Characteristics of youth in alternative education settings: a scoping review of the literature

Youth who attend alternative education are often labelled as 'youth at risk' or 'marginalized youth'. These general labels do not do justice to the different facets in the lives of these youth. Having a clearer view of who these youth are, and what characterizes them is necessary to be able to better tailor alternative education to their needs. Therefore, this scoping literature review investigates different characteristics of youth who attend alternative education. It provides information on demographic characteristics, physical and mental health, social functioning, school trajectories and academic skills in youth attending alternative education. The results show that there is not one distinguishing feature for youth in alternative education, but that many of these youth encounter challenges on many domains. Implications of the findings for prevention of school disengagement, alternative education provision and research are discussed.

Keywords: alternative education; school disengagement; school dropout; adolescent; characteristics

1. Introduction

Children and youth might disengage from school for a vast array of reasons, including school-related, financial, social and/or personal reasons. This might result in youth irregularly attending school, having certain periods of non-attendance, or completely quitting education, in other words dropping out of school. School disengagement is an important challenge for education systems all over the world (Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2016; European Commission, 2012; McFarland, Cui, Holmes, & Wang, 2019; Nevala et al., 2011), because youth who drop out of school are at heightened risk of unemployment, social exclusion, poor health, poverty (McFarland et al., 2019; Nevala et al., 2011) and involvement in crime (Nevala et al., 2011).

One of the answers to the challenge of school disengagement and dropout are alternative

education settings. It is difficult to give an encompassing definition of alternative education because of the great variety between alternative education options (Aron, 2006; Aron & Zweig, 2003; Te Riele, 2007; Thomson, 2014), but they might be defined as:

> "schools or programs that are set up by states, school districts, or other entities to serve young people who are not succeeding in a traditional public school environment. Alternative education programs offer students who are failing academically or may have learning disabilities, behavioural problems, or poor attendance an opportunity to achieve in a different setting and use different and innovative learning methods. While there are many different kinds of alternative schools and programs, they are often characterized by their flexible schedules, smaller teacher-student ratios, and modified curricula. (Aron, 2006, p. 6)".

The "other entities" described by Aron might be individual schools, non-profit organisations, (mental) health organisations, juvenile justice agencies (Thomson, 2014), religious organisations (Zhang, 2008) or others. The diversity in organizing entities unsurprisingly leads to a great diversity in focus, purpose and practices. The term alternative education settings however usually does not refer to education settings that solely adhere to non-mainstream pedagogies, such as Montessori schools. The actual common characteristic between alternative education settings thus seems to be the youth they cater to. But whom do they cater to?

Youth attending alternative education settings (YAE) are often summarized under the term 'at risk' (Beken, Williams, Combs, & Slate, 2009; Dunning-Lozano, 2016; Fish, 2017; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011) or 'marginalized' (Harnischfeger, 2018; Robinson & Smyth, 2016). Only a few articles have delved into the question what characterizes YAE (Foley & Pang, 2006; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; McFadden, 2010; Thomson, 2014). These are either survey articles or (sections of) narrative reviews. No broad review looking into the characteristics of YAE has to date been published. Having a clearer view of what

characterizes YAE is necessary to better tailor alternative education to their needs, and help policymakers and professionals working with disengaging youth to make more informed policy decisions.

1.1. Aim of the study

The current study presents a scoping review (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) of the literature describing characteristics of youth in alternative learning environments, published in peer-reviewed journals between 1996 and 2020. The aim of this review is to summarize relevant literature in a way that answers the following research questions: a) what are the characteristics of youth attending alternative learning environments? and b) what are their school histories? Since the field of alternative education is broad, interdisciplinary and heterogeneous in methodology, and the aim of this review is to inform practice and policy, a scoping review seems appropriate (Tricco et al., 2018). Implications for practitioners and researchers are discussed.

2. Methods

2.1 Search strategy and data sources

Four academic databases (ERIC, Science direct, ProQuest Central and Taylor & Francis) were searched to identify relevant articles in peer-reviewed journals, published between 1996 and 2020. Following search words were used: "characteristics", "profile" and "population", each time combined with one of the following: "alternative school", "alternative education", "continuation school", "alternative learning environment". All possible two word combinations were made (e. g. "population" AND "alternative education"), using full text search. When a combination yielded more than 300 hits, the search word pertaining to alternative education was searched for only in the article title, while the other word was still

searched for in the whole article. PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) guideline was followed. The review protocol was not pre-registered online.

