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The Essence of Alternative Education: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of At-Risk Secondary Alternative School Students

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The Essence of Alternative Education: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of At-Risk Secondary Alternative School Students

by

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Reginald Means, Sr., I know love is an action word. You have shown your love for me throughout this process. It takes a strong man to stand in the gap and to keep the family stable as I spent countless hours in the library and at the research site writing and gathering data respectively. Honey, I love you. Thank you for loving me! This is OUR degree! To my children, Derrick, Maurice, and Kayla, I thank you for giving me space to work. You are a pleasure to be around, and you keep amazing me. You are destined for greatness. God has not given you the spirit of fear—don't forget!

To my parents, Hilliard Glenn and Louise Redmond Glenn, and to my parents Arthur Means, Sr. and Mamie Means, you have all taught me so much about myself. You encouraged me to never quit and to follow through until the end. I love you. I could never have gotten here without leaning on you—you are my rocks. To my brothers, Erik and Michael and my other brothers, Arthur, Jr., Michael, and RoDerick, and to my nieces, nephews and cousins, go get everything you want out of life! To my best friend, Adrienne Crowley, you know...girl you KNOW!!! I love you all!!!

Finally, I stand on the shoulders of my grandparents, aunts, uncles and others who have paved the way for me before I was ever born. I am who I am because of those who made it though the middle passage, decades of degradation, and years of humiliation so that I could take advantage of this awesome opportunity. They saw me before I saw myself.

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To the Superintendents whose students are served at my research site, I would like to thank you for giving me permission to work with the participants. I would like to acknowledge the director of my research site for opening his doors to me and trusting me with his students, faculty and staff. Finally, I would like to thank *Dock*, *Jass*, *Herb*, and *Kaye* for their commitment to me during this process. Without their input, my study would have been a bust. They took the time to share their experiences that will hopefully lead to more productive educational opportunities and better educational outcomes for the students who find themselves placed in alternative schools for “at-risk” students.

I am forever appreciative to you all!

ABSTRACT

What do the lived experiences of at-risk high school students reveal about the essence of alternative education? This phenomenological study sought to reflectively examine the experiences of at-risk students who are being educated in a large, Type II, alternative school in South Carolina. The research participants are high school students--grades 9-12--who have spent at least one year in a traditional high school setting and at least one year in the County Alternative Program (CAP). The literature review highlighted the historical role of high schools in the United States, the role of high schools, high school redesign and the evolving role of alternative schools serving at-risk students. The review of literature also identified effective alternative school programs. The literature review helped the reader to understand the current state of affairs related to alternative education and how such affairs are connected to the socially constructed themes participants revealed in the study. The researcher used qualitative methodology such as individual interviews and focus group interviews to organize participant data into thematic statements that reveal the essence of alternative education. This study, based on student perspectives, is not meant to be a prescriptive fix for the ills associated with alternative education. It is meant to open streams of dialogue about alternative education. Through increased dialogue, those in educational leadership may be led to consider student experiences in addition to student behavior and academic performance as they make decisions about alternative education programs.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

After more than twenty years as an educator, I am continuously awed, and sometimes overwhelmed by the expectations placed on public school systems to meet the educational, social and emotional needs of all students. These high expectations, when coupled with rapid technological advances, high stakes testing, value-added accountability, and the anticipation that every student will graduate high school college and career ready, leaves me and other educators struggling to keep up with the demands. Yet, there are countless unknowns for us educators in this age of educational transformation, and just as many unknowns for our students. Some students will adjust to the changes and move along with few hitches, many will struggle, and others will simply quit. As an educator serving in an alternative school, I wonder how many policymakers, administrators, and classroom teachers have given serious consideration to what will happen to those students who have not been able to thrive in a traditional school setting? How will the educational system adjust to reach those students who are the most vulnerable when it comes to high school completion? With these questions in mind, I designed this phenomenological study to investigate the experiences of a group of high school students who are educated in a large alternative school in the Southeastern region of the United States. I used qualitative methodology to highlight the phenomenon of alternative education geared toward meeting the needs of at-risk high school students. I am hopeful that the findings of this research will generate new knowledge in the field of

alternative school education and inform the practices of educators and policymakers who seek to positively impact students who are at risk of failing or not completing high school.

I begin this first chapter with an overview of the study's context, the problem statement, and the purpose statement for the proposed study. The remainder of the chapter focuses on my research question, my research approach, my research perspectives, and my research assumptions. I conclude the chapter with the rationale and significance of my study as well as definitions of key terminology.

Overview of Context

The recent decline in the US economy accompanied by rapid technological advances in a shrinking global society has drawn attention to how education is conducted throughout the nation; many fear that the United States is quickly losing its edge as a world superpower due to the citizens' lack of educational preparation. This lack of preparation leads to all sorts of problems. Educational attainment is directly related to the amount of money one can expect to make throughout his or her lifetime. The US Census Bureau's *Annual Social and Economic Supplement* (ASEC) of 2007 reports as the educational attainment of individuals increase, the total household earnings do the same. If a person fails to obtain a high school credential or its equivalent, his or her chances of success decline exponentially. As personal wealth declines, a decline in the collective wealth of the nation naturally follows. Today's educational leaders must consider how to effectively and efficiently analyze the needs of all students in order to prepare them and

our nation for survival in the tough and competitive global society of the 21st century and beyond.

Although there have been several educational changes, nothing has changed the educational landscape of the 21st century more than the latest version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)--which federal lawmakers approved in 2001. Commonly known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), it has been the catalyst for wide-sweeping changes in secondary education. One of the initial provisions of this law required high schools to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) by moving 100 percent of the nation's students to complete academic proficiency in language arts, science and mathematics by 2014.

The Obama administration argued design flaws of NCLB in its *Blueprint for Reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (2010)*. Realizing the goal of 100 percent proficiency for all students was highly improbable, many state leaders petitioned the federal government for an ESEA Waiver. The intent of an ESEA waiver is to allow schools the flexibility to be innovative in their approaches to education. As part of the waiver agreement, educational leaders on all levels are required to closely monitor disadvantaged students' progress towards graduation (Balfanz et al, 2013, p. 7).

Educators in South Carolina, like others in the nation, are attempting to reform education within the bounds established by its ESEA waiver. The SC Statehouse website, www.scstatehouse.gov outlines the requirements of SC Act 200 which was passed May 20, 2014. This law requires the establishment of an assessment system that ensures students' readiness to move from one grade level to the next. The new assessment

system must also provide a clear indication that students are prepared for postsecondary success in colleges and future workplaces.

Problem Statement

NCLB's focus on the educational achievement of all students has fine-tuned national attention to the needs of those students most at-risk of not completing high school. Those who fail to complete high school with a diploma are considered dropouts. In March 2010, President Obama warned the citizens that the dropout problem is "a problem we cannot afford to accept and we cannot afford to ignore."

The South Carolina Longitudinal Information Center for Education (SLICE) has a statewide system for gathering education-related data and reporting that data via its website. SLICE reports between the years of 2008 and 2013, the SC on-time graduation rate had improved from 74.9% to 77.5%. However, there still remained a 2.5% state dropout rate with 5,232 students leaving school prior to graduation or prior to completion of the coursework required to graduate high school.

Past studies have shown a number of reasons for dropout rates (e.g. Shannon & Bylsma, 2003); other studies have focused on effective ways to help students recover prior to their dropping out of school. In their study of high school dropouts, Balfanz et al (2010) listed the reasons dropouts reported leaving the traditional school system:

- Boredom;
- Disconnection;
- Lack of challenge;
- Need for employment; and

- Family issues

Recovery of these high school dropouts is important to the social and economic well being of the United States and the state of South Carolina.

Educators, policy makers and philanthropists have given great thought to the development of alternative education programs in their efforts to thwart this large number of dropouts. Many states have established these programs as possible solutions to educating at-risk youth who are not faring well in traditional school settings. The US Department of Education published the first national study of public alternative schools in 2002. At that time, there were 10,900 alternative schools in the nation that served 612, 900 students. In spite of the large number of students being served in alternative schools, the NCES reports “Few existing national-level measures have focused on public alternative education for students at risk of education failure” (<http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/frss/publications/2002004/index.asp?sectionid=6>).

There are still no well-delineated, systemic plans to address the needs of students who are unsuccessful in a traditional high school setting. This is an educational leadership problem. More students are entering alternative school settings, but we do not understand what this means for them. As I mentioned earlier, educators are mandated to serve all students so that they graduate high school prepared for colleges and careers. This mandate does not exempt students being served in alternative school programs. Very few studies have taken the initiative to ask at-risk students about their experiences. Through my study, I sought to interject into the body of knowledge the voices of at-risk students as well as information about the phenomenon of alternative education.

Purpose Statement

I designed this phenomenological study to uncover the essence of alternative education through the lived experiences of at-risk high school students currently being served in an alternative school setting. For the purposes of this study, an alternative school is defined as one that is separate from a traditional school. It is established to help marginalized high school students meet graduation requirements or transition back into a traditional school setting.

Research Question

When compared to other areas of education, alternative schools and how students interpret their experiences in them have received little attention. Many scholars seem highly interested and motivated when it comes to researching the top academic performers; however, those students in the bottom quartile of academic performance are often pushed into the academic background to be seen—but seldom heard. My study sought to uncover the essence of an alternative school education through qualitative data collected from the research participants. My question is: What does an examination of the lived experiences of at-risk high school students reveal about the phenomenon of alternative school education?

Research Approach

I investigated the phenomenon of alternative education using qualitative research methodology. My research participants were high school students--grades 9-12--who have spent at least one year in a traditional high school setting and at least one year in the County Alternative Program (CAP). The students were between the ages of 15 and 17. I

selected these criteria because students within this age range are considered adolescents who are in Piaget's formal operational stage of development. In this time of their lives, the participants should be able to think logically about abstract concepts and offer conjectures about the impact an alternative school education will have on their futures (Atherton, 2013). It is my desire to promote deep reflection, which will help participants develop their personal identities and increase their self-awareness.

County Alternative Program (pseudonym) is located in the state of South Carolina. It serves hundreds of at-risk students in grades 6-12. According to the CAP website, the school offers the following to students:

- access to middle school and high school coursework, which will give them an opportunity to regain lost academic ground;
- an opportunity to recover credits toward a high school diploma;
- character education and service learning opportunities;
- a safe learning environment that pushes students to grow academically, socially, emotionally, and physically;
- teachers who use a variety of creative instructional strategies to promote real-world connections and authentic learning opportunities;
- faculty and staff who believe all students are valuable, and they need extra guidance to identify their positive attributes;
- a judgment-free environment to promote the student confidence; and
- the ultimate goal of successfully transitioning the students back into their home schools, into adult education or into the workforce.

Researcher's Expertise

I have been a professional educator for more than twenty years. I obtained National Board Certification in AYA-ELA and I am certified to teach Advanced Placement Literature, Language and Composition. I was a classroom teacher for thirteen years, and I have spent a total of nine years in secondary educational administration. I am an Education Specialist, and I am certified to be a k-12 Superintendent. My expertise brought to this study practical knowledge and first-hand experiences working with at-risk students.

