This study examined the reasons that four high school students who had previously refused to attend school willingly attended an alternative K-12 school for students with special needs. The two research questions that framed this study were (a) why do students who refused to attend their regular schools willingly attend Brookfield Park? and (b) in what ways is Brookfield Park different from traditional schools? In order to answer these questions, interviews were conducted with four students in grades 8-11 who attended a school avoidance program (SAP) at Brookfield Park, a public school in the Northeast. The four themes that emerged from these interviews as situations that motivated students to attend school were (a) school climate, (b) academic environment, (c) discipline, and (d) relationships with teachers. Interview data were combined with the researcher’s observations as a teacher in the school as well as examination of students’ attendance records.

The issue of school non-attendance is an increasingly serious problem facing society. The link between chronic absenteeism in high school and dropping out has been well documented (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Mensch & Kandel, 1988), and dropping out has been associated with an increased likelihood of unemployment, dependency on welfare, and incarceration (Center on Education Policy & American Youth Policy Forum, 2001; Harlow, 2003; Snyder & Sickmund, 1995; Sum, et al., 2003). Because of the impact this problem has on society in both social and economic terms, solutions clearly need to be explored.

Research into the issues of school non-attendance, truancy, and dropping out, has traditionally examined social, family, and personal variables that place students at risk for such behaviors. However, from my interviews with students who were previous non-attenders, it was apparent that the cause of their detachment from school lay within the school setting itself. Likewise, positive characteristics of the school

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setting were related to their motivation for attending an alternative education site.

Although research has been conducted on the reasons students disengage from school (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001; Trusty & Dooley-Dickey, 1993), skip school (Elliot, 1999; Roderick, 1994; Rumberger, 1995), and drop out of school (Christenson, et al., 2001; Ekstrom, et al., 1986; Mensch & Kandel, 1988), little research has been conducted on the factors that motivate students to attend school. This critical gap needs to be filled, as it sheds light on the motivating factors within schools, which if known, can direct school reform.

Categories of School Non-Attenders

A focus in the extant literature has been the identification and labeling of different categories of students with behavior most commonly referred to as “school refusal” (Bernstein & Garfinkel, 1986; Elliot, 1999; Granell de Aldaz, et al., 1994; Kearney, Eisen, & Silverman, 1995; Last, et al., 1987; Ollendick & Francis, 1988; Paige, 1996; Phelps, Cox, & Bajorek, 1992; Thyer & Sowers-Hoag, 1986, 1988). Recently, Pellegrini (2007) proposed that students’ behavior should be described as “extended school non-attendance,” which presents the behavior in neutral terms and directs attention to the school environment. In line with this reasoning, the term “school non-attendance” will be used in this paper, except when specifically referring to research on “truants.” Most researchers maintain the distinction between truants—conceptualized as those who skip school without their parents’ knowledge and attend intermittently (Pilkington & Piersel, 1991; Reid, 1993), and those with “school phobia” (Phelps, Cox, & Bajorek, 1992; Retting & Crawford, 2000). It is generally agreed that the latter do not willingly skip school, but do so out of chronic fear or anxiety (Fremont, 2003; Heyne & Rollings, 2004; Kearney, Eisen, & Silverman, 1995; Phelps, et al., 1992; Salemi & Brown, 2003).

Lack of agreement over the classification of school non-attenders has hindered research into successful interventions and solutions to the problem. Students with school-related anxieties and fears are typically treated with therapeutic interventions (Barrett, Dadds, & Rapee, 1996; Heyne & Rollings, 2002; Kearney & Silverman, 1990, 1993; Kearney et al., 1995; Last et al., 1987; Phelps, et al., 1992; Spence et al., 2000) and the literature base on interventions for these students consequently emanates from the counseling field.

The literature on truancy, on the other hand, concentrates on interventions of the legal system (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2002; Fantuzzo, Grim, & Hazan, 2005; Puzzanchera, 2002) and on measures that have been taken by schools and school districts around the country to increase attendance (Gullat & Lemoine, 1997; Starr, 2002). Although truants and students with school phobia have generally been viewed separately based on perceived volition (Elliot & Place, 1998), emerging research indicates that truants may also have school-related fears (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Egger et al., 2003).