2.2. Selection of the studies

Articles were included when they met the following requirements: must concern an alternative learning environment, and must at least do one of the following (a) describe characteristics of YAE; (b) describe the pathways or reasons for referring to or attending alternative education; (c) describe characteristic of families (whose children are) attending alternative education; (d) use YAE as participants in quantitative or qualitative research, and clearly describe their samples' demographics or other characteristics. Only articles published in English are included in this review. All articles written up until 1995 were excluded, as to only review the most recent 25 years of research. Figure 1 gives an overview of the screening and selection process. The search was conducted between February 2019 and November 2020.One hundred articles were included in the review after screening and selection. An overview of all included articles can be found in table 2.
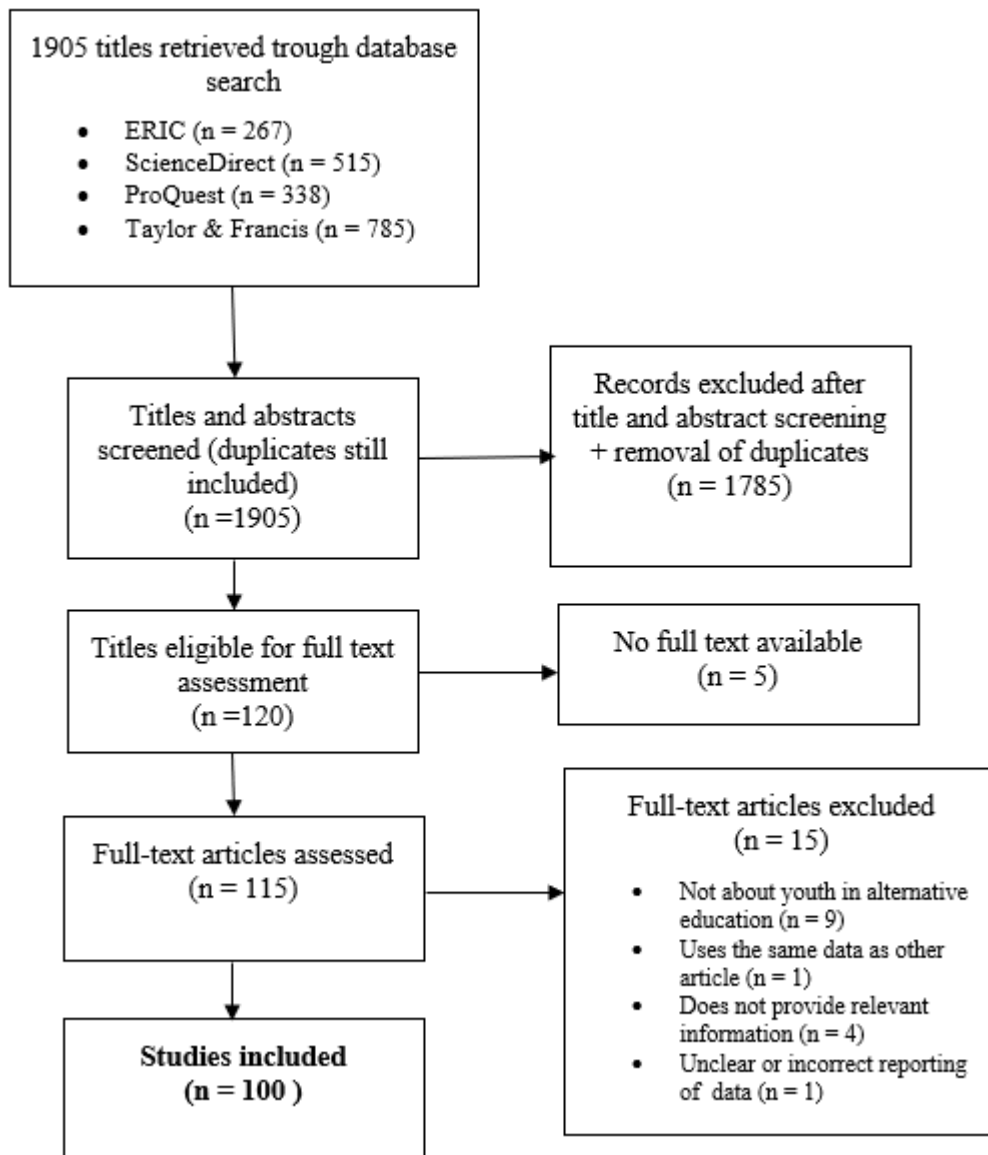
Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of the search and selection strategy

2.3. Data chartingand management

The relevant information was charted from each article after thorough reading by the first

author, and charted information was classified using an Excel-spreadsheet. The stored

information consisted of study characteristics and of the information describing YAE or their

families (e.g. information considering YAEs gender, age, school history, living situation,

reason for attending alternative education, health. In some cases the information relevant

for this synthesis was gathered from the description of the sample in the methodology

section, rather than from the results of the research), in line with inclusion criterion (d),. The choice to include sample descriptions was made to include more information, and under the assumption that authors generally have no incentive to describe their sample in a biased way.

3. Results

3.1 Study Characteristics

This review includes 52 quantitative studies, 30 qualitative studies, 11 mixed studies and 7 review-, meta-analysis or theoretical studies. The studies came from 12 different countries, with most studies coming from the USA (74 studies). Other studies came from Australia (6), Ireland (3), the UK (3), New Zealand (2), Canada (1), Chile (1), Colombia and the USA (1), Finland (1), Honduras (1), Israel (1) and Singapore (1). Five articles were not specific to one place, since they were general reviews (reviewing a total of 36 articles) or theoretical articles. Sample sizes varied between three and 12684 participants. Fifty-one studies had a sample size bigger than 70 and 38 studies had at least 100 participants. The total number of participants in all the reviewed articles adds up to (at least) 75978 students and 160 staff members and principals. It is however difficult to give an exact number, as some students might have participated in multiple studies, and some studies only reported the number of participating alternative education settings, and not the exact number of students in these settings.

3.2 Global results

a) What are the characteristics of youth attending alternative education?
In the following section we summarize the charted information which describes YAE and their families. Kranzler, Floyd, Bray, and Demaray (2020) have suggested a biopsychosocial

ecological model for use in school psychology research, which we will use to structure our findings.

Kranzler et al. (2020) built their model around the *individual* or *self*, which they describe as "all the biological processes, psychological constructs, and physical features associated with each individual" (Kranzler et al., 2020, p. 421). This review discusses the following aspects of the individual: sex assigned at birth, age, physical health and emotions. The individual lives " in an immediate environment that is shaped by their actions and that in turn shapes both who they are and their patterns of behaviors" (Kranzler et al., 2020, p. 421). Most characteristics identified in this review are contexts, events or outcomes situated in these interactions, on the micro level and/or meso level. Concretely, this review discusses family (family composition, family bond and family problems), friendships, ethnicity, financial situation, mental health, self-esteem, academic achievement, language and traumatic experiences of YAE.

Individual or self

Sex assigned at birth – Alternative education settings generally have more boys than girls. Fifty-seven out of 75 samples included in this review have more than 50% boys; (described in 63 studies[1]). We found percentages of 36% up to 90% male students, in settings that are not exclusively intended for boys (n = 1; 79) or girls (n = 4; 2, 10, 64, 99).