For the past three years, I have served as the Director of an alternative school program in another part of South Carolina. In my daily work with alternative school students, I wonder what their experiences at my school really mean to them. Are they receiving the type of quality education I believe my program is offering? Does the absence of misbehavior necessarily mean the presence of high-level educational attainment for my students? Is the instructional program at my school comparable to the traditional schools when it comes to preparing our students for colleges and careers? I have often been told that my work with at-risk students is a waste of time; that their fate is sealed. However, it would be a travesty if educators of at-risk students fail to learn as much as possible about such students and what is required to lead these most vulnerable students toward more successful educational outcomes.

While my expertise provides valuable insight, as I conducted my study, I kept in mind that this same expertise had the potential to lead to bias regarding research design

and research interpretation. I made a conscious effort to recognize and discuss any biases that arose as I conducted this study.

Researcher's Assumptions

As I began my study, I considered these assumptions:

- There would be enough willing participants to conduct the study. This assumption was based on my work with students who have been in an alternative school setting for multiple years.
- Because the participants have been in an alternative high school setting for multiple years, they would have the maturity level needed to participate in interviews and to create artifacts based on their educational experiences.
- The participants had the maturity level to relay the affective impact of their experiences via artifact production. This assumption was based on my prior experience as a classroom teacher.
- I would be given access to the participants as well as permission to conduct the research on the CAP campus. This was based on my administrative experiences.
- It would take more than one session to gain the trust of the participants. This assumption was based on my past work with alternative school students.

Rationale and Significance

Dropping out of high school has a negative impact and long-reaching consequences for those individuals who have dropped out. Their failure to earn a high school credential also negatively impacts their state, local and national communities. Dropouts earn less money, contribute less money, and cost more money in terms of

health care, criminal justice and public assistance. “Without the right skills, dropouts face limited job prospects, less earning potential, and a lower quality of life” (EEDCCASC 2006, p.iii). The federal and state governments have invested a tremendous amount of resources in an effort to reengage students and to prevent them from dropping out of school. In 2010, President Obama announced that the federal government would invest \$900 million dollars to improve the nation’s graduation rates (Almeida, Steinberg, Santos, &Le, 2010).

While the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) mandated that school districts graduate more students, some students undoubtedly fell through the cracks. In response to the call to increase the number of high school graduates, there has been a surge in the number of alternative school programs that serve at-risk students. The rapid rise in alternative school programs has led to an increased need to understand more about this phenomenon. Giroux (2004) cautions educators and students to become more reflective about how knowledge is produced, how knowledge is received and how knowledge is consumed. Such reflection is as important in alternative school settings as it is in traditional school settings. Again, there has been very little reflection in the area of alternative education.

This phenomenological study sought to reflectively examine the experiences of students served in alternative school settings. Past studies of alternative education focused on program and student characteristics, but not the experiences of the students from their perspectives; DuCloux (2009) posits, “...we haven’t taken the time to ask them what would help them be successful” (p.9). Hopefully, the design of my study will lead to results that can be used to better prepare students for college and careers, open

streams of dialogue concerning alternative school programs in South Carolina, specifically, and alternative education in general. Through increased dialogue, educational leaders and policy makers may be led to consider student experiences in addition to student behavior and academic performance as they make decisions about alternative education. For teachers of at-risk students, my study may also uncover instructional practices students consider valuable to their academic success. This is important because many states are gravitating toward teacher evaluation systems that gauge teacher effectiveness through some assessment of their students' academic growth in a given school year. Finally, I hoped my study would help practitioners and students alike to view alternative education as viable route to future success and not a dead-end road.

Definition of Key Terminology

AYP-Adequate Yearly Progress—a measurement of a school's educational progress which uses standardized test results. It is required by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Alternative Classroom—a self-contained classroom within a traditional school (Hefner-Packer 1991)

Alternative School—a school, separated from a traditional school, established to help marginalized students meet graduation requirements or transition back into a traditional school setting

At-Risk — involving the risk of education failure as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school (NCES)

Bracketing—a researcher’s discussion of personal experience with the phenomenon under study (Creswell 2013)

Continuation school—schools such as street academies or job-training facilities developed for students who have dropped out of traditional school (Hefner-Packer 1991)

Credit Recovery—the opportunity to recover a Carnegie unit; it is designed for students who have previously taken a course and who did not receive credit for that course due to a non-passing grade, excessive absences, etc.

Cyber schools—Schools that only offer online courses.

Dropout—In accordance with the CCD definition, a drop out is a student who leaves school prior to completion of the program of study approved to receive a high school diploma. Transfer students, dead students, ill students, or students who have moved to another country are not considered dropouts. Also in accordance with the CCD definition, students who are receiving a general educational development credential (GED) are considered dropouts.

Essence—the culminating aspect of a phenomenological study that incorporates what participants experience and how they experienced it (Creswell 2013)

Event Dropout rate—the computed number of students who drop out of school in one year without completing an approved high school program (NCES).

GED—General Educational Development Credential

Graduate—a student who has received credit for all courses necessary to receive a high school diploma. In South Carolina graduates must have 24 Carnegie units and pass the High School Assessment Program (HSAP).

Invariant (Essential) Structure—a composite description, focused on the common experiences of research participant, that presents the essence of a phenomenon in a phenomenological study (Creswell 2013)

Magnet school- a self-contained program with an intense focus on one or more subject areas such as science, technology, engineering or math (Hefner-Packer 1991)

NCLB—No Child Left Behind

Online classroom—a classroom in which instruction is delivered via Internet.

Reductio—bracketing of the researcher’s experience in a phenomenological study (<http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/methodology/>)

School year—the 12-month period of time from the 1st day of school (operationally set as Oct. 1)

Structural descriptions—descriptions in phenomenological research that focus on “how” the participants have experienced a common phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994) as reported by Creswell (2012)

Textural descriptions—descriptions in phenomenological research that focus on “what” the participants have experienced a common phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994 as reported by Creswell (2012)

Transcendental phenomenology—occurs when the researcher suspends prejudgment according to the phenomenon being investigated (Husserl

Virtual school—schools that primarily use the Internet to create online classrooms (Tucker, 2007)

Vocatio—the act of expressing the essence of meaning in a phenomenological study through the use of written language
(<http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/methodology>).

Withdrawal—the process of withdrawing from school or from a special program

"The work of social constructivism is to uncover the ways in which individuals and groups work to construct their perceived realities." -Lev Vygotsky

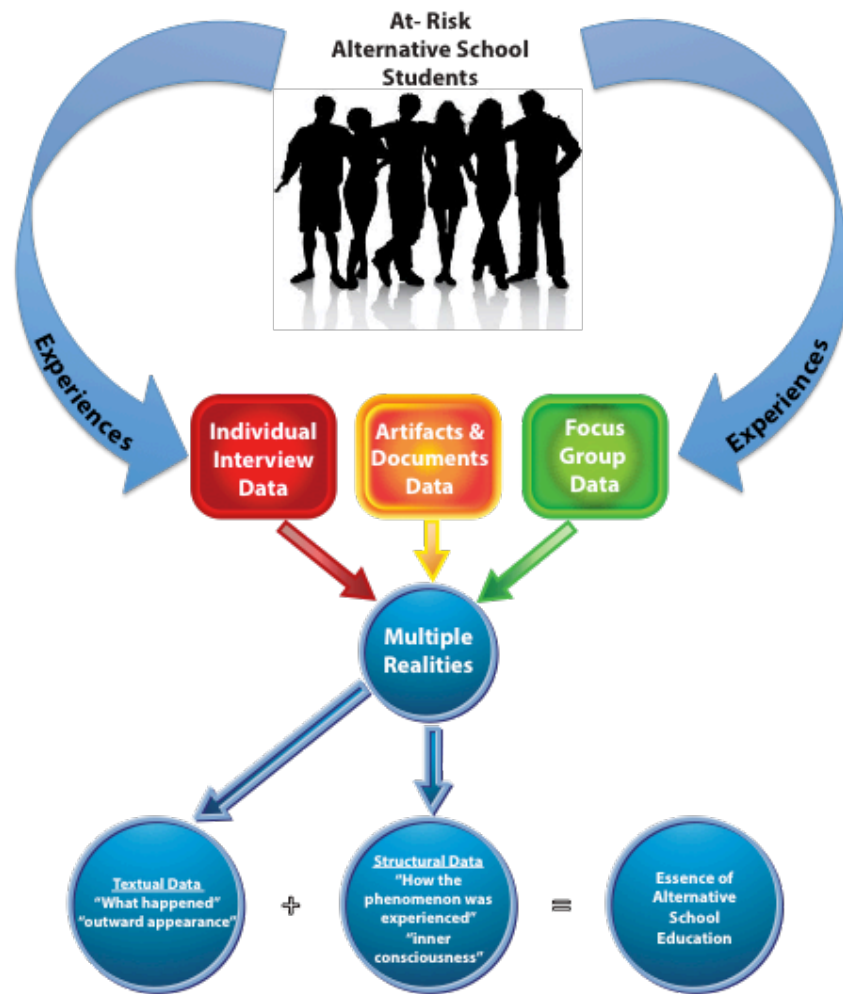


Figure 1.1 Theoretical Framework

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Again, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to shed light on the lived experiences of high school students who have spent at least one year in a traditional school setting and are currently being served in an alternative school setting. Based on a social constructivist framework (see figure 1.1), the study sought to examine themes revealed from the multiple realities of individuals and focus groups in order to extract the essence of alternative education.

Social constructivism assumes social interactions are vital in the creation of reality, knowledge and learning. To social constructivists, these social interactions are influenced by context and culture (Derry, 1999, McMahon, 1997, Vygotsky, 1978). “In this view, an organization exists not ‘out there’ but in the minds and actions of its constituents” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p.42). Following this train of thought, the true meaning of alternative education exists in the minds and actions of alternative students.

This literature review highlights the historical role of high schools in the United States, high school redesign, the evolving role of alternative schools serving at-risk students and the identification of effective alternative school programs. Furthermore, this literature review helps the reader to understand the current state of affairs in alternative education and how such affairs are connected to the socially constructed themes participants revealed during this study.

The Historical Role of High Schools

The first two decades of the twentieth century were a time the United States began to develop ideas about how the masses should be educated. It was during this time The National Educational Association (NEA) established a committee to determine the purpose of secondary education and to explore this essential question: What knowledge is of most worth? Through an analytical process, the committee developed *The Report of the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education*, which presented seven cardinal principles that would promote “uniformity in school programmes and in requirements for admission to college” (p.1). These principles are: health, command of fundamental processes (the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic), worthy home membership, vocation, citizenship, worthy use of leisure and ethical character. The report concluded that these educational goals could best be met with a comprehensive high school that offered a diverse curriculum to an increasingly diverse study body.

