with coaching using fidelity data being critical to the transference of knowledge and skills gained in training into the school and classroom setting (Ward et al., 2023). This suggests that professional development alone is insufficient without ongoing coaching and support structures.

For instance, research on student disengagement, can guide teachers in choosing strategies that are proven to enhance engagement. Teachers are more likely to adopt and sustain new instructional strategies when they engage in professional learning communities, peer coaching, and interdisciplinary collaboration (Esfijani & Zamani, 2020; Rasdiana et al., 2024). Further, research-informed practice empowers teachers as reflective practitioners, encouraging critical evaluation of their practices, adaptation to new evidence, and a culture of continuous improvement (McLean Davies et al., 2015). Moreover it also encourages

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professional learning communities that share and generate localised knowledge based on both academic research and classroom experience.

In the context of disengagement or other persistent challenges, research can expose systemic issues that are often missed in day-to-day practice. Embedding these findings into school policies and interventions ensures that responses are not only reactive but also preventive (Brown, 2017), targeting the root causes rather than the symptoms. Although a substantial body of research is available to schools, outlining indicators, risk factors, evidence-based interventions, and reframing of disengagement, the narratives provided by parents in this study suggest a persistent gap between research and practice. Despite the availability of this knowledge, the schools attended by these young people appeared not to utilise these well-established approaches. Ultimately, broadening educators' conceptions of disengagement is essential for creating more inclusive and responsive educational environments. It can enable staff to move beyond stereotypes and assumptions to consider the full continuum of issues that can underpin disengagement and address the needs of all students and families more effectively.

9.3.2 Recognise the importance of early recognition and intervention in student disengagement from education

Early recognition, identification and intervention of student disengagement from education is important. Research (Balfanz et al., 2007; Gossner et al., 2025; Martins et al., 2022) shows that early identification and intervention can disrupt the pathway to disengagement and ensure students remain engaged in education. Balfanz et al. (2007) argue for early warning systems that can recognise students who are failing subjects, specifically English and mathematics, and have poor attendance or poor behaviours. While Gossner et al. (2025, p. 33) "revealed disengagement to be a cumulative and dynamic process", highlighting the need for early recognition and intervention. In this study's participating parents'

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narratives, there was no mention of the school recognising or intervening in their young people's disengagement. According to the research, early recognition and intervention may have significantly improved the chances of re-engaging this study's young people before they became disengaged.

9.3.3 Strengthen school-parent partnerships to support re-engagement

Parents of disengaged young people often feel blamed for their young person's disengagement from education (Luet, 2017). When school administrators and staff use an accusatory tone or are dismissive towards parents' concerns, these feelings are reinforced and the relationship between the parent and the school is damaged even further (Lumby, 2007). The parents in this study unanimously felt unheard and unsupported by their school, despite their efforts to seek help. When approaching the school regarding their young person's disengagement, parents struggled to find the right person to have a conversation with, to be understood and be heard. Schools were unsupportive and in one case refused to listen to the parent's deep knowledge about their young person. This suggests that to better support disengaged students, school staff at all levels could benefit from rethinking the ways they engage with parents of disengaged young people. Listening to parents, valuing their insights, and involving them in decision-making processes, could lead to more effective strategies for re-engagement.

Parental involvement is widely recognised as a key factor in promoting student engagement and academic success (Luet, 2017); however, the experiences shared by parents in this study suggest that schools often fail to effectively communicate with or involve families during the early stages of disengagement. Instead of partnering with parents to develop collaborative, strengths-based responses, schools may inadvertently marginalise them, compounding the sense of isolation and helplessness families feel as they watch their children disengage from school. This disconnect underscores the importance of examining

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how schools conceptualise the role of parents in re-engagement processes, the strategies they employ to involve them, and the structural or cultural barriers that hinder effective collaboration.

9.3.4 Implementation Considerations: Moving from research to practice

The findings from parents' narratives reveal that knowing what works is only the first step; implementing evidence-based practices with fidelity requires deliberate infrastructure and support. Implementation frameworks include usable innovations, linked implementation teams, implementation drivers, implementation stages, and improvement cycles, with usable innovations requiring clear description of underlying philosophy and theory of change, specification of essential components, and a measure of fidelity (Fixsen et al., 2013; Ward et al., 2023).