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[1] 1, 3, 5, 7-9, 11-18, 21-25, 27, 29-35, 41, 45, 47, 49-55, 58, 62, 63, 66, 67, 69-72, 74-76, 78, 81, 82, 86, 87, 90, 92-98, 100

Age – The mean ages in described samples ranged from 13.0 to 19.9 years[2]. The respectively lowest and highest reported ages were 6 and 26, but most YAE in our review were between 10 and 21 years old[3]. This might however mostly reflect the fact that most alternative education settings are broadly aimed at high school age youth (31).

Physical health – The current review scarcely finds any evidence of physical health problems among YAE. Only one article mentions physical health problems among other obstacles YAE encounter (54). Health also does not seem to be a significant stressor for YAE (58). However, many articles report high(er) drug use among YAE (9, 14, 21, 39, 41, 47, 67, 69, 70) as well as sexual risk taking behavior (21,39, 67, 87).

Emotion and coping – We only found four studies reporting on emotion regulation and coping. These suggest that YAE use less positive, and more avoidant coping strategies (58, 91), and might have difficulty regulating negative emotions, such as anger (25, 95). One study suggests that there might be differences in the methods male and female YAE use for coping, with males reporting less support seeking as well as avoidant coping strategies (51).

Microsystem and Mesosystem

Ethnicity – Many YAE are part of an ethnic minority in the country they live in. Forty-three out of 66 sample descriptions included in this review (reported in 58 articles) reported over

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[2] 2, 5, 9, 11, 14, 16, 17, 21, 25, 28, 30, 34-36, 39, 43, 45-47, 51, 53, 54, 56, 57, 63, 67, 69, 71, 77, 81, 82, 86, 90, 96, 97, 98

[3] 3, 5, 11, 13-15, 18-23, 25-27, 29 30, 34, 39, 42, 45 46, 51, 52, 54-56, 58, 59, 62, 63, 66, 67, 69, 70, 71, 74, 75, 77, 80-82, 84, 85, 87, 88, 92, 96, 99

50% minority youth (range 0% - 100%; n = 58[4]). Many studies report that the minority-majority ratio of YAE samples does not mirror the distribution of the surrounding schools or community (1, 23, 34, 49, 56, 68, 79, 83, 93, 97), while in only one study this general ratio is in line with the region (98). Guerin and Denti (1999) claim that the proportion of minority students increases with the level of restriction: continuation schools and shelters most closely reflect the community, while more punitive alternative education settings have stronger overrepresentation of minority youth (37). Recent studies corroborate that some characteristics, such as being part of certain ethnic minorities, are more prevalent in certain types of alternative education (68, 93). Only a few studies performed outside the USA did report on ethnicity (3, 21, 22, 27, 63, 82, 99), yielding insufficient material to draw more specific conclusions.

Family composition – Some articles in this review suggests that many YAE come from single-parent homes (57, 78). While youth from single-parent homes outnumbered those who came from two-parent homes in five alternative education samples (2, 14, 26, 27, 79), in four study samples it was the opposite way around (18, 30, 39, 54). However, even when in a YAE sample the majority of YAE might come from two-parent homes, YAE might still be more likely to come from single-parent homes than their peers in traditional education, as was the casa in a study from the UK (39). A small portion of YAE do not live with their parents, but live with grandparents (2,14, 27, 40), other relatives (26, 27), foster care (39) or in residential care (39, 62). Only one non-USA study reported on family composition. In this Chilean study half of the students came from single-parent homes, one third lived in a two-parent home, and a fraction of students lived with other relatives than

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[4] 1, 3, 7-15, 17, 18, 20, 23-26, 28, 30-36, 38, 41, 42, 46-50, 54-56, 58, 63, 64, 67, 69-72, 74, 78-83, 86, 87, 90, 93, 96, 98

their parents (27). Only a few articles give additional detail when mentioning single parent homes. For example, scarcely any articles report on possible stepparents, parental death, and/or parental incarceration, with a few exceptions (26, 40, 56, 86). However, in their sample of 515 YAE in the US, Thurman and colleagues (2018) found that 49% had at one point had a parent in prison (86). Some YAE might also be parents themselves, or might be pregnant, as this is a frequently mentioned reason to attend alternative education (10, 19, 20, 21, 22, 26, 31, 79, 87, 89).

Family bond – Our search yield slightly mixed results concerning the relationship YAE have with their parents. YAE seem less likely than other youth to describe their parents as supportive (19, 21, 37, 91). Denny, Clark, et al. (2004) and Wiest et al. (2001) also suggest YAE feel less connected to their parents, and that they consider their parents as less involved in their lives (21, 91). On the other hand, a study in the UK by Henderson and colleagues found no difference in the level of connection YAE and their traditional education peers feel towards their parents (39). Another study reported that the vast majority of YAE thinks that at least one of their parents cares about them (22). Either way, YAE report not getting as much family time as they would like (39), especially boys (21). No studies specifically report on the relationship between YAE and their siblings.

Family problems – Several authors from different countries (USA, Australia and Ireland) report that YAE often come from complex or multi-problem families (12, 13, 52, 75). In a USA YEA sample Sullivan et al. (2011) found that almost one in two students report having moderate to serious family problems (81) Carpenter-Aeby, Aeby and Boyd identified six characteristics commonly found in families of students entering alternative education. They describe these families as being tired, isolated, in crisis, resistant to change, distrusting of the system, and having unrealistic expectations (12). YAE might encounter stigma

concerning their families (29).

Financial situation – Alternative learning environments have a high number economically disadvantaged students (range 19% - 100%, n = 23[5]). Seventy-seven percent of the articles in our review reports at least 50% financially disadvantaged youth. This is most often operationalized as the number of students eligible for free or reduced lunch options at school. One study reports that pupils in alternative learning environments are less likely to report basic household resources like a working car (21), and one study reports that they are more likely to have unemployed mothers than their peers, but not more likely to have unemployed fathers (39).