Mirel (2006), compared the NEA’s *Cardinal Principles Report* to the NEA’s Committee of Ten Report which was presented in 1893. The Committee of Ten Report recommended the standardization of secondary school via a college preparatory curriculum. Mirel (2006) concluded the developers of the *Cardinal Principles Report* assumed students of the time were not as smart as students of previous generations; therefore, to expect the students to complete a college preparatory curriculum was counterproductive.

Based on those assumptions, the *Cardinal Principles Report* suggested a diversification of the high school curriculum, which allowed students to “choose a course of study according to their future direction, whether it was to attend college or to directly enter the

workforce” (Barton, 2011,p.6). The Cardinal Principles Report, along with the Social Efficiency Movement, the Progressive Education Movement, and the Social Meliorist Movements led educators and policy makers to explore the role of the comprehensive high school in society and how to best deliver instruction within the high school classroom.

The Social Efficiency Movement gained momentum with the ideas of researchers such as Frederick Taylor and through the ideas of educators such as Franklin Bobbitt. Machine theory is firmly rooted at the core of the Social Efficiency Movement. Machine theory models such as scientific management, Administration Management, and Bureaucracy theory, “focus rather heavily on workflow strategies for improving worker efficiency” (Marion, 2002, p.21). Taylor offered scientific management as a solution to inefficiency in steel mills and other industries. He theorized that organizations would operate more efficiently if managers specified tasks, standardized movements and closely monitored employees as they worked (Marion, 2002). The ideas of “educational engineering” and the analogy of students being viewed as raw material were introduced through Bobbitt’s publications *The Elimination of Waste in the Curriculum (1913)* and *The Curriculum (1918)*. According to Bobbitt, the purpose of education is one of practicality: preparation of students for life as productive adults in society. As Bobbitt’s contemporary Ralph Tyler (1949) stated, “...education is a process of changing the behavior of people” (p.62)—hence educational engineering deals with scientifically managing the behavior of the students so that they have the skills society deems necessary for adulthood. Tyler (1949) posed four questions that would lead educators to

determine educational objectives, instructional activities and how efficiently students meet those objectives:

1. What is the educational purpose (objective) of the school?
2. What educational activities would help students to meet the educational purposes?
3. How can the educational activities be purposefully organized?
4. How can educators determine whether the purpose has been met?

Schiro (2009) highlights the term efficiency. He states, “Effective organization of learning experiences allows curriculum objectives to be efficiently accomplished by stimulating learning to take place in the most efficient manner possible—where efficiency is defined in terms of expenditure of time, money, and human resources” (p.59). The Social Efficiency philosophy requires educators to find out the specific needs of society and prepare scientifically sound objectives that modify student behavior through the use of measurable behavior objectives. From this perspective, the role of the high school is to make sure students meet those objectives as they train for adulthood.

Progressive educators also focused on occupations and took a scientific approach to education; however, in contrast to the Social Efficiency Movement, the Progressive Education Movement included a focus on students’ interests as well as their physical, mental, spiritual and emotional needs. John Dewey, the “Father of Progressive Education” viewed school as a microcosm of a democratic society. He believed education was life itself—not merely preparation for life. According to his convictions, schools should serve as the vehicles to cultivate a better society; one in which cooperation and

democracy would be commonplace. Dewey, as reported via Waddington (2006), presents the following goals of education through occupation:

1. Habits of industry and self-discipline
2. Cooperation;
3. Technological transparency;
4. Scientific insight;
5. Artistic expression; and
6. Freedom

In *My Pedagogical Creed*, Dewey (1897) provides the reader with five argumentative articles that support the idea of thoughtful children who are able to convert education into something useful in the historical context of the early twentieth century. In Article I, Dewey admonishes educators to appeal to the students' interests and abilities lest they lose interest and become disengaged in the classroom. In the next four articles, the reader will recognize a fusion of Dewey's educational philosophy and his background in psychology.

In Article II, Dewey defines the school as a social institution that must represent present life and simplify existing social life so that education is real and vital to the child. The teacher's role is to design experiences and find ways for the "discipline of life" to be revealed to the students. Dewey also believed examinations (assessments) should "test the child's fitness for social life and reveal the place in which he can be of the most service and where he can receive the most help."

In Article III, Dewey outlines the subject matter of education. He champions educators' use of students' interests and activities as a gateway to core area content--such as literature or science. In this article he also directly opposes the notion of Social Efficiency when he writes, "The progress is not in the succession of studies but in the development of new attitudes towards and new interest in, experience."

In Article IV, Dewey discusses, again, how student interests should permeate the educational environment. He includes an emphasis on the child's natural development. He discusses the process of how a child's intellect is developed--how movement comes before consciousness, how imagery is an important part of instruction, and how paying attention to students' natural interests reveal their developmental levels and the future direction of their learning.

In Article V, Dewey revisits the role education plays in changing society. It is through a formal education that students begin the process of coming to share in the social consciousness. It is this common consciousness that will change the individual and eventually change, or reconstruct, society. Dewey ultimately wanted to "outline a blueprint for a new kind of free citizen who would be both capable of, and favorably disposed toward, building a better society (Waddington, 2006, p.14).

The focus on an individual's intellectual development, whether through efficiency or through interests, was not the focus of Social Meliorates. Education, according to the Social Meliorates, would lead to the evolution of the personality rather than intelligence. According to Kliebard (1995), Social Meliorism is founded on the work of Albion Small and Lester Frank Ward. Small emphasized that knowledge should be gained to develop

better social relationships, not merely to develop the individual. Ward believed the work of schools is to develop a better society; schools should be vehicles of social reform, social progress and social revitalization. In the 1930s, professors at Columbia College pondered if schools could build new social orders. Harold Rugg introduced textbooks that focused on “the treatment of immigrants, sexism, efforts to organize labor, inequality in income and living conditions, and government corruption” (p. 82). Education was meant to prepare citizens to tackle these issues and come up with solutions that move society forward.

High School Redesign

Like the Social Meliorates, Progressivists and others who sought to clarify which knowledge is of most worth, today’s educators are grappling with the purpose and functionality of secondary schools. Mirroring the schools in the early twentieth century, the schools of the twenty-first century are functioning in a context of rapid technological changes, pervasive societal dis-ease, and political uncertainty. Hoyle et al (2005) have identified three distinct waves of educational reform. The first wave, 1983-1986, started with the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s report entitled *A Nation at Risk*. This wave brought with it an increased focus on accountability that shifted policy making from the district-level to the state level. There was a reinforcement of centralized bureaucratic control. The states expanded regulatory control of education through a focus on standardized testing, increasing requirements for graduation, lengthening school days, and toughening teacher licensure requirements. The second wave, 1986-1989, continued to focus on accountability and improving student performance on summative assessments. There was also the call to address the learning needs of all students.

Diversity was recognized as it related to cultures and learning styles. During this second wave school-based management became more prevalent as educators sought to limit the negative impacts of bureaucracy such as low academic performance and high failure rates. The third wave, 1989-2003, included amendments to ESEA (1994) and NCLB (2001). This third wave focused on the student's well-being—no child should be academically left behind. Church (2000) states while the first two waves targeted segments of the educational system, the third wave is directed towards a systemic change in education “with special focus on schools with large populations of disadvantaged students” (p.2). This third wave of reform, he reasoned, would be important due to educators and policy makers increased focus on proficiency standards and test-based accountability. Harvey and Daniels (2009) posited three good aspects of NCLB legislation: education was placed at the top of the national agenda; weaker schools and school systems were exposed; and the disaggregated data “shined a harsh spotlight on the shameful disparity between students of privilege and those from poverty, those with special needs, and speakers of other languages” (p.9).

In his research at John Hopkins University, Balfanz (2009) posed the question: Can the American high school become an avenue of advancement for all? There has been a clear call from the public and private sectors as well as national, state and local governments to revamp America's high schools. In his 2013 State of the Union Address, President Obama announced the formation of the Partnership to Rebuild America that includes the creation of “modern schools worthy of our children” and secondary schools that award high school diplomas that forge a path to a gainful employment or college entry. In his budget speech, President Obama (2013) articulated the need to

...ensure our high schools are putting our kids on a path to college and a good job. The Budget includes a new competitive fund that will help redesign America's high schools to prepare students with the real world skills they need to find a job right away or go to college.

Millions of dollars have been allocated to implement said changes; \$300 million dollars have been allocated to redesign high schools and to expand the career and technical education demanded by the growing manufacturing sector. A \$125 million competitive grant program has been established to “expand the capacity of school districts to implement effective and sustainable school reform” (Obama, 2013), and \$265 million has been allocated for the development of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) Innovation Networks.

The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) and the National Governors' Association (NGA) support the idea of high school redesign as well. In 2005, the NGA held its first national summit on the status of high school in America.

School systems are being asked to transform rather than reform. The purpose for the comprehensive high school is shifting away from an industrial-age model whose main product was factory workers to a model more aligned to the needs of the global society of the 21st century. Barnard (2013) states we need “professionals who can work on teams to solve complex problems” and students who are “skillful manipulators, synthesizers and creators of knowledge” (p.12). According to the *Redesigning America's High Schools Fact Sheet* (2013) the following must occur:

1. Academic content and instructional practices must be redesigned;

2. Personalized learning opportunities must be provided;
3. Students must be offered academic and wrap around support services;
4. Schools must provide high-quality career and college exploration counseling;
5. Students must be offered opportunities to earn postsecondary credits while still in high school;
6. Students must be offered career-related experiences or competencies;
7. School systems must strategically use learning time in more meaningful ways;
and
8. Educators must be provided evidence-based professional development.

The Evolving Role of Alternative Schools Serving At-Risk Students

The literature on high school redesign does not outline a specialized plan to educate students who are not successful in a traditional school setting. The SC High School Redesign Commission cautions, “America can no longer afford the educational practices of the past—educating a third of our students well, with an eye toward higher education, and educating the rest moderately well or hardly at all, with an eye toward minimally skilled jobs and few intellectual demands” (South Carolina Department of Education [SCDE], 2006, p.2). Effective alternative schools may answer the educational needs of the two-thirds of America’s students who are leaving school woefully unprepared for success in the colleges and workplaces of the future. The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) website dropoutprevention.org supports the use of alternative schools as a way for school and community leaders to meet the legal mandate of equal access to education for all students.

Alternative schools were first started in the 1960s during the Civil Rights era to assist students who were not succeeding in traditional school settings (Lange & Sletten, 2002). They were established to help marginalized students; especially those who were in danger of dropping out or being pushed out of a traditional school. They were also established to help students complete graduation requirements or to help students transition back into a traditional school setting (Barton, 2005; DuCloux, 2009; Edwards, 2013). Today's alternative schools primarily serve secondary school students. The educational programs in alternative schools include an emphasis on core curriculum, social services, community-based learning, and individualized instruction (NCES 2010).