Causes of School Non-Attendance

The research on causes of non-attendance has generally focused on family, personal, and school causes. Although there have been studies on the family dynamics of anxious non-attenders (e.g. Kearney & Silverman, 1995), most studies on the causes of non-attendance have focused on truants. These studies have identified deficient guidance or parental supervision (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Henry, 2007), poverty and substandard living conditions (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Bethke & Sandfeur, 1998; Rohrmann, 1993), and lack of awareness of attendance laws (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001) as causes of students’ non-attendance.

The personal causes that have been identified tend to overlap with school causes. Academic difficulties, for example, have been linked to truant behavior (Dougherty, 1999; Farrington, Loeber, & Van Kammen, 1990; Galloway, 1986; Henry, 2007; Schultz, 1996; Sommer, 1985), and many researchers pinpoint feelings of isolation and alienation that students experience in the school setting (Finn, 1989; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Mackey, 1977; Rood, 1989). A recent study that assessed functions of anxiety-related non-attendance using various parent and youth measures, found, in line with previous findings (see Kearney & Albano, 2004; Kearney &
Silverman, 1990), that predictors for degree of school absenteeism were (a) avoidance of school related stimuli that provoke negative affectivity, (b) escape from aversive social and/or evaluative situations, (c) pursuit of attention from significant others, and (d) pursuit of tangible rewards outside of school (Kearney, 2007). While such findings indicate general school and personal causes of students’ non-attendance, they do not shed light on students’ personal experiences within particular school settings. Although student interviews would be fruitful in providing such information, most interview research has been conducted with truant students and dropouts (e.g., Attwood & Croll, 2006; Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Erickson & Lefstein, 1991; Harte, 1994), with little attention given to students with anxieties or school-related fears. This research helps to fill that gap.

### Alternative Schools

Although there is a fair-sized body of research on alternative schools for students who are considered at-risk (i.e., truants and potential dropouts) (Easton, 2002), there is a paucity of research on alternative school programs for students with school-related anxieties and fears. The research on alternative schools can, however, inform the discussion on positive school characteristics that motivate students to attend. Southwell (2006), in a reconceptualization of truancy as a symptom of deficient schools rather than deficient students, points out that many schools in the U.K. have successfully reduced truancy by altering systems of power within schools.

Although different alternative schools serve different purposes, they tend to share in common the desire to meet the needs of students who have not optimally benefited from traditional school programs (Lange, 1998). One of the most cited reasons for students’ success in alternative schools is the small size of the school. Raywid (1994) outlined three characteristics that account for the success of small schools (a) they generate and sustain a community within them, (b) they make learning engaging, and (c) they provide the organization and structure needed to sustain the previous two situations. Small schools also enable close student-teacher relationships characterized by care and concern (Griffin, 1993; Smith, Gregory, & Pugh, 1981).

Although there is no set number for defining small and large schools, Brookfield Park, the school in which this study was conducted, encompassed all grades from K-12 and had a total of 157 students, making it a small school by any small school size standards (e.g., Cotton, 1996; Lee & Smith, 1997; Meier, 1995; Williams, 1990). Research shows that compared to large schools, it is much easier for students to become involved in clubs and activities in small schools, and such involvement is central to students’ sense of belonging (Bauman, 1998; Coladarci & Cobb, 1996; Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004; Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Lange, 1998; Rayle, 1998).

The students I interviewed at Brookfield Park all held positions of importance in the school. James was head of the school postal service, Courtney was the librarian’s assistant, and both Jacob and Stephen helped the social activities coordinator with all school-wide events. These students would have been unlikely to hold such positions at their previous schools due to competition from the “in” group (defined by Krovetz (1999) as those who occupy a central place in the school). The prestige gained through the positions they held at Brookfield Park served many benefits, including (a) providing them status, (b) making them known to everyone in the school, (c) boosting their confidence and self-esteem, and (d) increasing their sense of belonging (Bauman, 1998; Coladarci & Cobb, 1996; Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004; Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Lange, 1998; Rayle, 1998).