Friendships – YAE do seem to be confident in their ability to befriend peers, based on the only two articles discussing the subject in this review. In a New Zealand sample over 90% of YAE find themselves competent at making friends (22). Wiest and colleges studied a US sample, and found no difference in self-perceived ability to make and keep friends between YAE and youth in mainstream education (91).

Self-esteem – Our search yielded only a few articles mentioning self-esteem in YAE. One of these was a brief narrative review mentioning that YAE suffer from low self-esteem (37). However, other sources in this review do not seem corroborate this. For example, Wiest et al. (2001) found that youth attending a continuation school in California did not differ from their peers in traditional education in self-esteem (91). Also in the US, one study reported on a juvenile justice alternative education sample where only 2% had severe self-esteem issues, and 16% moderate self-esteem issues (81). Some qualitative research suggests that many YAE have positive self-esteem (17), but that they perceive themselves as

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[5] 1, 14, 21, 22, 26, 27, 32, 34, 41, 46, 47, 49, 50, 55, 56, 64, 72, 73, 78, 79, 80, 89, 93

"different" from their peers (38). We should keep in mind that being or having been in an alternative education setting for some time might already have had a positive influence on their self-esteem (62).

Mental health – Several articles mention significant mental health problems among YAE. This is especially the case for depressive symptoms (12, 21, 22, 38, 51, 81, 86). Between 14% and 36% of YAE seem at risk of depression, and between 5% and 33% have clinical depression scores, strongly suggesting a depression (21, 22, 81). Worrying results from New Zealand found that 21% of the boys and 38% of the girls attending alternative education had attempted suicide in the past year (21,22). The proportion of youth reporting a recent serious suicide attempt was three to nine times higher in the alternative provision group compared to the regular high school group (21, 22). Anxiety might be less typical in YAE, because youth with school-related anxieties are often treated in mental health settings (94).

Trauma – A significant number of YAE have suffered traumatic events such as abuse or (familial) violence. Self-reported sexual abuse among YAE varies between 17% and 52% (21, 22, 82). Only two articles report on physical abuse. In one study 3% of YAE was suspected by staff to be victim of physical abuse (11). This is stark contrast with a New Zealand self-report study where physical abuse was self-reported by 52% of YAE (21). Johnson et al. (2014) also found that one in two YAE report having had one or more of the following adverse childhood experiences: physical abuse, sexual abuse, familial substance abuse, and witnessing domestic violence (46). This is also reflected in qualitative reports of YEA (56).

Academic achievement – 'Academic failure' is a frequently mentioned reason for referral to an alternative education setting in the USA and Canada (4, 20, 43, 62, 71, 87, 88, 91). It

is usually not further specified what 'academic failure' exactly encompasses. We assume this might refer to different things amongst which failing grades or having an academic level below age or grade expectations. Two studies in this review respectively suggest that YAE have lower reading levels than their peers in regular schools (1), and lower math and language levels than peers with the same risk factors in mainstream education (6). One Irish study however gives us the idea that not necessarily all students in alternative education provision have academic trouble, as they report that only 32% of the students struggle with literacy and numeracy (52). Surprisingly, YAE report getting mostly B's[6], C's or higher (26, 71, 87, 90). The only study in this review investigating academic self-esteem in YAE, found a non-significant difference compared to peers attending traditional education (91).

Language – This review would suggest that most alternative education students in the USA are proficient in English. Three studies report that 70 up to 100% (55, 72, 80) of the YAE in the USA fluently speak English. Two other studies report that English is also the language mostly or only spoken at home, for about 65% of YAE in the USA (17, 30). One study however reports that some YAE might have qualitative language difficulties such as difficulties with structural language, social communication or generating narratives (45). Unfortunately, no non-US studies reported on language.

b) What are the school histories of YAE before attending alternative education?

Our second research question concerns the school histories of YAE. This review finds that most youth have had discontinuous school careers before attending alternative education. The available evidence suggests a high incidence of suspension, expulsion, grade failure and

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[6] B is equivalent to a score of 80% to 89%.

school dropout among the alternative education population. For instance, Ruebel, Ruebel, and O'Laughlin (2001) found that slightly more than one in four students has dropped out of school before attending the alternative education setting (77). One case study describes that several Australian YAE have been without education for at least six months or more (63) .

Other studies report that at least one in two alternative education students have ever failed a grade or been retained (range 48% - 89%; 14, 27), with one Chilean study reporting that 10% YAE in their population had repeated a grade at least four times (27). In line with these cross-sectional findings, a longitudinal cohort study found that students who have failed at least one grade in traditional education are at 4.5 higher odds of ever attending alternative education (88). On the other hand alternative learning environments might also have students who have skipped one or more grades (56). This seems to be in line with Howell and colleges who report that in alternative credit programs most youth are average or remedial students, but there is a smaller group of gifted students as well (43).

Several studies report that the vast majority of YAE have been suspended one or more times in their life, and expelled at least once (1, 14, 17, 90). One of these same studies however reports that the mean number of suspensions for YAE is not significantly higher than for matched youth in general education (1). Vanderhaar et al. (2014) gives further illustration of the complex trajectories these youth have had before attending an alternative education setting. They report that 11% of the students in disciplinary alternative high schools had previously attended an alternative elementary school, and half of them had at one point attended school in a psychiatric setting (88).