There is no nationally defined system of alternative schools; however, several researchers have tried to develop ways to categorize types of alternative schools. For example, the Education Commission of the States website (www.ecs.org) has identified two types of alternative schools:

- 1) those for students who would be considered “at-risk” or who have not flourished in a traditional school; and
- 2) those for students with a history of disciplinary problems and/or disruptive behavior.

Hefner-Packer (1991) devised five models of alternative schools: The alternative classroom; the school-within-a-school; the separate alternative school; the continuation school; and the magnet school. Their descriptions are as follows:

- 1) **Alternative classroom**—a self-contained classroom within a traditional school;

- 2) **School-within-a-school**—a school housed within a traditional school that has specialized educational programs and is semi-autonomous;
- 3) **Separate alternative school**—a school separated from the traditional school that has different academic and social adjustment programs;
- 4) **Continuation school**—schools such as street academies or job-training facilities developed for students who have dropped out of traditional school; and
- 5) **Magnet school**—a self-contained program with an intense focus on one or more subject areas such as science, technology, engineering or math.

Raywid (1994) has created a three-tier category system of alternative schools that is often cited in literature:

- **Type I** alternative schools serve all students (schools of choice);
- **Type II** alternative schools are focused on “forced choice” students who are removed from traditional schools for disciplinary reasons (last-chance schools); and
- **Type III** alternative schools are focused on providing therapeutic assistance for students who are socially and/or emotionally challenged (remedial schools).

Melissa Roderick’s typology differs from other classifications because she chooses to focus on students’ educational needs rather than the type of program or services offered (Aron, 2006). Roderick focused on four types of students:

- Students who are off track due to disciplinary problems, but they are due to go back to regular schools;
- Students who have had to assume adult roles such as parenting or caring for parents;
- Students who are older, but are returning to complete a high school diploma or GED; and
- Students who are behind educationally due to special needs such as learning disabilities or severe mental or emotional problems.

In 2001, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conducted its first study of public alternative schools and programs for at-risk students, the *District Survey of Alternative Schools and Programs*. The Education Commission of the States (ECS) website defines at risk as “involving the risk of education failure as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school.” The NCES study sought to provide data concerning the number of public alternative schools in the US, their student enrollment, staffing, programs and other services for at-risk students. When the study was conducted, 39% of public school districts in the US had at least one alternative school program. The US Department of Education published the results of the study in 2002; at that time, 10,900 alternative schools in the nation served 612, 900 students (NCES). The study was repeated during the 2007-2008 school year. The results of this most recent study show an increase in the number of alternative schools serving an increased number of students: 64% of the public school districts serving 646,500 students. With the national and state attention focused on decreasing the dropout rates

and increasing the graduation rates of US citizens, alternative education is becoming a more essential segment of the educational system (DuCloux, 2009).

The increase in alternative school students is attributed to changes in state and federal laws. State laws and policies throughout the US have common enrollment practices which call for students to be enrolled in alternative schools for being suspended or expelled from traditional schools, having an at-risk student status, being persistently disruptive, being behind academically or overage for their respective grade levels (DuCloux, 2009). Physical attacks/fights, possession or use of drugs, possession of firearms and other weapons, and continual truancy are also reasons for students to be transferred to alternative school settings from traditional school settings (NCES, 2006 & Verdugo & Glenn, 2006).

Negative Observations Associated With Alternative School Programs

There are a few negative observations that need to be mentioned in this review of alternative education. According to Kellmayer's (1995) review of literature, programs that serve at risk students do not serve as "real alternatives" because most of the programs are punitive in nature; the programs are not operated much differently than traditional schools; and student and staff are involuntarily assigned to the programs (p.6). Another issue is the lack of clear educational oversight for alternative school programs. Lange and Sletten (2002) indicate, "There is still very little consistent, wide-ranging evidence of their effectiveness or even understanding of their characteristics" (p.2).

This lack of oversight has led researchers such as McCargar (2011) to refer to alternative schools as black holes that offer sub-par educational environments that house future prisoners. McCarger (2011) completed a case study of alternative schools in Connecticut. This is one of the few studies that examines the educational experiences and outcomes of alternative school students. The researcher argues that alternative programs are established to help struggling students get their high school credentials—in theory. However, in application these programs become “an off-the-radar extension of [the] disciplinary system, enabling schools and districts to remove their most challenging students while functionally absolving schools of responsibility and accountability for student discipline and educational outcome” (p.4). In this study, the researcher refers to alternative students as “invisible students” and presents the notion of the “the secret pipeline” in which students are pushed into alternative education through counseling, coercion and involuntary placement. The secret pipeline is defined as undocumented disciplinary practices that lead to the students’ removal from traditional schools into alternative schools or adult education. Both placements usually have low graduation rates that usher students into the juvenile justice system and places them on the path to prison.

The research on the school-to-prison pipeline shows that a disproportionate number of minority students are affected by strict disciplinary practices that push them out of schools into prisons. This is another negative observation associated with alternative school programs. Similar to the research on the school-to-prison pipeline, the highest numbers of referrals to alternative schools for disruptive behavior are in districts with a majority of minority students (NCES 2006). “Race and ethnicity appear to be

related to the presence of alternative schools and it may be that such environments are being used to house minority students” (Verdugo & Glenn, 2006, p.20). Most of these students have been labeled as problems and troublemakers, and they are disproportionately targeted for placement in alternative schools. In response to working with such students, many alternative school leaders establish collaborations with the juvenile justice system, child protective services, and the police. Leaders were least likely to establish collaborative partnerships with the parks and recreation system, job placement agencies, or family planning agencies (Verdugo & Glenn, 2006).

Another negative observation deals with the lack of a clearly established accountability system associated with alternative education programs. Some researchers suggest that it would be a misstep to gauge the effectiveness of alternative programs using current accountability measures (Aron, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002). They argue alternative students’ poor performance on accountability tests could negate any positive measurements of nontraditional outcomes such as increased satisfaction and better self-esteem. Another misstep associated with the current accountability measures is that alternative schools are identified as programs instead of schools. Programs do not have to complete strategic school profiles or school report cards to document their Annual Yearly Progress (AYP); therefore, it is impossible to isolate information related to alternative students’ academic growth, school enrollment and student outcomes.

There are two risks associated with secondary school reform efforts and their impact on alternative education. First, the increased availability and the convenience of student placement into alternative school programs may lead traditional schools to increase their push-out policies and practices. Secondly, students may be “channeled into

weak alternative programs at the first sign of struggle, and policies and practices within the alternative system work to keep them stuck for the duration of their educational career” (McCarger, 2011, p.13).

Identification of Effective Alternative School Programs

Although there are not large quantities of studies related to effective alternative school programs, the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) located at Clemson University, has compiled a database of 129 research-based alternative education programs that have been deemed highly effective in educating at-risk youth. These schools have organizational patterns that range from summer school to charter schools. The exemplary schools provide strong evidence demonstrating program effectiveness in decreasing dropout rates, increasing graduation rates and a mitigating impact on dropout-related risk factors. The NDPC website (<http://www.dropoutprevention.org>) identified eight key characteristics of successful programs:

- A maximum teacher/student ratio of 1:10;
- A small student base with no more than 250 students;
- A clear mission and discipline code;
- A caring faculty that is provided opportunities for continuous staff development;
- An atmosphere of high expectations for student achievement;
- Individualized education plans based on student expectations and learning styles;

- Flexible school schedules with ample community involvement and support; and
- Total commitment to the success of each student.

Of the 129 alternative school programs identified, five have been selected for this literature review. These programs have been highlighted because they have been evaluated using a quantitative experimental design. Furthermore the, NDPC verified the information presented about the programs via an external review team. These programs were also included in the literature review to provide insight for researchers, educators and policymakers interested in innovative programs that offer strong quantitative evidence of effectiveness.

The Career Academy is located in Sacramento, California. It serves 50-250 high school students each year. It has a school-within-a school organization pattern. Its initial mission was to help inner city students remain in school and to give them occupational training. According to the NDPC, it has evolved to reduce delinquent behavior and to promote the development of the students' protective factors. The school addresses individual risk factors such as low achievement and misbehavior; family risk factors such as low socio-economic status; and community risk factors such as family composition. The school focuses on developing relationships as the primary protective factor. Supportive adults, opportunities and rewards for pro-social involvement, social competence and creative problem solving were used to establish positive relationships within the school.

Diploma Plus, Inc. is located in Boston, Massachusetts. It is considered a small alternative high school program that integrates dropout recovery and prevention programs

with college and career readiness initiatives. What makes this program different from others is that it does not use traditional grade levels; it is a three-phase program that takes a performance-based approach to high school completion. According to their website (diplomaplus.net), the students work at their own paces. Students are promoted according to their mastery of core competencies rather than seat time requirements, credits or their ages. Students monitor their learning and track their progress through competency-based rubrics. The NDPC cites low achievement, poor attendance, low educational expectations lack of effort, and low commitment to school completion as risk factors targeted through Diploma Plus, Inc. Like the Career Academy program, Diploma Plus, Inc. focuses on developing relationships as a protective factor for the program. Students are surrounded by caring adults, are rewarded for pro-social behavior, and are provided opportunities for positive engagement with peers through authentic learning tasks. This program boasts higher graduation rates and higher program completion rates when compared to other alternative high schools.

Foxfire High School is located in Zanesville, Ohio. Foxfire High School and Foxfire Intermediate School serve at-risk students ages 11-22. Foxfire High School is listed as a model for best practice on the US Department of Education website. The school's wraparound services and supporting partners and organizations are significant. The students have access to a social worker, nurse, mental health counselor, 21st century director, drug and alcohol counselor and an outreach coordinator. There are over forty supporting partners and organizations that assist with the education of Foxfire's students. The NDPC selected this program as a model because it addresses numerous risk factors students encounter within themselves, with their families, with their schools and with

their communities. Positive relationships, independence, competence, creativity, and optimism are protective factors the NDPC touted as high points of this program.

Lamar Academy, located in McAllen, Texas, consists of Options High School and an 8th grade Transitional Program. This program was selected as a model because it showcases accelerated learning in a self-paced environment. It also has a flexible schedule. The program uses a Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) for students with limited English proficiency. It is one of the few model alternative programs that serve reenrolled students with disabilities. In addition, Lamar Academy employs unique strategies for locating students. Educators make phone calls and home visits. The students are contacted via personalized letter, television and radio ads, public events and friend-to-friend recruitment just to name a few avenues. The NDPC lists low achievement, retention, being over-age for grade, poor attendance, low educational expectations and lack of effort as the individual risk factors Lamar Academy addresses. Although the protective factors of relationships and creativity are addressed, there is a stronger emphasis on the protective factors associated with school.