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Brookfield Park based on some kind of disability or special need, a situation which fostered a sense of commonality. Close-knit interpersonal relationships were central to the school and increased students’ perceptions of “fitting in”, a situation that has been connected with students’ sense of attachment to school (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Osterman, 2000).

As Head (2006) proposes, it is necessary to address the underlying emotional or social circumstances that cause students to be absent from school. While the success of alternative schools for truant students and those at risk of dropping out has been demonstrated, more attention needs to be given to schools with successful attendance programs for students who have developed school-related fears. Such students have typically been treated with therapeutic interventions; however, the success of the School Avoidance Program (SAP) at Brookfield Park demonstrates that establishing a positive school climate and promoting respectful, supportive relationships within the school can be sufficient to motivate students to attend.

Method

Setting and Participants

This research was conducted at Brookfield Park, a public K-12 school in a large urban school district in the Northeast. In the past, students were admitted to this school on the basis of a severe medical need or disability that could not be accommodated in a regular school setting. However, due to recent school closings in the district, many students with mild disabilities were also admitted. This site was selected because it was the school in which I had taught for the previous 6 years and also because it was the only known public school for students with special needs that included a school avoidance program (SAP) specifically for students with school-related anxiety or fearfulness.

The participants were one female and three male students in grades eight through eleven, who were transferred to Brookfield Park after a sustained period of absenteeism from their previous schools. These students were selected because at the time of research they were the only middle and high school students in the school avoidance program (SAP) who were not classified with a disability. Permission to use participants from this setting was gained from the principal of the school, the students’ parents/guardians, and the students who participated.

Data Collection and Analysis

Three types of data collection were utilized to provide for triangulation. Students were interviewed individually for approximately 40 minutes on four different occasions. One or two interviews were conducted with each participant per week during the school day. All participants were informed that their responses would be completely anonymous and their signed consent to be interviewed and audio-taped was obtained. Participants were told what the overall purpose of the interviews was and they were given an approximate timeframe for each interview.

The first interviews consisted of open-ended questions about students’ past experiences in their previous schools. Some of these questions were prepared beforehand and some were based on feedback provided during the interviews. In the next set of interviews, I posed more structured questions on the specific aspects of schools that students did not like, and situations that specifically made them not want to attend. Information provided in the initial interviews was used to guide my questions. The following interviews involved open-ended questions about students’ experiences at Brookfield Park. Based on information provided in these interviews and topics identified in previous research, I asked structured questions in the final interviews to gain more specific information about the factors at Brookfield Park that motivated students to attend. I coded interview transcripts and looked at recurrent themes throughout. The themes that emerged were (a) school climate, (b) academic environment, (c) discipline, and (d) relationships with teachers.

Interviews were used as a qualitative method to make meaning of what participants experienced. To provide a check for internal consistency of information, interviews were conducted over the span of two to four weeks. The different perspectives of the four students were
also compared to make meaning of their experiences. After transcribing the audiotaped interviews, I shared written drafts with students to ensure accurate interpretation of their personal experiences.

I also gained access to students’ cumulative record cards, which documented the number of days students attended school and the number of days they were absent each year. Comparisons were made between students’ attendance in previous schools and their attendance at Brookfield Park. This objective form of data was used to verify information provided during student interviews.

These two data sources were supplemented with observations based on my experiences as a teacher at Brookfield Park. Having taught five other students who had transferred to Brookfield Park because of extended school non-attendance, I was aware of the conditions that enabled them to readjust to the school environment, as well as their preparedness to return to regular high schools after attending Brookfield Park.

Findings
The following accounts of students’ school attendance histories are based on information provided on students’ cumulative record cards.

Stephen attended one elementary school where he maintained regular attendance. He attended high school for 3 weeks before deciding not to return. After not attending for approximately 3 months, he was transferred to Brookfield Park. Between the middle of January and the end of the school year in June, he was absent a total of 15 days.