For policy makers, this study's findings carry important implications. Policy makers need to shape a coherent, actionable and well-communicated implementation strategy that engages stakeholders early on and takes into account the environment as part of the policy design process (OECD, 2019). Current policies around attendance, inclusion, and re-engagement must be re-examined through the experiences of these families. Where parents described feeling pressured by attendance mandates that ignored mental health considerations, or where diagnosis did not lead to effective support, policy has failed at the implementation level. Education agencies need the skills to use implementation and improvement science practices, and attention to implementation capacity can be scaled when policy makers and funders support the use of implementation science in legislation and funding opportunities (Ward et al., 2023). This means moving beyond attendance-centric metrics toward policies that embed relational pedagogy, mental-health-led pacing, and parent voice as core indicators of engagement.

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For teacher education, both pre-service and in-service programs must foreground the relational and moral dimensions of classroom practice that parents identified as pivotal. Coaching behaviours with empirical support for practice change include prompting, scaffolding of supports, performance feedback, using data, and relationship building, with coaching using fidelity data being critical to the transference of knowledge into the school and classroom setting (Freeman et al., 2017; Knight, 2009; Ward et al., 2023). Teacher education should equip educators to recognise their role as policy actors whose moment-to-moment decisions enact or undermine engagement. Programs should model the "chunking," reduced literacy load, timely feedback, and public respect that parents described as re-engaging their children and should train teachers to audit their own practices for the unintended messages of streaming, deficit framing, and compliance-focused control.

Importantly, the content of coaching should be tightly aligned with quality standards and linked to other professional development efforts, with coaches emphasizing how to use assessment tools and standards to inform practice, engage in continuous quality improvement, and meet the individual needs of educators (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). This suggests that one-off professional development workshops on student engagement are insufficient; sustained coaching structures are needed.

At the systems level, coaching leaders on the use of high-leverage systems change and continuous improvement methods can guide complex educational restructuring and increase the capacity of district leaders to plan, implement, and evaluate (Ward et al., 2023). This study suggests that school and district leaders must address structural contributors to disengagement, NAPLAN regimes, ATAR streaming, Year 7 transition timing, device-heavy curricula, not as neutral backdrops but as active determinants of who is excluded. Implementation drivers include competency drivers and organisation drivers both supported by effective leadership, and these drivers are integrated and compensatory, meaning the

philosophy, goals, knowledge, and skills are consistently expressed in each driver (Fixsen et al., 2015; Ward et al., 2023).

This implies establishing implementation teams that include parents, students, teachers, and specialists. When planning systems change, leaders should identify stakeholder groups that would be affected, consider each group's differentiated needs for the change to be successful, and note needs such as professional development to prepare staff for the change (Ward et al., 2023). Using structured improvement cycles, such as Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles, can support systematic decision-making and continuous refinement.

Finally, the protective parenting visible in these narratives challenges us to reframe 'non-attendance' from compliance failure to a signal of systemic harm. Systems-level change requires creating what some researchers describe as transformation zones where existing systems are disturbed and paths to system change are established. For these families, that vision involves schools where safety, relatedness, and intellectual engagement are not traded off against attendance targets, and where policy enactment genuinely walks alongside families rather than positioning them as problems to be managed.

9.4 Recommendations for Further Research

The contributions of this study raise awareness of parent's experiences of their young person's disengagement from education. Further research involving replication of this study with a larger sample size would be interesting to determine if the same categories of description emerge out of a larger study. One possibility would be to do a case study of one school's approach to disengagement, exploring school processes, staff opinions and attitudes, students' opinions and attitudes, as well as parent opinions and attitudes to explore the many influences that can affect disengagement from education. This case study could offer a deeper understanding of how disengagement from education is addressed by one school community.

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Considering the ease with which I was able to apply the models of disengagement to the data collected for this study, it could be useful to situate the research using one of these models. An example would be using the pushout, pullout model of school dropout proposed by Bradley and Renzulli (2011) which could allow for identification of within family factors that may pull a young person out of school, and within school factors that may push a young person out of school. This research could offer a way of discovering the unique patterns of factors that impact on individual young people's disengagement from education.