Table 1: key findings of this review

Biological characteristics
- A prototypical alternative education student might be a teenage boy [1, 7, 9, 11-15, 18, 21, 24, 25, 29, 31, 32, 41, 49, 54, 55, 58, 62, 63, 67, 70, 71, 78, 81, 86, 87, 90, 92, 94-97, 98, 100]
- Many YAE are part of an ethnic minority [1, 3, 7-15, 17, 18, 20, 23-26, 28, 30-36, 38, 41, 42, 46-50, 54-56, 58, 63, 64, 67, 69-72, 74, 78-83, 86, 87, 90, 93, 96, 98]
- YAE would likely be engaged in risky health related behaviors such as drug use [9, 13, 14, 21, 39, 41, 47, 53, 67, 69, 70] and sexual risk-taking behavior [21, 39, 67, 69, 70, 87]
- Being pregnant or parenting is frequently mentioned as a reason for referral to alternative education [10, 19, 20, 21, 22, 26, 31, 79, 87, 89]
- We find little evidence of physical health problems in the YEA population [58]

Psychological characteristics
- Many YAE experience mental health problems, especially depression [12, 21, 22, 51, 53, 81, 86]
- Students in alternative education are more likely than their peers in traditional education to have attempted suicide [21, 22]
- YAE might turn to less positive coping methods to deal with their problems [58, 91]
- Students attending alternative education might have experienced physical, sexual or other forms of abuse [12, 22, 46, 81, 82]
- YEA might have difficulty controlling anger [95] and forgiving [25]
- Results concerning YAE's self-esteem are mixed [12, 37, 91]

Social characteristics
- Many YAE come from single parent homes [2, 14, 26, 27, 29, 30, 39, 78; 79]. A small portion of YAE live with grandparents [14, 26, 27, 40,] other relatives [26, 27] or in a group home [39, 62].
- Often YAE come from families with financial difficulties [1, 14, 21, 22, 26, 27, 32, 34, 41, 46, 47, 49, 50, 55, 56, 64, 72, 73, 78-80, 89, 93]
- Results concerning the affective bond and support between YAE and their parents are mixed [19, 21, 22, 37, 39, 81, 91]
- YAE report they do not get as much family time as they would like [21, 39]
- YAE seem confident in their ability to make friends [22, 91]
- YAE are generally proficient in the official language [55, 72, 80.] They might however have difficulties with structural language, social communication or generating narratives [45]
- Little is known about siblings of YAE

Academic characteristics
- Academic failure is frequently mentioned as a reason for referral to alternative education [4, 12, 16, 17, 19, 20, 26, 31, 38, 56, 62, 71, 87, 89, 91, 99]
- YAEs academic performances are generally lower than academic performances of their peers in traditional education [1, 6]
- Not all students in alternative education have academic difficulties [52]
- A small portion of students in alternative credit program students are gifted students [43]

School history
- YAE are likely to have encountered one or more disruptions to their school history such as suspension [1, 14, 17, 34, 88, 90], expulsion [13, 14, 34, 90], failing a grade [14, 27, 48, 56, 88], skipping a grade [56] or dropping out [3, 29, 77]
- YAE might have previously attended an alternative elementary school or a psychiatric hospital school [88]

4. Discussion

This review suggests that there is not one specific characteristic in which YAE might differ from their peers. Rather, we found that YAE might encounter difficulties with many of the different facets of their lives. It is important to keep in mind that many of the facets reviewed are not independent of each other. It is for example known that single-parent families face a higher risk of poverty than families with two parents living together (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015). As we expect that many YAE face challenges with regards to numerous aspects − possibly every aspect − described in this review, the needs of these youth are complex and multi-faceted. We also found some suggestions of potential strengths in YAE.

In the next section we discuss what some of the results from this review mean for (a) prevention of school disengagement (b) practitioners working with YAE and (c) future research.

Implications for prevention and screening

Considerable research has already been done to identify possible predictors of school disengagement and school drop-out (De Witte & Rogge, 2013; Dupéré et al., 2015; Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997; Ogresta, Rezo, Kožljan, Paré, & Ajduković, 2020; Robison, Jaggers, Rhodes, Blackmon, & Church, 2017). Research investigating predictors and risk factors for attending an alternative education setting is however more scarce. The available evidence does not always point in the same direction, but agrees that alternative school placement is strongly predicted by the number of school changes, especially later in school life (Vanderhaar et al., 2014; Worrell, 1997). School instability might be an important measure for screening youth at risk, because it is an aggregate of three prevalent characteristics in YAE; suspensions and expulsions, financial difficulties and familial

difficulties. Frequent school changers might be students who are expelledfrom one school, and are thus obliged to change school, but might also be youth in unstable living arrangements, as moving house often entails moving school. Moving might be due to inability to pay the rent (Hernandez, 2017), or changes in family situation (such as parental divorce or death), foster placement, placement in a group home or other reasons. About 40% of YAE in New Zealand had moved at least two times in the previous year, while in the general youth population this was 15% (Denny, Clark, et al., 2004; Denny, Fleming, et al., 2004). Teachers, counselors and administrators in mainstream schools should therefore pay particular attention to students who have changed schools frequently, as they are likely to have academic, social, psychological of financial vulnerability, and be at risk for school disengagement.

Implications for practitioners working with YAE

This review shows that YAE might differ from their typical peers in mainstream education. Those working with these youth should always attempt to consider every facet of these young people, even when one aspect might be more salient. It is understandable that some people might be most alarmed by school-related deficits, while for others disruptive behavior might be the number one priority. This review, however, reminds us that every aspect of these youth is a priority. We do not do right by these young people by only trying to bring about change in one domain.

We learn that it is important that the learning options are flexible and individualized, because YAE might represent the whole spectrum of giftedness. Qualitative research indicates that some adolescents feel they do not learn enough while attending an alternative education setting (Souza, 1999), and some scholars raise concerns about to the evolution of academic skills while attending disciplinary alternative education (Kennedy-Lewis et al.,

2016; Randle, 2016). Academic success does however not take place in a vacuum. This beautifully is illustrated by the finding that academic difficulties are found to be directly influenced by delay of gratification, and indirectly by drug use and violence (Herndon, 2011; Randle, 2016) in the alternative education population. For this reason, we urge those working with youth at risk to help these young people cope with all challenges in their life, not only the academic ones. The evidence in this review suggest that YAE might lack positive coping and emotion regulation skills. Coping and emotion regulation however are essential to them, especially those who encounter difficult life events.