Union Alternative School is located in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It is a suburban high school whose enrollment is completely voluntary. The school accepts students with social and emotional issues, returning dropouts, and students who have issues with drug and alcohol abuse. It is not considered a punitive program. The program incorporates block scheduling, innovative teaching strategies in what they call a kind and respectful environment to help students experience academic and social success. According to the NDPC, the program addresses numerous risk factors associated with the individual, family, school and community. Given the focus on a kind and respectful culture, it is not

surprising that counseling is focal point of this program. The program promotes protective factors such as relationships, independence, competence, creativity and optimism.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a literature review, which highlighted the historical role of high schools in the United States, high school redesign, the evolving role of alternative schools serving at-risk students and the identification of effective alternative school programs. Furthermore, this literature review helped the reader to understand the current state of affairs in alternative education and how such affairs are connected to the socially constructed themes participants revealed during this study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction to Research Methodology

Through this qualitative study, I intended to explore the phenomenon associated with the experiences of at-risk high school students who have spent at least one year in a traditional high school and are currently being served a Type II alternative school setting in South Carolina. Type II alternative schools are focused on “forced choice” students who are removed from traditional schools for disciplinary reasons (Raywid, 1994).

I have included an observation protocol, individual and group interview protocols and directions for the creation of student artifacts. I designed these documents to explore the participants’ insights and perspectives. These have been included in the appendix.

Through this study, I sought to uncover the essence of an alternative school education as culled from the rich descriptions obtained via student discourse.

My primary research question is:

What does an examination of the experiences of at-risk high school students reveal about the phenomenon of alternative school education?

In this chapter, I included the rationale for the research approach, an overview of the research methodology and design, a discussion of the data collection procedures, and the analytic approach. Furthermore, I explored issues of trustworthiness such as

credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability. I concluded this chapter with a discussion of ethical considerations and limitations of my study.

Rationale for Study and Use of Qualitative Research Approach

With the approval of the University of South Carolina's Institutional Review Board, I desired to conduct a qualitative study dedicated to the experiences of at-risk high school students, ages 15-19, who have spent at least one year in a traditional high school setting and are currently working towards a high school diploma in an alternative education program.

A qualitative research approach is appropriate because I sought to reveal the voices and experiences of students who are missing from the body of literature concerning secondary alternative education. I sought to empower the study participants through the presentation of their profiles and reflections, in order to cultivate what Creswell (2013) calls a "complex detailed understanding of the issue." In this case, the issue is the complex and detailed essence of alternative education.

Nkwi, Nyamongo & Ryan (2001) state, "qualitative research involves any research that uses data that do not indicate ordinal values" (p.1). Creswell (2013) outlines four philosophical assumptions of qualitative research, based on a social constructivist or interpretive framework, and their implications for practice that will support this study. First of all, the ontological assumption is that the participants represent multiple realities that may be organized into common themes. I will conduct in-depth interviews and use participants' original artifacts to collect data related to these multiple realities. Seidman (2013) states, "a phenomenological approach to interviewing focuses on the experiences

of participants and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 16). I share the participants’ experiences through a thorough analysis of the data collected. I also synthesize these experiences into themes to extract the essence of what it means to be educated in an alternative school setting.

The setting or context of the study is the focus of the second philosophical assumption. The epistemological assumption in qualitative research holds that studies should be conducted in context, and the researcher is an active observer in the study rather than an objective observer. Creswell (2013) states, the researcher should use the participants’ own words as evidence and work collaboratively as an insider with the participants. Through observation of the students in the alternative school setting, I tried to establish myself as an insider. This insider status allowed me to gather extensive data from the participants, which I used to develop and justify the knowledge claims of this study.

As an active observer, I uncovered and admitted my biases--which is the basis of the third philosophical assumption—axiology. According to Creswell (2013), the axiological assumption allows the researcher to present his or her value-laden interpretation alongside the interpretations of the participants. I bracket my experiences to fully disclose any sources of bias.

The final assumption Creswell (2013) discusses is the methodological assumption, which seeks to understand the process of research and its language. The researcher understands through inductive reasoning that knowledge will emerge and the initial design may change as the study progresses; research questions and data sources

may have to be modified based on the researcher's field experiences. Seidman (2013) cautions researchers not to overemphasize the emergent nature of a qualitative research study when she states, "the danger of overemphasizing the 'emergent' nature of the design of the study is a looseness, lack of focus, and misplaced nonchalance about purpose, method, and procedure...(pp.38-39).

Although the assumptions presented for use in this study are espoused via Creswell's (2013) research, there are other resources devoted to more in-depth discussions of various philosophies and debates surrounding qualitative research. Creswell (2013) lists several resources for the novice qualitative resources in table 1.1 in his book *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Other sources dedicated to the qualitative research approach and its diversity include the *Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research* (Given, 2008) and the *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4th Edition (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Overview of Phenomenological Research Methodology

Adams & van Manen (2011) posit, "The method of phenomenology is radical reflection" (<http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/methodology/>). In the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Smith (2011) traces the history of phenomenology as a philosophical discipline and defines phenomenology as "the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view" (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology>). According to Smith (2011), phenomenological research is rooted in the perspectives of philosophers such as Edmund Husserl, Hiedegger, Merleau-Ponty, C. Moustakas (1994), and M. Van Manen (1990).

The purpose of phenomenological research is to describe the common meaning of experiences of a phenomenon for several individuals. Creswell (2012) highlights seven defining features of phenomenology based on the works of Moustakas (1994) and Manen (1990):

- The focus on a single phenomenon to be explored;
- The phenomenon is experienced via a heterogeneous group [3 to 15 individuals];
- A philosophical discussion about a phenomenological study such as the commonly lived experiences of individuals—both objective and subjective;
- The researcher’s bracketing of personal experiences with the phenomenon [reductio];
- The use of various sources of data;
- The formulation of structural and textual descriptions; and
- A descriptive passage that discusses the essence of the participants’ experiences [vocatio].

A phenomenological qualitative study is the best approach to answer my research question. Roberts (2004) supports this notion. She notes that the qualitative research approach is focused on “people’s experience from their perspective” in an attempt to look at the “essential character or nature of something” (p. 11).

Sample and Population

The study population consisted of at-risk students who are currently enrolled in an alternative school program in the Upstate of South Carolina. The criterion sample consisted of a heterogeneous group of four students, ages 15-17, who have completed at

least one year of high school in a traditional high school setting and at least one year in an alternative school setting. These participants were selected because of their shared experience of participating in alternative schooling as they work toward fulfilling the requirements necessary to receive a high school diploma. Creswell (2013) states, “Criterion sampling works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon” (p. 128). These students were selected through school records, referrals from participants and educational leaders at their school. Students’ participation in the study was voluntary. The students did not receive compensation, and they could have excused themselves from the study at any time. I use a pseudonym for the school as well as the study participants to protect their anonymity.

Overview of Information Needed

Bloomberg & Volpe (2008) outline the four kinds of information that should be considered in qualitative studies. The information centers on context, which is the culture and environment of the research site; perceptions, the participants thoughts related to the research subject; demographics, the participant profile information; and theories, information collected from literature about the research topic under study.

I reviewed the internal documents connected with the alternative school, its leadership, faculty and students to gather essential contextual information. I will examine documents such as faculty and student handbooks, and the way instruction is conducted to discover the procedures and routines associated with this specific context. I will also review the State Department of Education’s website to locate any documents pertaining to the school under study.

I initially interview participants to collect perceptual and demographic data.

Bloomberg & Volpe (2008) posit interviews allow the researcher to

uncover participants' descriptions of their experiences related to such things as :how experiences influenced the decisions they made, whether participants had a change of mind or a shift in attitude, whether they described more of a constancy of purpose, what elements relative to their objectives participants perceived as important, and to what extent those objectives were met (loc. 2013 of 5989).

My review of relevant literature helped to establish a theoretical framework that supports my research approach. The literature also provides support for my analysis of participant data and my research conclusions.

Data Collection Procedures

Initially, I wanted to use observations, interviews, and participant documents and artifacts to gather data from each of the study participants. Due to the emergent design of qualitative studies, the methods are flexible and they did change, as the participants and I deemed appropriate. As Bloomberg (2013) suggests, using multiple methods allow the researcher to achieve triangulation of data (location 662 of 5989).

Literature Review

The literature review focused on the following topics: the historical role of high schools in the United States, high school redesign, the evolving role of alternative schools serving at-risk students and the identification of effective alternative school programs.

The literature review provided current understandings related to alternative school and the students that are served in them.

Roberts (2004) identifies several purposes for the literature review in a qualitative study (p. 74). Literature reviews help the researcher to

- focus the purpose of the research more precisely;
- develop a conceptual framework that may guide the researcher;
- identify the concepts of topic for study;
- uncover previous research similar to your own that may be meaningfully extended;
- determine the relationship of your topic to current and previous research; and
- form a basis for determining the significance of his/her study.

I reviewed additional literature as the study evolved and as I reflected upon the data throughout the qualitative research process.

Observations

I spent two full school days observing the research site to collect contextual data. The contextual data provides the “history, background, and germane issues” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, Loc 1161 of 5989) associated with my study. I used Wolcott’s (1981) observation strategies as reported in Glesne (2006, p. 54) to guide the observation phase of data collection. The first strategy involves making broad sweep observations in which the researcher observes and records everything. The second strategy involves observing nothing in particular—I looked for unusual occurrences in the research setting. The final

strategies required me to search for paradoxes and problems within the research setting. This approach allowed me the opportunity to study the context, observe potential participants in their natural environment as well as observe other interactions of people within the alternative school. All observations and researcher reflections were recorded in a field notebook. Multiple observations gave me an opportunity to make discoveries with the participants via firsthand experience (Creswell, 2003, p.186, table 10.2). Gaining the rapport and the trust of the participants was upheld as the biggest limitation I encountered while gathering data via observation.

Focus groups

I used focus group meetings as a way for participants to use active discussions and meaningful conversations to explore and to reflect upon their shared lived experiences as secondary students who have spent time in an alternative school setting. The focus group is a source of data that is analyzed, not to seek specific answers to problems, but to listen to the participants' conversation about the research topic of interest (Morgan, 2008). The use of focus groups is appropriate for this study. Morgan (2008) states focus groups are "especially useful for hearing from groups whose voices are often marginalized within the larger society" (p.352). The voices of the alternative school students have been marginalized through the students' isolation from their peers who are educated in regular school settings. I have found their voices to be conspicuously silent in the literature reviewed for this study. Prior to conducting the focus groups, my contingency plan, if needed was to use Cotton's (2003) 25 leadership categories related to student achievement, student attitudes, student behavior, teacher attitudes, drop out rates and teacher behavior to stimulate additional conversation.

Artifacts and Documents

Initially, I wanted to collect student-produced artifacts that captured their experiences and representations as alternative school students. Each student is unique; therefore students were asked to express themselves through a medium that was comfortable for them. For example, students were asked to produce a rap song, write an essay, create drawings, paintings, videos or other digital imagery to present their understandings. The use of artifacts is an appropriate strategy to help develop the profiles of these students. Norum (2008) touts the use of artifacts to gather rich data, to support or challenge other data sources, to generate or confirm hunches and to provide thick description of people and/or settings (p.24).