Jacob attended three elementary schools before being transferred to Brookfield Park in 3rd grade. While in 2nd grade he moved to a different neighborhood and repeated 2nd grade in a new school, during which time he was absent a total of 34 days. This school was a K-2 school, so he started another school in 3rd grade, in which he missed 63 days by April of the first year. He was then transferred to Brookfield Park where out of the 31 remaining school days, he missed only two. From grades 4 through 8, he missed an average of 12 days per year and in grade 9 he missed 16 days.

James attended three elementary schools before being transferred to Brookfield Park in 7th grade. Between pre-K and grade 6, he missed 191 days of school. In grades 4, 5, and 6, he missed 48 days, 39 days, and 26 days, respectively. After being transferred to Brookfield Park, his absences decreased to 10 days in his first year.

Courtney attended three elementary schools before being transferred to Brookfield Park in 8th grade. In grade 7, she missed a total of 128 days. In her first year of Brookfield Park she missed 46 days—an 82-day improvement over her previous school year’s attendance. In 9th grade her absences decreased to 26 days.

Clearly, students’ attendance patterns were influenced by the interaction of individual, family, and school factors. However, my interviews with these students focused on the school setting so as to identify alterable school characteristics that influence students’ attendance. Through these interviews, four school characteristics that served as motivation for students’ school attendance at Brookfield Park were identified. These are discussed below.

School Climate
According to the Manitoba Department of Education, Training and Youth (2001), “A positive school climate exists when all students feel comfortable, wanted, valued, accepted, and secure in an environment where they can interact with caring people they trust.” (p. 3.3). It is clear that Brookfield Park encompassed these characteristics. Students described feeling comfortable and accepted by others, and being involved in trusting, interpersonal relationships.

At the time of the interviews Stephen was in his second year at Brookfield Park. He transferred after a 3-month absence from his regular high school, Jefferson, where he believed himself to be “the only [white student] in the school,” for which situation he was subjected to constant racial slurs and threats of violence. He spent his days in school friendless and alone, fearing for his safety. In contrast, racial or other differences faded into insignificance at Brookfield Park where all students had some kind of disability or special need. Stephen explained:
There’s no discrimination, no racism here, everybody gets along with each other. Everybody keeps to each other in one building, everybody looks out for each other in the building basically, like they only got each other...no matter what the disability or special need or anything, everybody still tries to stay together.

In other words, the fact that all students had some kind of special need was something that Stephen saw as serving a bonding function. While Stephen’s being white was a characteristic that made him different at Jefferson, at Brookfield Park students’ differences actually made them closer to one another.

Indeed, all students were sent to Brookfield Park because they had a need that could not be met in a regular school setting, and for some students who may have been stigmatized for their disability in another school, Brookfield Park served as a welcome “melting pot.” Courtney, too, described the close-knit atmosphere that resulted from this situation, claiming that students around the school, “all seem to be good friends, they help each other out, and everybody always seems in a good mood.”

Courtney’s main objection to her previous school was the daily outbreak of fights: “The teachers had to break up fights in the middle of the room, so you could have got hurt that way. You never knew when they were going to start fighting and you wouldn’t want to be in their way,” a situation which made Courtney feel unsafe in her own classroom, as well as around the school. And to confound an already unpleasant situation, “the teachers were always yelling at the students for the fighting.” The teachers in this school appeared to be diverted from teaching to breaking up fights and punishing students, creating an atmosphere that Courtney stated, “made you just not want to be there.”

Courtney’s rejection of this school was clearly understandable under these circumstances. The pervasive presence of fights made her feel unsafe, and as a result of the teachers’ punitive responses to the violent outbreaks, a negative school climate was created. At Brookfield Park, on the other hand, Courtney stated: “There’s no fighting and everybody is really nice to you. Everybody gets along with each other and gets their work done.” For Courtney, the absence of fights clearly played a significant role in creating a positive school climate. It enabled teachers to teach and students to learn. It showed that students cared about one another, and it made Courtney feel comfortable and safe in her classroom and around the school.