9.5 Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study include a small sample size, personal life changing events, and the challenges associated with limitations of a novice researcher. Each of these are further explained below.

9.5.1 *Small sample size*

The sample size in this study is small, with only seven families, eight parents being interviewed. In phenomenography, the aim is to use a broad enough sample to capture all the various ways that a phenomenon could be experienced (Bowden & Green, 2005). It is best to have enough participants, commonly 10 to 30, to provide a diverse enough sample to allow the data collected to capture the variability of the social phenomenon. It is noted that some researchers feel they capture all variations with as few as 7 to 11 participants (Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2017). It is possible that a larger sample size may have resulted in more categories of description.

9.5.2 *Personal life changing events*

During this research, I experienced several significant life changing events that affected my ability to maintain consistent focus and momentum. These events required multiple leaves of absence, resulting in several disruptions to the study's progress. While

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these disruptions could be viewed as a limitation, they also offered unexpected benefits. The periods of reduced engagement in writing provided opportunities for deep, reflective thinking and informal discussions, which often resulted in insights that have been included in this thesis.

9.5.3 *Novice researcher*

It is important to recognise my limitations as a first-time PhD researcher. For me, phenomenography was a difficult approach to master. While I read widely to build an understanding of the approach before beginning, certain aspects of the research design may have been overly stringent, particularly in the development of interview questions. Bowden and Walsh (2000) recommend open-ended interview questions to allow participants to interpret and respond in their own way. While I adopted this approach, I recognise the interviews may have lacked sufficient probing due to my limited experience as a novice researcher. If I were to conduct the study again, I would place greater emphasis on identifying and incorporating more probing questions to elicit deeper and more nuanced responses.

9.6 Conclusion

This study has investigated parents' perspectives of their young people's disengagement from education. This is an area of research that is mostly absent from existing literature, as discussed in Section 4.3 of this thesis. Few studies have investigated how parents' experiences of their young people's disengagement (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015). By presenting the narratives of a group of parents, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of student disengagement.

Parents were asked to speak about how they experienced their young person's disengagement from education. Despite many negative experiences with school staff many

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parents retained positive views about education. This resilience underpins the importance of valuing and harnessing parents' voices.

Moreover, parents in this study reached out to be heard. They wanted their voices and stories presented, in the hope of encouraging the education system to support other parents of young people who may have similar experiences to theirs. Evidently many of these parents felt alone and isolated on this journey. Parents hope the sharing of their stories will encourage practices to be reconsidered and eventually influence change so that other parents and young people do not have to experience the difficulties they experienced.

The ways that this study's parents experienced their young person's disengagement varied, however, the two most frequently experienced unifying categories of frustration, and distress highlights that for some parents and children, school carries a heavy emotional toll. Such findings highlight the urgent need for schools to develop more effective strategies and processes for supporting families whose young people are disengaging from education. Ultimately, this study affirms that parent's matter. Their voices and insights should be considered when designing interventions and support systems for disengaged students. A more inclusive and compassionate approach that partners with parents can lead to more responsive, effective and sustainable educational practices.

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Appendix A: Guiding Questions for the Interviews.

What does disengagement from education mean to you?

What makes you think your young person is disengaged?

Can you tell me about your young person and their experiences with education?

And with school?

What value do you place on education/school?

Can you tell me about your experiences with education?

What about with school?

How are your experiences with education/school the same or different as your young person's experiences?

When did you first notice your young person was disengaging from education/school?

What was this disengagement like for you as a parent?

How did/does this disengagement impact your young person?

What do you think were/are the main factors that contributed to your young person's disengagement from education?

Appendix B: Advertisement in School Newsletters

You are invited to participate in a research project working to promote parental voice in the area of student disengagement from education. The research aims to understand parents' perspectives and experiences of youth disengagement for the purpose of informing policy and developing resources to tackle educational disengagement.