This review also clearly highlights the importance of being attentive to trauma, mental health and suicide, when working with alternative education students. Practitioners should not be afraid to speak about these subjects. All alternative education students should have access to mental health care professionals, either in the alternative education setting, or through collaborations with mental health institutions. Practitioners working with these youth should be especially attentive to internalizing problems (such as anxiety and depressive symptoms) in youth who display disruptive, hyperactive or aggressive behavior, as these eye-catching, and sometimes antagonizing behaviors might cause other problems to be overlooked (Esch et al., 2014).

Further, this review shows how important it is to pay attention to family dynamics. Questions to ask yourself as someone working in an alternative education setting are among the following: (a) "Who is (still) the family of the youth I'm working with?". Knowing this will help to be sensitive with those youth who, for example, live in a group home or whose family situation has recently changed. (b) "Do they feel supported by parents, siblings and other relatives?". The evidence in this review is very mixed on this aspect, and we expect the answers to be very different for each youth. Paying attention to family dynamics does not

automatically imply trying to fix all family problems. In some cases it might lead to helping the youth accept and grief over some family relations that might never be what said youth might hope for. In these cases it is especially important to support youth, and help them identify adults and peers in their network who they can rely on to ease their practical and emotional needs. Lastly this review suggest that the answer to the question (c) "Does this young person gets the family time he or she wants?" will often be negative. Knowing this, occasionally or routinely involving family or significant others is especially valuable, even though it is known to be a challenge for alternative learning settings (Aeby, Thyer, & Carpenter-Aeby, 1999). Context involvement can take on many forms, but some examples are exhibitions or showcases for family and friends, significant others occasionally, or regularly taking up a chore at the setting (e.g. cooking, sharing a skill or interest…). Parents who don't have the possibilities or motivation to invest time in these activities can still be kept in the loop (e.g. by sharing social media content, publishing newspapers or pamphlets that youth can share with their context…).

Lastly, but importantly, we should consider the strengths of these youth. Looking for strengths when working with multi-problem youth, might sometimes seem difficult, but is especially important in these cases. This review hints at some potential strengths for YAE. It seems that many of these youth feel confident in their friendships, and their ability to make friends, for example. If this is the case for the youth you are working with, you should note and reinforce this, and use this in the education you want to bring about. You might for example focus on group works (McBath, 2018) or service learning. Much of this review focusses on challenges or even deficits youth in alternative education encounter. It is, however, possible for each of these facets to be a strength or a protective factor in a youth you are working with. The challenge for those working with YAE is to really get to know the youth they are working with, to understand their challenges, and discover (and create)

individual assets and strengths to deal with these challenges.

Implications for future research

Although further research about the characteristics of alternative education students is necessary to corroborate some of the results of this review, this review identifies some domains that especially need attention in future research. First of all, a few singular results were identified that need further research, namely sexual orientation of YAE (Denny, Clark, et al., 2004), parental incarceration (Thurman et al., 2018) and outcomes after alternative education (Harnischfeger, 2018).

Second, only scarce evidence is available about language-proficiency and home language of YAE, about their friendships, emotion regulation and coping styles. More evidence is needed about these domains, particularly as they might be possible domains of intervention.

Lastly some domains show conflicting evidence, and therefore also require further research. This is the case for alternative education students' self-esteem, for the relationships they have with their parents, and for their school-related skills. Particularly this last domain needs more sophisticated and detailed research than is currently available, as we have reason to believe very different levels of school related skills are present in YAE.

5. Limitations and conclusion

- It is very important to keep the scope of this article in mind. It investigates *youth who attend alternative education*. We can safely say that these youth are not thriving in traditional education and at risk for school disengagement. We should be careful not overgeneralize the findings to high school dropouts, as not all YAE have dropped out of school, nor is it the case that all youth who have dropped out of school attend alternative education. Some of the limitations of this study are that it only includes studies in English, and that it only includes published articles. The number of studies conducted outside of the USA was very limited, which made it difficult to compare

and differentiate between the characteristics of students from different countries and different cultures. This review might therefore apply less to YAE of certain cultures. Further, the quality of the articles was not formally appraised. While this is customary in scoping reviews, it leads to the disadvantage that no statements can be made about the quality or generalizability of the findings in each study. Lastly, articles reporting on the prevalence of a certain characteristic most often did not report the base-rate of the characteristic in the general population, a comparable group, or a control group, which makes interpretation of some of the results less clear. This review reminds us that YAE often encounter difficulties in many domains of their lives. The needs of these youth are thus complex and multi-faceted. It is essential to keep every facet of their lives in mind, to do them justice.

Declaration

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Table 2: Included studies (n = 100)