The students also related their positive feelings about Brookfield Park to its small size. Describing his relationship with teachers, Jacob stated: “You can get closer to them ’cause there are not as many kids.” In addition to the closer student-teacher relationships enabled by the small school size, students also got to know each other at the many all-school functions. As James explained:

[Compared to other schools] there’s more like programs...get-togethers for the entire school, like all the winter things and stuff, and like all the different foods and everything [referring to a multicultural luncheon]. And that’s nice. In other schools they don’t bother doing that.

Because of the small student body, participating in these activities gave all students in the school the chance to get to know one another. At the same time, teachers could get to know students. James explained:

It seems like here everybody’ll know you. It’s just so nice, whereas in other schools, you see teachers, and you’ve known them for like a year and they don’t even know your name. And it’s just really nice, you just pretty much like know every student here, where in other schools there’ll be all kinds of students and you’ll never get a chance to meet even half of them.

Even Jacob, who claimed that he did not like to be around large groups of people, did not mind attending school-wide functions at Brookfield Park because he knew everyone in the school. When I asked him how he knew them, he responded: “From my other classes, walking through the hallways, seeing them at lunch and at the end of the day when we’re going home, and from just being here a long time.”
Clearly, Brookfield Park provided a lot more opportunities for all students in the school to interact than in other schools, leading James to conclude:

It’s a great school. Everybody’s just so nice here. It’s small so everybody knows you and everybody’s just so nice. Everybody talks to you and, it’s just a wonderful school...every time I sign out in the office everybody’s like, ‘Oh hi, how you doing?’ and [they] talk for like 10 minutes. The teachers are all nice. You can sit there and talk with them and fool around with them, you know, just joke around. I just really like it.

Overall, it was evident that Brookfield Park had a positive school climate. Students’ special needs served a bonding function, and also helped to create a warm and supportive environment. The small school size and all-school functions enabled students to get to know one another and allowed teachers to get to know students, resulting in a close-knit school in which students felt comfortable and safe. This personalizing atmosphere, characterized by trust and friendliness, was clearly a significant factor in motivating students to attend school.

Academic Environment

Compared to students’ previous schools, academic work at Brookfield Park was seen as easier, and the classroom atmosphere as calmer and more conducive to work. In addition, teachers were considered to be more lenient with deadlines and thought to show more interest in students’ academic progress.

Courtney explained that compared to her previous schools where she was unable to learn because teachers’ days were spent breaking up fights, at Brookfield Park: “It’s easy to learn...because the teachers don’t have to break up fights. They can actually teach.” She stated: “It’s just a nice school to be in [because] you can get your work done.” Stephen agreed, based on his experiences at Jefferson:

You can’t do your work when people are sitting there throwing papers and stuff and calling you names all the time and the other kids in the class are throwing books out of the window, they are whistling at girls out the window, so you can’t work in there. So I told them, I can’t do the work, so I’m not coming to school. There’s no sense to be in school if that’s how it is. I called the principal and I explained to him, ‘I’m not going to come to school in that kind of environment’ and he said, ‘I don’t care, then you’ll fail.’ And that’s why I just stayed home.

Clearly Stephen desired an orderly classroom in which he could complete his work without disturbances. Hoping the principal would agree that such an atmosphere was necessary, he “threatened” to leave unless things changed, but the principal’s response merely served to reinforce the fact that his academic progress was of no concern to educators in the school.

After such experiences, students at Brookfield Park appreciated the opportunity to learn in an orderly environment, where teachers’ time was not taken up on disciplinary measures and could instead be devoted to teaching. Courtney was in 11th grade and was focusing on completing the classes she needed in order to graduate. Toward this end, she viewed school as a place to work and not to make friends, as the following quote demonstrated: “I just want to come here and get my work done and be able to graduate so I can go on to college and become a vet.” Stephen shared this academic focus: “I try not to make relationships, I just try to stay by myself. I don’t want to make no friends or nothing. [I just want] to try and learn as much as I can in the six hours and just go home.”