Methods and Procedures for Data Analysis and Synthesis

Overview

In the *Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, van den Hoonaard & van den Hoonaard (2008) outline the process of data analysis in qualitative studies and reveals features that are common to all qualitative studies. The explication of data in qualitative studies involves the iterative process of collecting and analyzing data, writing memos during and after data collection, coding the data according to themes, the use of writing to analyze data, and a connection to the literature in the field under study.

Analytic Approach

In qualitative research, data collection and data analysis are iterative processes that will allow the study to evolve. Bloomberg (2008) posits, “Qualitative data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the masses of data collected”

(location 2683 of 5989). The field notes I took and the reflections I made during the initial observation phase were processed immediately to discover information about the context of the study. The information gleaned helped me to formulate and/or revise individual and focus group questions. After the initial observation period, field notes and reflections helped amplify new findings and perspectives connected to the research site and participants.

For the analysis of individual and focus group data, I used Campbell's (2011) technique presented in his YouTube video *Introduction to Methods of Qualitative Research*. I transcribed the individual and focus group interviews immediately following the completion of the interviews. During the data analysis phase, I created two Microsoft Word documents—one that contains textual data, and one that contains structural data. I used the data to create two tables that highlighted participants' key words in order to expose redundancies or what Bloomberg (2008) calls "big ideas" (loc. 2797 of 5989).

I then organized these big ideas into themes that underscored repeated student perceptions—not necessarily the accuracy of those perceptions.

Synthesis

The methods of inquiry for this study were empirical and reflective. Through the use of empirical methods, I sought to explore the participants' myriad of experiences prior to reflection. After unification of participants' textual descriptions into one description and the unification of participants' structural descriptions into one description, I combined those descriptions into an invariant structure (Campbell 2011). Then I reflected upon this invariant structure. Using this reflective method, I interpreted

the collective experience of the participants in search of any revelations about the essence of alternative schooling for at-risk students. These revelations were added to the larger body of knowledge concerning alternative education.

Issues of Trustworthiness

In order to conduct a study that is trustworthy, I considered how my actions impacted the participants, the research site, and others who may be affected. According to Rallis & Rossman (2012), trustworthiness is “composed of both competent practice and ethical considerations for the participants” (p.73). Key (19997) outlines the qualitative researcher’s approaches to assessing trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (<http://www.okstate.edu/ag/agedcm4h/academic/aged5980a/5980/newpage21.htm>).

Credibility

I have already bracketed my experiences that may bias this study. I traced my subjectivity and bias through journaling throughout the data collection process. Creswell (2003) asserts, “the more sources tapped for understanding, the richer the data and the more believable the findings” (p.36). I triangulated data to synthesize themes to make sure the participants’ meaning is revealed. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed in their totality. I did not share these tapes and transcriptions with anyone other than study participants. Participants reviewed the transcripts to ensure their veracity and to ensure the internal validity; this is what Creswell calls member checking (Creswell, 2003, p.196). Member checking contributed to the trustworthiness and credibility of my final report (Seidman, 2013). In an additional effort to maintain

credibility, I stored recordings and transcripts in a locked cabinet when they were not in use. They will be destroyed after three calendar years.

Transferability

I provided rich description of the sample and any collected data. Through this description, the audience got a full and realistic understanding of the research context. Fellow researchers will be able to determine if my research process will work for future studies.

Dependability & Confirmability

To ensure the study's dependability, I explained all procedures and methodologies in full detail. I triangulated data and fully explained my code-recode procedure. I also tracked any changes in context, procedures and methodologies in my field notes. Participants significant statements are relayed in Appendices F and G.

Ethical Considerations

Since the participants are minors, I solicited informed parental consent before any student participated in the study. The consent documents apprised parents of the purpose and procedures of research along with the anticipated benefits (see Appendix A). I provided assurances of confidentiality to all persons involved with the study. I assigned the school and each participant a pseudonym to protect his or her identity and the identity of the research site. The South Carolina Internal Review Board reviewed my research proposal, and determined there were no unnecessary risks associated with participation in

this study. I reiterated to participants that their involvement is voluntary, and they may remove themselves from the study at any time (see Appendix A).

Limitations of the Study

I understand that this research approach was not designed to reveal definitive answers to my research question, nor is the approach designed to disprove a hypothesis-- which are goals associated with quantitative research. The results of this study cannot be replicated due to the unique narratives of the participants within the context of this particular study at this particular point in time. I had to take great care not to take participants' accounts out of context. The study as designed is labor intensive as it involves making sense of a vast amount of data. It is hoped, however, that the findings of this study will yield viable themes that reveal the essence of alternative schooling. It is also hoped that that the recommendations for educators and policymakers who work with at-risk students yield more studies centered on alternative education. This study may also serve to uncover variables other researchers may find useful in future quantitative or mixed-methods studies.

Chapter Summary

This chapter included my research rationale, an overview of qualitative methodology and design, data collections procedures, and the researcher's analytic approach. The chapter also explored issues of trustworthiness such as credibility dependability, and transferability. The chapter concluded with the ethical considerations and limitations of my study.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction to Research Findings

Through this qualitative study, I explored the phenomenon associated with the experiences of at-risk high school students who have spent at least one year in a traditional high school and are currently being served in an alternative school setting in South Carolina. Through this study, I sought to uncover the essence of an alternative school education as culled from rich descriptions obtained via student discourse.

My primary research question was:

What does an examination of the experiences of at-risk high school students reveal about the phenomenon of alternative school education?

This chapter includes a review of pertinent documents and environmental issues that highlight the context of the study which may impact participants' perceptions about alternative education. I also discuss what is unique, compelling and unusual about the study environment. In addition, I present participant profiles along with textual descriptions and structural descriptions created through an explication of participant interview data. Since no student created an artifact, I could not present data concerning

those. To conclude this chapter, I present the invariant structure as a synopsis of the research findings. This synopsis uncovers the essence of alternative education as revealed through the lived experiences of at-risk high school students.

Pre-Interview Context Clues—The First Two Days

As I drove onto the school's campus, the first mental note I made was of the blank marquee students see each day as they arrive. There was no welcoming message posted for the alternative school students who attend this school. Then, I noticed the campus's beautiful foliage and made a second, more positive, mental note of the surrounding trees and their leaves that were in the process of changing hues. This metaphor of change and transition was not bypassed as I thought about the daunting task that was ahead of me as a novice researcher. My pastoral observations were abruptly interrupted as I arrived at the front of the building. My third mental note crept in. In contrast to the natural beauty surrounding the campus was a black and white police car that signaled the definite presence of the law.

I gathered my belongings, trying to shake my initial fears. When I finally got the courage, I went inside. When I walked into the building, the building was immaculate--almost sterile. There was a sign on the door of the office that reminded students of their conduct and that they must "follow the rules." I took a deep breath and entered my first venue as a professional researcher. In contrast to the sterile entryway, the receptionist greeted me with a warm and friendly smile. Earlier on this first morning, the Director sent the receptionist and other staff members an email announcing my arrival in the

building. I wondered if the staff felt upset because they were not given more of an advanced notice.

I didn't have long to worry about the staff, because the receptionist immediately escorted me to the Director's office. The Director of CAP was friendly and open to my questions about policies and procedures. He also provided documents such as a parent-student handbook and student discipline guidelines for me to review. Then he gave me a brief tour of the facility and introduced me to the faculty and staff who were equally as friendly as the director.

Through my review of the documents, I learned more about the organizational structure of CAP, its mission and vision, policies and procedures, culture and environment as well as the student population. As mentioned earlier, CAP is an organization that serves at-risk students from multiple school districts. The Director expressed the difficulty associated with serving students from multiple districts. CAP's population of middle school and high school students are bused from multiple districts and are served in this one location. I imagine it is a logistical and political nightmare trying to meet the needs of all of those districts that have unique personalities, unique rules and unique Superintendents who all place different demands on the CAP Director on the behalf of their particular students. I experienced some of the same logistical and political difficulties as I tried to gain access to the research site. All of the Superintendents, except one holdout, gave me permission to work with their students. It was through a Deputy Superintendent in one of the districts that I learned all Superintendents had to unanimously agree for me to work at the site. It took over a month

to finally gain access to the site. Underestimating the politics associated with educational research was definitely a rookie mistake on my part.

CAP has four administrators—the Director, an Assistant Principal for the alternative high school program, an Assistant Principal for the alternative middle school program, and an Assistant Principal for the full-day therapeutic program that serves students who are eligible to receive IDEA services. There are 4 guidance staff members, a nurse, a bookkeeper, a school resource officer, an attendance clerk, 2 secretaries, a cafeteria manager and 2 custodians. The instructional staff has 5 ELA teachers, 5 math teachers, 4 science teachers, 4 social studies teachers, 3 physical education teachers, 2 character education teachers, 2 special education teachers, 2 business education teachers, 2 computer lab teachers, and 3 ISS/Character coaches.

The mission, vision, philosophy and belief statements along with policies and procedures are posted on CAP's website; therefore, in order to maintain anonymity and confidentiality I will highlight key words/ideas associated with each.

Mission Statement:

- safe learning environment;
- academic success;
- development of the student's social, cognitive, emotional and physical growth;
- variety of instructional methods; and real life learning

Philosophy Statement:

- all students are valuable;

- students need guidance;
- history of failure in the traditional school setting require creative approaches to learning;
- environment that doesn't judge students;
- structured learning that is not rigid;
- support of student growth and confidence

Belief Statement:

- all students can learn;
- learning takes a lifetime;
- learning is a priority;
- all stakeholders share responsibility for learning;
- the school environment is a safe one;
- differentiation of instruction addresses student differences;
- cultural diversity aides learning; individuals are accountable for their actions

Policies and Procedures specific to CAP:

- Each student must be approved by the home school's district level official before attending CAP.
- Administrators and counselors create prescriptive programs of study to "ensure success and a return" to their traditional school.
- Before students attend classes at CAP they must complete the Initial Week behavior modification program.

- Middle school students have a 6 period class schedule; high school students have a 4x4 block schedule.
- Parents and guardians are contacted in writing when a student is suspended.
- If a student is recommended for expulsion, the base school is responsible for notifying the parent.
- The reasons provided for school uniforms include: instilling students with discipline; helping with peer pressure; helping with concentration, and helping school officials quickly identify intruders.
- Prior to entering the building students are searched with a metal-detecting wand to “ensure safety and security” of everybody in the building.
- The School Resource Officer has the authority to “detain, arrest, and place in custody” a student who violates state laws.
- Twice a year (at the end of first semester and at the end of the year), if students are passing all classes, have a good discipline record, and attend school regularly, the Director of CAP will recommend the names of students to return to their home schools.
 - The home school district has sole discretion to accept or reject CAP’s recommendation.

My first two days at CAP were devoted to field observations. During those days I observed three teachers to get a general impression of how instruction was conducted. On the way to the classrooms, I noticed the few faded decorations, papers with rolled up

corners, which speckled the white walls sporadically. There was very little student work posted.