	Reference	Location	Sample size [a]	Informant [b]	Mean age (range)	Specific population/specific type of alternative	Scope [c]	Extracted data [d]			
								1	2	3	4
1	Afacan en Wikerson (2019)	USA	81	R	-	Behavior-focused, alternative middle schools	B	X	X		X
2	Amin, Ahmed, Browne & Sato (2006)	USA (Maryland)	315	SR	17.3	Alternative(s) for pregnant or parenting teens	A	X		X	F
3	Amitay & Rahav (2018)	Israel	36	SR	(15-18)		A				X
4	Atkins (2008)	USA	-	-	-		C				
5	Atkinson & Rowley (2019)	UK	9	SR	13.4 (10-16)	Youth who have reintegrated in mainstream education after alternative education	B				X
6	Beken, Williams, Combs & Slate (2009)	USA (Texas)	84 AESs	R	-		B				
7	Booker & Mitchell (2011)	USA	269	R		Disciplinary alternative education setting(s)	B	X	X		X
8	Bowmann-Parrot, Greenwood & Tapia (2007)	USA (Missouri)	19	R + O	-		B	X			X
9	Brener & Wilson (2001)	USA + Columbia	8918	SR	16.8		C	X			X
10	Brouwer, Foster & Jalensky (2019)	USA (Wisconsin)	8	SR	-	Pregnant teens in a general alternative setting	A	X			F
11	Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby (2012)	USA	189	SR + R	14.9 (11-18)	Mandatory alternative school(s)	A	X	X		X
12	Carpenter-Aeby, Aeby & Boyd (2007)	USA	599	SR + R + CR	-	Mandatory alternative school(s)	A	X			X
13	Carswell, Hanlon, O'Grady, Watts, & Pothong (2009)	USA	222	SR + CR	(11-19)		A	X			X
14	Carswell, Hanlon, Watts & O'Grady (2014)	USA	109	SR	13.9 (11-16)	Disciplinary alternative education setting(s)	A	X	X	X	X
15	Castleberry & Enger (1998)	USA (Arkansas)	173	SR	(12-18)	Alternative education graduates	B	X			X
16	Cox (1999)	USA	83	SR + R	13		A				X
17	Coyle, Glassman, Franks, Campe, Denner, Lepore (2013)	USA (California)	765	SR	16.2		B	X			X
18	Coyle, Kirby, Robin & Banspach (2006)	USA (California)	988	SR	(14-18+)	Community day school(s)	B	X		X	
19	D'Angelo & Zemanick (2009)	USA (Pennsylvania)	60	R + STR	(14-20)		A				
20	De La Rosa (1998)	USA (Texas)	1 AES	SR + R	(17-21)		A				

21	Denny, Clark & Watson (2004)	New Zealand	266	SR	14.5 (13-15)		B	X	X		X
22	Denny, Fleming, Clark & Wall (2004)	New Zealand	286	SR	(11-17)		B	X	X		X
23	Dunning-Lozano (2016)	USA (California)	18	SR + R	(14-18)	Continuation school(s)	A	O			
24	Edgar-Smith & Palmer (2015)	USA	75	SR + R	16 med		A	X	X		X
25	Edgar-Smith & Palmer (2017)	USA	125	SR	15.6 (13-18)		A	X	X		X
26	Escobar-Chaves, Tortolero, Markham, Baumler (2006)	USA (Texas)	927	SR	(12-20)		B	X	X	X	
27	Espinoza, González, McGinn & Castillo (2020)	Chile	1112	SR	(13-18)		B	X	X	X	X
28	Fallon & Feinberg (2017)	USA	3	R + O	14	Youth with mood disorder in a therapeutic alternative program	A				
29	Fish (2017)	Australia	12 staff members	STR + O	(14-16)		A				X
30	Fleschler, Tortolero, Baumler, Vernon & Weller (2002)	USA (Texas)	354	SR	17 (14-20)		B	X		X	
31	Foley & Pang (2006)	USA (Illinois)	84	STR	-		B				
32	Frank (2019)	USA	180 AESs	R	-		C	X	X		X
33	Franklin, Streeter, Kim & Tripodi (2007)	-	46	R	-		A	X	X		X
34	Free (2014)	USA	77	SR	14 (12-17)		A	X			X
35	Grana, Black, Sun, Rohrbach, Gunning & Sussman (2010)	USA	7058	SR	16.7		C	X			X
36	Grigsby, Forster, Tsai, Rohrbach & Sussman (2018)	USA (California)	1101	SR	16.9		B	X			
37	Guerin & Denti (1999)	-	-	L	-		B				
38	Harnischfeger (2018)	USA (New York)	3	SR	-	Youth who have graduated after attending alternative education	A		X		
39	Henderson, Nixon, McKee, Smith, Wight & Elliott (2019)	UK	219	SR	15.9 (14-17)		B		X	X	
40	Hernandez (2017)	USA (California)	3	SR	-		A				
41	Herndon (2011)	USA (Florida)	391	SR + R			A	X	X		X
42	Hopson & Steiker (2010)	USA	70	SR	(14-19)		B	X			
43	Howell, Laws, Bryant & Williams (2005)	USA	-	STR + R	16.9		C				
44	Jahnukainen & Helander (2007)	Finland	26	SR	-	Settings for youth excluded from vocational schooling	B				
45	James, Munro, Togher, & Cordier (2020)	Australia	27	STR + R	13 (12-16)		B				X

#	Authors	Country	N	Method	Age	Setting	Grade				
46	Johnson, Bearinger, Eisenberg, Fulkerson, Sieving, Lando-King (2014)	USA (Minnesota)	4586	SR	16.9 (11-21)		B	X	X			X
47	Johnson, Sales, Rew, Garing, Crosnoe (2019)	USA (Texas)	515	SR	17.1		B	X	X			X
48	Kennedy, Acosta & Soutullo (2019)	USA	80	SR + STR + O	-		A	X				
49	Kennedy-Lewis, Whitaker & Soutullo (2016)	USA (Florida)		R + STR	-	Disciplinary alternative education setting(s)	A	X	X			X
50	Kubik, Lytle, Fulkerson (2004)	USA (Minnesota)	70	SR	-		A	X	X			X
51	Kuosmanen, Fleming & Barry (2018) a	Ireland	30	SR	16.7 (15-20)		B					X
52	Kuosmanen, Fleming, Barry (2018) b	Ireland	32/ 16 staff members	SR	16.7		B					X
53	Kuosmanen, Fleming, Newell & Barry (2017)	Ireland	146	SR	17.6		B					
54	Lagana-Riordan, Aguilar, Franklin, Streeter, Kim, Tripodi & Hopson (2011)	USA (Texas)	33	R	17.5 (16-18)		A	X	X	X		X
55	Long, Renshaw & Camarota (2018)	USA	73	SR + STR	(10-14)		A	X	X			X
56	Loutzenheiser (2002)	USA (Washington)	9	SR + R	17.3 (15-19)		A	X	X			
57	Marshall, Aguilar, Alas, Castellanos, Castro, Enamorado & Fonseca (2014)	Honduras	5500	SR + R + STR	18.5/14.3/18.1		B					
58	May & Copeland (1998)	USA	132	SR	(15-19)		B	X				X
59	McBath (2018)	USA	10	R	(14-15)		A					
60	McFadden (2010)	-	9 articles	L	-		C					
61	McGregor, Mills, Te Riele en Hayes (2015)	Australia	2 AESs	SR	-		B					
62	McMillan, Stuart & Vincent (2012)	Canada	7	SR	(16-18)		A			X	X	
63	Mills, Renshaw, & Zipin (2013)	Australia	-	STR + R	15.5 (15-16)		A	X				X
64	Modesto (2018)	USA (Texas)	7	SR	-	Alternative(s) for pregnant or parenting teens	A	X	X			F
65	Mullen & Lambie (2013)	-	13 articles	L	-	Disciplinary alternative education setting(s)	C					
66	Novak (2019)	-	14 articles	L	(12-19)	Disciplinary alternative education setting(s)	C	X				X
67	O' Hara, Messick, Fichtner & Parris (1996)	USA (Florida)	83	SR	16.9 (15-20)	Dropout prevention program	A	X				X
68	Perzigian, Afacan, Justin en Wilkserson (2016)	USA	12684	R	-		B		X			X