If you accept to participate in the research, you will be invited to be interviewed and tell your story of your young person's disengagement from education. Interviews will take no more than 1 1/2 hours of your time. You will also be asked to provide general demographic information. All information provided will be kept confidential.

If you are interested in participating in this research, please contact Denise Svane, PhD candidate, James Cook University on Mobile: or by Email: denise.svane@my.jcu.edu.au.

Appendix C Information Sheet



INFORMATION SHEET

PROJECT TITLE: Young Peoples' Disengagement from Education: hearing parent voices

You are invited to take part in a research project about disengagement from education. We are interested in hearing the experiences of parents of young people between the ages of 12 and 17 who are disengaged from education. Young People who are considered disengaged from education may fall into one or more of the following categories:

- They do not participate in school or classroom activities;
- They do not engage with the school work or the curriculum;
- They do not have a sense of belonging at school;
- They may behave inappropriately;
- They may have a negative attitude towards school.

The study is being conducted by Denise Svane and will contribute to her Doctoral Thesis in Education at James Cook University. If you agree to be involved in the study, you will be invited to be interviewed. The interviews, with your consent, will be audio-taped, and should take approximately 1 ½ hours of your time. The interviews will focus on your experiences of your young person's disengagement from education. The interviews will be conducted at the College of Arts, Society and Education at James Cook University, or a venue of your choice. The interviews will be completely confidential. You are welcome to have a support person present during these interviews if you choose.

Prior to the interview, you will be requested to complete a demographic form to provide additional data to support your experiences of your young person's disengagement from education.

When the researcher has completed transcribing your interviews and written up the story of your young person's disengagement, you will be invited to read the story collected to verify the accuracy of your story. You will be able to edit the contents of the story if you choose.

Taking part in this study is completely voluntary and you can stop taking part in the study and withdraw any data at any time without explanation or prejudice.

There are no risks involved in this study as you choose what you will share with the researcher. However, your young person's disengagement from education can be an emotive issue, therefore, if you feel distressed as a result of discussing your experiences, you will be supported to seek counselling through Relationships Australia Townsville call 1300 364 277 or Centacare Townsville (07) 4772 9000. You may also choose to seek online or telephone counselling from NQ Connect, call 1300 059 625 to book your session.

Further Support for your Young Person regarding their disengagement from education can be sought from the following support agencies:

Family and Child Connect helps families connect with appropriate services they need to care for their children. To contact phone 13 32 64.

Department of Education Youth Engagement Team Email: studentservicesnqr@qed.qld.gov.au or phone (07) 4758 3222 (#2 State Schooling)

If you are concerned about your young person's mental health, please see your doctor as soon as possible.

Your responses and contact details will be strictly confidential. The data from the study will be de-identified and used in research publications, journal articles, conference presentations and a doctoral thesis. You will not be identified in any way in these publications. The findings from the research will be disseminated to key staff in the Department of Education and key stakeholders in the community to ensure your voice is heard.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact **Denise Svane and/or Snowy Evans**.

Principal Investigator:

Denise Svane

College of Arts, Society and Education
James Cook University

Phone:

Email: denise.svane@my.jcu.edu.au

Supervisor:

Name: Snowy Evans

College of Arts, Society and Education
James Cook University

Phone:

Email: neus.evans@jcu.edu.au {HYPERLINK "mailto:"}

If you have any concerns regarding the ethical conduct of the study, please contact:

Human Ethics, Research Office

James Cook University, Townsville, Qld, 4811

Phone: (07) 4781 5011 (ethics@jcu.edu.au)

Appendix D Informed Consent Form

This administrative form
has been removed

Appendix E Demographic Form

Pseudonym (name to be known as to protect your identity): _____

Family Structure: _____

Age of your young person who is disengaged: _____

Your relationship to the young person who is disengaged? _____

Number of other adults in household and their relationship to the young person: _____

Number of other children in household: _____

Their relationship to the young person: _____

Ages of children: _____

Young Person's Year level at school: _____

Household income:

- ☐ Below \$40000 per annum
- ☐ Between \$40000 to \$70000 per annum
- ☐ Between \$70000 to \$100000 per annum
- ☐ Over \$100000 per annum

Your education level: _____

Other parents education level: _____