When I entered the first room, I spotted character posters of respect, honesty, fairness and citizenship, which were on the walls. It was the beginning of the block, so I asked the young teacher, who paced the floor, where I should sit. She showed me where to sit, and then we waited together. I looked around for her daily objectives, standards, and procedures. There was an old standard posted, but it was not addressed during the observation. The clock did not have the right time.

Shortly, three male students walked in: two white males and one black male. When the first student walked in, he was unaware of my presence as he asked, “Are we gonna finish watching the movie today?” This question alarmed me and raised my administrative red flag, as I assumed this movie was probably a waste of instructional time. The teacher responded, “We gotta move on.” Which supports my initial assumption of wasted instructional time. Why not finish the movie if it serves as a way to increase student achievement in the teacher’s content area? I bracketed my bias concerning this exchange between the teacher and the student and carried on with my observation.

The students watched a CNN news presentation about cyber-attacks, cyber security, ambulance drones, and the protests surrounding the shooting death of an unarmed black youth in Ferguson, Missouri at the hands of local law enforcement. The teacher did not remember the young man’s name [Michael Brown], but the students did. The teacher asked, “How is this rebellion, I don’t want to call it a rebellion, how is this uprising affecting the local economy?” I noticed her exchange of the words *rebellion* and

uprising and wondered if the students thought anything of it. Again, I noted my bias in my field journal.

After the newscast, the teacher gave the students lecture notes. The lesson was focused on consumption, income, and decision-making. The students wasted no time in letting the teacher know that they had taken these notes before.

The teacher tried to press through the information on the slide presentation, and the teacher did not acknowledge the comments students made during the lecture. She often interrupted the students before they were able to present a complete thought. The teacher did the majority of the talking, as the students sat quietly looking down at their desks. She raised her voice a couple of times during the observation; however, the students responded differently than I expected. They responded positively to her harsh tone.

The teacher then moved into a web-based activity in which she asked the students to comparison shop for laptops using amazon.com and bestbuy.com. The students were asked to write the prices of the laptops, write down one positive review from one of the sites and write down one negative review from one of the sites. One student said, “Wait a minute, I have no idea what I’m doing.” The teacher worked individually with this student and sent the other students to what she called “old-school desktop computers.” While the students were working on their computers, they struck up a conversation about automobiles and motorcycles. Near time for class change, one student began talking about a job he was offered. The teacher advised him, “Don’t take that manufacturing job, you won’t be able to focus in school.” Through their brief conversation, I learned the

student had two jobs and is looking to join the marine corp. As a result of their brief exchange, I made a note to ask the research participants about career education.

The second class I observed was a career and technology education (CATE) class. There were 8 students in attendance. The students were working on Microsoft Office software. In contrast to the first class I observed, content vocabulary and student work were posted throughout this teacher's classroom. The teacher was providing whole class instruction on the use of filters in Microsoft Excel. The students' attentiveness and engagement demonstrated a business-like atmosphere. This teacher called students by name and had many positive interactions with students throughout the observation.

The third classroom I observed during my first days on site was the Initial Week program. This room was the first stop students made when they entered CAP. According to school orientation literature, this mandatory, weeklong, behavior modification program seeks to transition students who are new to the school into the general population after one week. According to the documentation, the focus of the program is on supporting students and empowering them to find solutions, solve behavior problems, build strength, and develop emotional skills. This concept was interesting to me, so I spent approximately two hours observing the operations and student-teacher interactions within this class.

When I first entered the classroom, I noticed the relatively large number of African American students who were assigned to attend. One Caucasian male sat separate from the rest of the group. I did not notice him until he got up to sharpen a pencil. He was hidden by a partition. I also noticed that the two male instructors were African

American. I wondered if a researcher of another ethnicity would notice this as early as I did. They were working with a character education program called *Ripple Effects*.

The instructors, also called character coaches, seemed to genuinely care about the needs of the students. The instructors guided students to think about life choices and the decisions they made that set them on this alternative pathway in the first place. The students were asked to consider the monkeys (challenges) they must address to gain access to more successful outcomes. One of the teachers said multiple times, with the fervor of a Pentecostal preacher, “You always gonna have the Pookies, Ray-Rays and Topatweekas. I have a Pookie I can call right now if I wanna get high!” I am wondering if Pookie’s, Ray Ray’s and Topatweeka’s names would change according to the ethnicities of the students. The character educators stressed that this program was a second-chance opportunity for the students. In fact, the students’ homework assignment for the day was to “identify that Pookie in your life. We gonna come up with the best way to handle Pookie.”

The students also learned the STAR decision-making and problem-solving process (Stop-Think-Act-Review). One of the instructors said to the students,

If you want a different outcome, you gotta change your character. You gotta think beyond your circumstances. A fourth of the students who come here wind up dead or in prison. They didn’t change. It’s not too late for you. A fourth of the students here are lifers; they never get the monkeys off their backs. That’s the worst thing you can do is get hooked up with a lifer.

I wondered how many of these African American students have internalized the death or prison dialogue.

The teachers of the weeklong program were positive in their interactions with students throughout the observation. Comments demonstrated their support of the students. For example, one instructor encouraged the newbies when he stated, “Each one of you has something special about you, each of you has a purpose.”

In addition to character education centered on conflict-resolution, anger management, courtesy, respect, drug use, etc., the Initial Week students visit local colleges and industries. On the Thursday of Initial Week, students go through a leadership team camp. According to school documents, this camp is an on-site obstacle course that is “designed to explore group interactions, problem-solving skills, and leadership abilities.” At the end of Initial Week, students are supposed to be able to make positive changes in behavior with minimal assistance, strive for academic success, and build a more positive self-concept.

There were a few unique, compelling and unusual occurrences during the initial observation period. First of all there was a science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) conference that took place in the upstairs conference room. I wondered how many STEM opportunities were offered to CAP students. Secondly, I noticed that during class change, teachers did not monitor the hallways—only administrators. However, teachers did monitor student bathroom breaks.

Finally, a couple of teachers approached me—off the record—which was totally unexpected. These teachers made me aware of low teacher morale, low expectations of

students, and the lack of effort some of the high school teachers exhibited at CAP. The teachers expressed to me, there seemed to be a lack of school pride and no accountability for student learning.

These teachers as well as the Director also mentioned the enrichment period—called 5th block. During fifth block students are separated according to gender. One teacher told me—again off the record-- that other teachers did not take the time seriously. Those teachers resented working with the students and those same teachers were often late to 5th block to avoid interacting with the students. The Director stated that the time could be more productively used during this enrichment block.

Participant Profiles

I first met potential participants at the end of my first day of observations. The Director and the High School Administrator selected the students whom felt would fully participate and follow through with the demands of the study. Initially, there were six students recommended to participate: 4 males, 2 females. One male was at school, but decided not to participate. One other male quit coming to school after our initial meeting. During my first meeting with participants, I explained the project, provided consent forms and also provided artifact instructions. These are included in the appendix. I also used this time to address students' questions and concerns about my study.

The four students to whom I am eternally indebted are Herb, Jass, Dock and Kaye. Their names have been changed to provide anonymity. After our brief initial meeting, I jotted down the following initial impressions of these participants in my field notes.

Herb is a 16-year old African-American male. He has been at CAP for 2 years. Herb appeared reserved and cautious. Herb expressed anger because he was not allowed to return to his base school as promised.

Jass is a 15-year old African-American female. She has been at CAP on and off for 3 years. She attended middle school at CAP and is currently in the 10th grade. Jass appeared very thoughtful as she closely observed her fellow participants. She expressed that she feels cheated by having to attend CAP, and she desperately wants to return to her base school.

Dock is a 17-year old African-American male. He has been at CAP for one year. He appeared to be thoughtful, quiet and soft-spoken at the initial meeting. He spoke of how he has changed for the better since becoming a CAP student.

Kaye is a very outspoken 17-year old. She identified her ethnicity as “other” on the Participant Profile Sheet. She has spent 2 years at CAP. She is not shy about sharing personal details of her life. She prides herself on being a lesbian. She says she is a person of her word, and looks to find ways to take care of herself. According to Kaye, she is a visual artist and a rapper.

Code-Recode Procedure

As I transcribed individual and focus group interviews, I identified big ideas in order to initially organize the data. Then I read and reread the transcripts and jotted down memos. Stauss (1987) as reported by Creswell (2013) defines a memo as a written version of the researcher’s internal dialogue. Next, I used the process of horizontalization as I closely read the transcripts again in an effort to extract the participants’ significant

statements. Then I categorized those significant statements into textural or structural descriptions. On the final reading of the transcripts, I used highlighter pens to color-code textual descriptors green and structural descriptors yellow. I then used the transcripts and Microsoft Word to create tables to document each participant's comments throughout the data collection process. The tables were not developed to quantify comments as far as ranking them in order of significance. They were developed as a means to facilitate a logical discussion of themes. It is important to mention here that this section of my study was intended to present the participants' perspectives--not to prove or disprove them.

Unification of Textual Descriptors

Textual descriptors in phenomenological research focus on "what happened" with the participants in terms of a common phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994) as reported by Creswell (2012). Textual descriptors are concerned with contexts and outward situations that have influenced the participants' lived experiences with a common phenomenon. In addition to the revelation of participants' lived experiences, Van Manen (1997) states the textual descriptors also reveal the practical actions of pedagogy that lead to increase thoughtfulness about a phenomenon. There were four themes that evolved from a review of the textual data (see Appendix F):

1. The reasons students were sent to alternative schools influenced participants' lived experiences in alternative education;
2. How business was conducted in their traditional school settings influenced the participants' lived experiences in alternative education;

3. Relationships participants had with their teachers influenced their lived experiences in alternative education; and
4. Participants' ideas about improvements in education influenced their lived experiences in alternative education.

Participants were enrolled in CAP alternative school for two reasons: behavior issues and academic issues. As I noted in the literature review, these reasons are consistent with the enrollment practices of alternative schools throughout the rest of the United States. As far as behavior, participants attended the alternative school for having too many conduct referrals, excessive tardiness, fighting, skipping school, being disruptive and refusing to do work. Academic reasons include lack of enough credits to gain a high school credential, poor academic performance, failure to complete and turn in homework, and being in a lower grade than their age group. The participants' length of stay varied according to the policies of their home school districts. One participant recapped the reasons students attend alternative school as "25% punishment, 30% education...the rest is reality." (Kaye)

The participants revealed three major differences between their traditional schools and the alternative school: procedures and policies, quality of education, and social interactions. The policies and procedures of the alternative school deal with establishing order and enforcing boundaries in ways that are different from the traditional school. One difference is highlighted in the way students are given access to the alternative school building. For example, Dock stated, "We gotta wait outside before we come in the building." Herb added, "We get wanded, checked, searched..."