69	Peters, Tortolero, Addy & Markham (2003)	USA (Texas)	494	SR	16.1 (12-20)		B	X			X
70	Peters, Tortolero, Johnson, Addy, Markham, Escobar-Chaves, Lewis & Yacoubian (2005)	USA (Texas)	963	SR	(12-20)		B				X
71	Poyrazli, Ferrer-Wreder, Meister, Forthun, Coatsworth & Grahame (2008)	USA (Pennsylvania)	102	SR	15.9 (12-19)		A	X			X
72	Randle (2016)	USA (Texas)	893	R	-	Disciplinary alternative education setting(s)	B	X	X		X
73	Rayle (1998)	USA (North Carolina)	15	STR	-		A		X		
74	Ricard, Lerma & Heard (2013)	USA	125	SR	(6-18)	Disciplinary alternative education setting(s)	A	X			
75	Robinson & Smyth (2016)	Australia	24	SR	(11-18)		A				X
76	Rubow, Vollmer & Joslyn (2018)	USA	22	R	-		A				X
77	Ruebel, Ruebel, & O'Laughlin (2001)	USA	79	SR + R	17 (15-26)		B				
78	Slaten, Irby, Tate & Rivera (2015)	USA	15 staff members	STR	-	Therapeutic alternative education setting(s)	A		X		X
79	Souza (1999)	USA	5	R + O	-		A	X	X	X	M
80	Sperling (2019)	USA (California)	10	SR	(16-18)	Continuation school(s)	A	X	X		
81	Sullivan, Moyer & Gonzalez (2011)	USA	172	SR	14.6 (11-17)	Disciplinary alternative education setting(s)	A	X			X
82	Swenson, Houck, Barker, Zeanah & Brown (2012)	USA (New England)	185	SR	15.3 (12-19)	Therapeutic alternative education setting(s)	B	O			X
83	Tajalli & Garba (2014)	USA (Texas)	207 AESs	R	-	Disciplinary alternative education setting(s)	B	X			
84	Thomas & Dyment (2019)	Australia	46	SR + STR	(12-15)		A				
85	Thomson & Pennacchia (2016)	UK	9/?	O	(12-18)		B				F
86	Thurman, Johnson, Gonzalez & Sales (2018)	USA	515	SR	17.1		B	X	X		X
87	Tortolero, Markham, Addy, Baumler, Escobar-Chaves, Basen-Engquist, McKirahan & Parcel (2008)	USA (Texas)	940	SR	16 med. (12-20)		B	X			X
88	Vanderhaar, Munoz & Petrosko (2014)	USA (Kentucky)	7668	R	(11-18)	Disciplinary alternative education setting(s)	B				
89	Wasburn-Moses (2011)	USA	117 principals	SR	-		B		X		
90	Watson, Mouttapa, Reiber & McCuller (2007)	USA (California)	58	SR + R	15.9/15.4	Disciplinary alternative education setting(s)	B	X			X
91	Wiest, Wong, Cervantes, Craik & Kreil (2001)	USA (California)	93	SR	-	Continuation school(s)	A				

								1	2	3	4
92	Wilhite & Bullock (2012)	USA (Texas)	15	R + O	(10-17)		A				X
93	Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian, Courtright, Lange (2018)	USA	14161	R	-		B	X	X		X
94	Wilkins (2008)	USA	4	SR + R	-	School avoidance program in special education school	A				
95	Williams (2002)	USA (New York)	43/41	SR	-	Setting for weapon carriers	A				X
96	Wisner & Starzec (2016)	USA	24	SR	15.9 (15-17)		A	X			X
97	Worrell & Hale (2001)	USA (California)	92	SR + R	18.1/18.3		A	X			X
98	Worrell (1997)	USA (California)	82	SR	18		A	X			X
99	Zhang (2008)	Singapore	50	STR	(12-19)	Disciplinary alternative education setting(s)	A	X			F
100	Zolkoski, Bullock & Gable (2016)	USA	11	SR	-	Alternative education graduates	C				X

[a] Youth attending alternative education, unless otherwise stated; AESs = Alternative Education Settings
[b] SR = self-report; STR = staff report; CR = caregiver report; R = records; O = observation by researcher; L = literature
[c] A = 1 alternative education setting; B = several alternative education settings in one state or country; C = alternative education settings in more than one state or country
[d] 1 = ethnicity; 2 = SES; 3 = family composition; 4 = sex assigned at birth; X = included; O = not included, due to unclear reporting; F = setting only for girls; M = setting only for boys

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