Both Stephen and Courtney saw the primary role of school as enabling them to obtain a high school diploma. Unlike their previous schools in which learning was prevented by the disorder in the classrooms, Brookfield Park provided them with the environment they needed to accomplish their goals. In addition to the orderly classroom atmosphere at Brookfield Park, students also found work less stressful because there was little pressure surrounding its completion. James explained that teachers had a more lenient attitude towards work than at his previous school:

They don’t pressure you much. I mean there’s some pressure, but it’s not as
much. Whereas in other schools you have to have everything done and they won’t tell you if you have something due, in this school they’re nice and lenient and they’ll do that [tell you if you have work due], and once in a while they’ll give you free time so you can just take a break from everything . . .

And according to Stephen: “[Teachers will] cut you a little more slack here, like if you don’t hand a paper in on time or something, they will give you another day to do it, like you know, they’ll give you a little extended time. In a lot of high schools they wouldn’t do that.” Jacob concurred: “If I’m late [with an assignment] they just tell me to give it in later or the next day or something.”

It can be seen that in comparison to previous schools, students at Brookfield Park experienced a more relaxed work environment, with more flexibility surrounding the completion of assignments. Teachers told students what work they had due, gave them extra time to complete it if necessary, and allowed them to take breaks in between. In addition to this general low-pressure atmosphere, Jacob felt that the work itself seemed easy, which could be attributed to the fact he received more help with it than at other schools. Jacob explained that with the low teacher-student ratio, students received more one-on-one attention from teachers. And Stephen elucidated:

You get a lot more attention here ‘cause teachers actually care more than at regular schools. [At regular schools] they don’t even try because the kids are already ruining their reason for teaching. So it’s a lot better—you get more attention, and you learn more, and you get cut more slack.

JW: What signs are there that the teachers care more?

Stephen: ‘Cause they’ll take the time to explain something to you or like, I got really sloppy handwriting and a lot of teachers can’t read it, and they’ll just mark it wrong at Jefferson if they can’t read it. Here they’ll at least take the time to ask me what it is, or let me take the time to type it or whatever, so they give me options, and you wouldn’t have no options in any other high school.

Stephen clearly perceived teachers’ flexibility with deadlines and options to redo work as signs that teachers cared about his academic success. This care was also demonstrated to students by the individualized attention that teachers gave them, and the extra time they devoted to helping them understand material.

Students also explained that if they did not understand something, they could ask other students to help them. Courtney described how students used their free time: “People do their homework...the students help each other...if one of the students needs help with some work, they can ask the other students and they will help them.” She explained that there were no particular students that other students asked for help—they asked anyone in the class who was available. James confirmed that students could call on classmates for “whatever they need help with. If they need help, they’ll help.”

Overall then, it was evident that the academic environment at Brookfield Park was conducive to learning. Teachers recognized the need to be flexible and provide students sufficient time to complete work well. They provided students with individualized assistance and encouraged collaborative relationships among students, which created a supportive, positive, learning environment. Students took shared responsibility for their learning, and no students were perceived as holding academically dominant positions. This non-competitive atmosphere may have been due to the various disabilities that students had in each classroom; disabilities that impacted their speech, vision, mobility, ability to hold a pen, or turn pages of a book. Such a situation, in which students in the class had such different strengths and weaknesses, lent itself to a cooperative, helping atmosphere, where skills were pooled toward common goals.

**Discipline**

For students who came from schools where petty rules were enforced and where blanket punishments were applied to all students when one student erred, the disciplinary procedures at Brookfield Park were considered to be fair and non-punitive. In their previous schools, it
seemed to students that teachers “always had some reason to yell” at, or punish them. Recalling the group punishments that were commonplace at his previous school, James stated: “I remember one day in particular in science class, one kid was messing up, so the teacher made us go out in the hallway with all our stuff and line up for 20 minutes, and then he started yelling at all of us just because one person messed up.” Courtney shared a similar experience: “One time the kids were walking in the hallway and they weren’t quiet and [the teacher] made us walk up and down three flights of stairs over and over again for about an hour or two.” And when fights broke out, which was a daily occurrence in her class, the punishment was that every student had to copy definitions out of a dictionary. These group punishments seemed unfair to students given that they were being punished for other students’ behavior over which they had no control.

In contrast, James described how fairly rules were enforced at Brookfield Park compared to his previous school where students were sent to the principal’s office or suspended for the slightest rule violation. He explained how teachers at Brookfield Park were willing to listen to students’ reasons for acting in a certain way, and talked to them without “that crazy yelling and stuff,” which was the typical teacher response at his previous school. Even on his one visit to the principal’s office at Brookfield Park, the principal dealt with him leniently. James had refused to write out swimming rules, required of students not participating in swimming. This is James’ account of what happened as a result:

I got sent down to the office and I told her [the principal] all my reasons and she said, ‘well, I understand’ and she said, ‘well, you don’t have to do it now but maybe if you could just do it later in your homeroom or something’ and I said ‘ok, I’ll do it then’…and it was very nice of her.

The way the principal dealt with the situation showed James that she was willing to listen to his reasons for not wanting to follow a rule and reacted according to her assessment of their reasonableness. James therefore felt that his feelings were important, and because he considered the principal’s response to be fair, he was willing to comply with the desired behavior.

James also explained that his homeroom teacher did not respond strictly to behavior that would have been harshly punished in his previous school. This was an example he gave:

One time this year we had a substitute teacher and substitute para and we had to do these papers and one kid took them off the desk and I hid them behind the chalkboard, and nobody knew who did it and when I confessed to Ms. N. [homeroom teacher], she just laughed about it.

He stated that at his previous school, “That would have been serious — very serious. You would probably have to go down to the principal’s office and get a phone call home. They would probably suspend you for taking it.” Here, the contrast in attitudes between teachers at Brookfield Park and James’ previous school are highlighted, as are the disciplinary procedures. Whereas at Brookfield Park, James’ behavior was viewed as a harmless prank, in his previous school it would have been considered inappropriate enough to warrant suspension.

Overall, it can be seen that in students’ previous schools, teachers were authority figures who enforced punishments whenever students broke rules, regardless of the severity of the infraction. These punishments were applied to all students in the class, which was a system that was seen as unfair by students who were not involved in the rule-breaking. In addition, teachers attempted to enforce discipline by yelling at students in advance, hoping it would act as a deterrent. At Brookfield Park, both the principal and the teachers listened to students’ reasons for acting in a certain way and responded accordingly. In addition, since students conformed to expected behaviors, there was little need for discipline. As Raywid (1994) points out, small schools lend themselves to a personal atmosphere where the social order can be based on norms and interactions rather than rules and regulations.
Relationships with Teachers
The students described teachers at Brookfield Park as people they could talk to outside of an academic context. This seemed to be the teacher quality that students considered most important, and one which contrasted sharply with that of teachers in their previous schools. It was through talking to students on an informal basis that teachers conveyed the impression that they cared about them. James stated:

*The teachers here are very friendly. You can just start conversations with them, like when there's a break between classes. You can talk about anything, not even school stuff, you can talk about pets, anything really. At another school, you would never be able to talk to teachers, there'd never even be time to talk to teachers, and if you tried to talk to them all they would ever talk about is 'you have to do homework' or something. There would never be any personal relationship with teachers, where here there is.*

James explained that he could talk to teachers like friends, a situation which made him feel cared for by teachers and helped him develop close relationships with them. At his previous school, teachers did not have conversations with students except related to academic work, preventing students from getting to know their teachers, and leaving them unknown by teachers.

Stephen felt that teachers ignored the bullying they witnessed him enduring daily, which led him to state: “None of them [teachers] paid attention to any students, none of them cared. That’s why I didn’t want to finish school no more. I didn’t even want to go through four more years ‘cause every day sucked there.” In contrast, he described the teachers at Brookfield Park as caring and understanding of the students’ needs.

Courtney rarely spoke to people in school and when she did speak, it was in a whisper and was generally inaudible. Despite this “shyness,” she claimed to find the teachers approachable and stated that she had good relationships with them, which she attributed to the fact that: “I know I can trust them and if I have a problem I know I can go and talk to them about it.” In contrast, at her previous school “[Teachers] were always too busy breaking up fights; they didn’t have time to do anything else.”

Clearly, Courtney perceived teachers’ involvement in conflict resolution as consuming time that could have been spent teaching or addressing students’ other needs. At Brookfield Park, on the other hand, teachers were attuned to her feelings and showed concern for her on both an emotional and academic level, often asking her what was wrong if she looked sad or offering help with work if she appeared to be struggling.

Jacob also explained that he appreciated having teachers who were friendly and easy to get along with, and with whom he could just sit down and talk.

It seemed that for students whose memories of teachers at previous schools involved their yelling at students, one of the most endearing characteristics of teachers at Brookfield Park was the fact that they did not yell. In addition, teachers showed they cared about students by taking the time to talk to them as individuals. This enabled students to see teachers as more than authority figures. They could talk to them about problems, seek help from them with work, and rely on them for both academic and emotional support. Teachers were seen not as disciplinarians, but as people with whom it was possible to establish informal, supportive, trusting relationships.

Conclusion
The four students I interviewed were students who did not succeed in their regular schools. They found these schools to be violent and unsafe, with classrooms too disruptive to work in. In addition, discipline was unfairly enforced, and teachers were consumed with yelling at and punishing students. Students were reprimanded as a group, which made students feel powerless and demonstrated that teachers did not care about them as individuals.

At the same time, because teachers focused on discipline and not on student learning, students were unable to complete their work and progress academically. Although teachers were
aware of the problems caused by students fighting in class or otherwise disrupting lessons, they did nothing to prevent these situations, and responded instead in ways that increased students’ sense of hopelessness. Students interpreted teachers’ actions as demonstrating that they did not care about their emotional needs or their academic success. This perception was reinforced by the fact that teachers made no effort to speak to them outside of an academic context, and showed no interest in the problems they were experiencing in or out of school. Personal relationships with teachers were nonexistent and there was no camaraderie between students. Emotionally, students were unable to withstand the feelings of insignificance and unimportance that this atmosphere evoked. Considering that each day was an ordeal to get through, it is not difficult to understand why these students felt no attachment to school.

Students felt that having teachers who treated them as individuals and fulfilled their emotional and academic needs was one of the most positive attributes of Brookfield Park. Teachers were not viewed as disciplinarians, but as fair people who listened to their reasons for acting in particular ways and then responded accordingly. These actions led students to believe that teachers cared about them, a message also conveyed through teachers’ flexibility over work completion, the individualized attention they gave students, and their encouragement of student collaboration. These supportive interpersonal relationships both enabled students’ academic success and alleviated their academic stress.

The collaborative atmosphere that teachers promoted sent the message that all students’ contributions were valuable to learning, which Ormrod (2000) states is central to developing a sense of community, defined as: “a sense that we [teachers] and our students have shared goals, are mutually respectful and supportive to one another’s efforts, and believe that everyone makes an important contribution to classroom learning” (p. 602). A sense of community was clearly fostered at Brookfield Park. For students who stopped attending school because they failed to feel a sense of belonging to school, the sense of importance they were able to experience at Brookfield Park was highly significant. Because the majority of students in the school had disabilities or serious health needs, all students in the class were implicitly required to take on helping roles and pooling their skills was a necessary feature of the classroom environment.

Indeed, it was the unique characteristics of Brookfield Park that accounted for students’ positive attitudes toward school and their willingness to attend. The extant research on small schools points to the close student-teacher relationships and sense of belonging that are enabled in small schools (e.g., Armove & Strout, 1980; Natriello et al., 1990; Newmann, 1981). However, Brookfield Park encompasses an additional feature, one that is in fact unique to Brookfield Park — students without disabilities are included in an educational setting alongside students with disabilities. Although inclusion is commonplace, a situation in which the number of students with disabilities in the class outnumber those without disabilities is unlikely to exist in other schools. It is important to view findings from this research within this unique social and educational context.

It can be seen that the interpersonal dynamics at Brookfield Park served to give students a sense of power, status, and importance that they had previously not experienced in school. Teachers at Brookfield Park were able to attain visibility and status through a variety of interconnected factors, all of which contributed to the feelings of belonging necessary for students to identify with the school culture—an important prerequisite for regular attendance (Rumberger, 1995).

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