Another difference in policy is the mandatory uniform requirement for alternative school students. Alternative school students are required to tuck in their shirts, wear belts and wear khaki pants. Some participants wanted looser restrictions when it came to metal detectors and dress code. In addition, alternative school students were not permitted to use electronic devices, go to the bathroom unescorted, bring outside food, nor were they allowed to drive to school. Kaye's statement best summed up participants' ideas focused on the policies and procedures of alternative school. When compared to traditional school, "Alternative school is very restricted." (Kaye)

The participants also noted restrictions on social interactions when comparing the alternative school to their traditional schools.

At the traditional school, "sports take my mind off everything (pause) sports, lifting weights, and girls." (Dock)

At the alternative school, students "don't get to talk to most of [their] friends" (Dock)

There ain't even no recess" (laughter from the group). Shoot [at the traditional school], we got to get up and walk outside, talk, socialize here we can't even get up (short pause) go. (Kaye)

The alternative school offered a small setting and the possibility of more one-on-one interactions between teachers and students. In addition to the core classes, the alternative school included character education and virtual school as part of its educational offerings. During the first week at the alternative school, students attend classes in which, "they talk about the reason why you are here, getting the monkey off

your back, things you can do better, talk about how you gotta have a good grade point average.” (Dock)

The alternative school did not offer what the participants called exploratory or extracurricular classes, nor did the participants get to attend the vocational school. Alternative school student did not have books nor were they required to do homework. They were expected to do less work than what they would have to do in a traditional school setting:

It’s easier than my home schoolwork, like we don’t read books and stuff like that...and the teachers don’t really teach. They just probably show you one time, and they are done with it. They expect for you to know it then and there. (Dock)

The third textual theme highlighted participants’ close consideration of their relationships with teachers. Participants viewed teachers at their traditional schools as unconcerned about them. Being in the alternative school

...kind of gives you the opportunity to see how different schools are. Like you went to [he named his traditional school] and you see how the teachers treat you there. Like the teachers there treat you like they are better than you. These teachers here treat you like this ain’t your last chance...like you can be somebody, like you can go places. The teachers at [he named his traditional school] doubt you.” (Dock)

The participants stated some teachers served as role models who prepared them for life and the real world.

The teachers actually care more about you here and they try to prepare you for life, not so much as studying school work, they just try to help you and get you prepared for the real world...I pretty much have good relationships with all my teachers, so I can actually come to them about stuff that isn't related to school...(Jass)

The character educators were credited with helping to work on student attitudes and presenting different perspectives on how to handle various situations and are open to hear students' personal problems. The character educators in the building treat students "like you can be somebody" and "try to speak sense into students." (Dock)

Not all student-teacher relationships were viewed as positively. A majority of the participants cited the need for more positive relationships with teachers and administrators. As Kaye put it, "some of the teachers have issues." According to participants, some teachers cursed students, made sarcastic comments, and provoked students to misbehave.

Whatever the teacher say is it. The teacher can be making lies on you, they [administration] will not listen to you, they will listen to the teacher. You can't do something without somebody being on you. Some of the teachers try to get you in trouble. They push you to say something. Some teachers try to be sarcastic. The teachers, some teachers, be doing things, but when a student try to do it, they try to get mad and write them up. (Jass)

When compared to teachers at the traditional schools, alternative school teachers were collectively viewed as more lenient. Instruction was also viewed as less challenging than instruction at the traditional school. The following statements support the participants' view of lax instruction in their alternative school setting:

“We are learning the same thing over every year.” (Herb)

“We really don't even learn much here, you don't gotta raise your hand, you just speak out.” (Dock)

“It [class] can be chaotic or everybody bored that day...or people are sleep. It's depending on your teacher...some teachers make you do it, some teachers just kick you out and send you to the office.” (Kaye)

A majority of the participants also cited the need for more positive relationships with teachers and administrators.

All of the participants wanted better academic instruction and more course offerings:

“...better classes, better teachers, better work...libraries” (Dock)

“The work needs to be more difficult...” (Jass)

“We need more classes...different classes, like the regular school provides, so that we can catch up on our credits and be ready for when we go back to the home school.”

(Herb)

Participants wanted fine arts to be included as electives. Kaye and Jass summed up their thoughts about the academic program at the alternative school with these words:

This is not completely the best program...we need more alternative electives. If we had a little more like art, life intelligence...some people would respect it more if we had AP classes...harder classes to challenge students...(Kaye)

We need extra activities like painting and music and theatre. We don't get none of that. If they would add that to the school setting, it would be a whole lot different here. The attitudes of the kids would change. (Jass)

Unification of Structural Descriptors

Structural descriptors in phenomenological research focus on “how” the participants have experienced a common phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994 as reported by Creswell (2012). Structural descriptions are ones that reveal the participants inner consciousness. There were four themes that evolved from a review of the structural data (see Appendix G):

1. The participants' feelings associated with alternative education were more negative than positive;
2. The participants felt the educational offerings of the alternative school were inferior to the educational offerings of their traditional schools;

3. The participants felt unsupported and disrespected by a majority of the alternative school educators; and
4. The participants became less hopeful as their time in alternative placement increased.

For the participants, the negative impacts of alternative education greatly exceeded the positive impacts of alternative education on their attitudes about high school. Relationships with character educators and the Initial Week program were viewed as helpful to the participants.

“We went to [the local community college] a week or two ago; we got to see stuff I ain’t never seen. It opened my mind up.” (Kaye)

According to participants, the Initial Week program helped them to think before they act, helped them to handle diverse situations, helped them to control their anger, and it gave them an opportunity to work on becoming better people.

Initial Week...it’s good...first week here...they ask why you are here, what you can do differently, how to control your anger, how you can handle the situation differently...it’s a lot of good work...it’s good...it makes you think. (Dock)

“I think it impacts me being here. I can say like...staying out of trouble...learning my lesson, doing better in life” (Dock)

“I won’t make the same choices...won’t get mad as easy. I will learn how to control my anger...I don’t wanna end up in jail or something like that because of my attitude.”

(Herb).

Secondly, the participants viewed the opportunity for a second chance to succeed positively. The participants stated that being in an alternative school makes them value education.

Participants spoke of the negative energy they felt as soon as they entered the doors of the alternative school.

“I thought it would be laid back, with a bunch of Bae Bae’s kids running around. It is what I expected, teachers cursing back, Bae Bae kids...uniforms” (Kaye)

The participants were fearful when they entered the program initially. As interactions with adults in the building increased, the participants felt disrespected, blind-sided and left out of the loop when it came to decisions about their education.

“They don’t tell you when you can leave and what you gotta do to get out of here.”
(Dock)

“Write-ups keep you from leaving. Teachers thoughts...lack of communication...we really don’t know how it works.” (Kaye)

The participants felt neglected educationally because they were offered easy classes that did not challenge them.

“No AP classes, no honor roll, no college prep...” (Kaye)

They also felt neglected when they had to repeat classes for which they had already received credits. The students’ perspectives aligned with McCarger’s (2011) research

when McCarger found the policies and procedures within the alternative education sector channeled students into a weak system that kept students stuck in subpar learning environments for the duration of their educational careers.

Conversations about student-teacher relationships also showed some positive aspects of the alternative school setting—but mostly negatives. Participants measured teacher quality with the amount of concern the teacher expressed toward the students. Participants enjoyed it when their teachers engaged them in conversations about life and other relevant topics. Most of the participants, however, felt that teachers behaved unprofessionally and did not care about them or care about the quality of their education. The participants felt that the adults in the building should get to know them and try to really understand the reasons they misbehaved.

pull them to the side, get them in the hallway or something...actually try to find out why they act like they do instead of criticizing and talking about them [students]. Half the students go through so much, and that's why they act like they do. They haven't found the real reason we act out. They should spend more time connecting with the students and bonding with them.” (Jass)

Participants felt they had no rights or freedoms.

“They treat us like we're jail inmates...” (Dock)

“I didn't think they were gonna search you before you come in.” (Dock)

“You can't even bring your own food here.” (Herb)

The strictness the participants encountered at the alternative school upset them.

There ain't no trust here, that's what it is, no trust...we can't use the bathroom now because one crazy dude just wanted to throw his stuff across, on the wall in the bathroom...they feel like [if] they can't trust no one, they ain't gon' trust all of us...like it's communism... like they tryin' to dictate us... (Kaye)

They expressed the fact that they lost hope, became angrier and more unconcerned the longer they had to stay in alternative placement.

The program brings them down instead of lifting them up. Some people want to drop out of school from here. Knowing you have to come here every day makes you mad. Doing the same stuff and knowing nothing is going to change about it..." (Herb)

They also expressed the longer they thought about their stay in alternative school, the more they wanted to drop out of school.

"I been here for three years. Once you been here for so long, you start not caring again and falling back into your old habits." (Jass)

The participants felt that the alternative school did not prepare them to perform successfully academically should they get an opportunity to return to the regular school. For example Dock says,

"It really won't help me because the work is easy here. But when we go back it's going to be even harder."

I feel like we are here to get a good education—just like anywhere else—and it's undereducated [sic] here... in some classes we don't be doing nothing. We read,

we get off track, and spend the rest of the time talking. It's not going to be like that at the home school. It's kind of like degrading your education. (Kaye)

Overall, the participants felt alternative education did not help. They viewed alternative education as a gateway to more credits, but not necessarily a gateway to a better education or a better future.

Invariant Structure

The invariant structure presents revelations concerning my research question:

What does an examination of the experiences of at-risk high school students reveal about the phenomenon of alternative school education?

In alignment with the social constructivist viewpoint, the best way to reveal the essence of alternative education was through an examination of the actions and mindsets of alternative students (refer to figure 1.1). The viewpoints of the participants are provided here in an effort to determine the essence of alternative school as the participants have experienced it; these viewpoints are not presented as an evaluation of the quality of alternative education.

People say that we are high risk of dropping out and stuff. I don't really see it as that. I feel like they're labeling us. But I mean, personally, I think it is giving me a second chance...it is all up to you at the end of the day. When I first got here, the primary reason I was here was because of my attitude and how I was quick to react, like go off on people and just explode...and so, being here kinda helped me with my anger and the way I think (pause) and how I react to things. (Jass)

I didn't feel successful [at the traditional school]. I didn't really try my hardest; that's why I'm here (looks down)... I was worried about girls than what was going on at school. I was not really focusing, and I was worrying about problems at home. (Dock)

“Even though we are alternative school students, we are also still humans that want to better ourselves and move on with a normal life.” (Kaye)

Prior to being assigned to attend an alternative school, the participants found themselves removed from traditional high schools because they veered from the academic or behavioral expectations of the traditional schools. Behavioral reasons for removal range from participants' refusal to do work to participants' involvement in fights.

“ I kept getting ISS and stuff like that. That's what the referrals stacked up on. That's kind of the reason why I'm here too.” (Dock)

“Sleeping in class, I still made good grades, I never got in trouble at a traditional school, got kinda lazy...” (Herb)

“I had too many referrals...being disruptive...not turning in homework...small stuff...”(Jass)

“...the day I got kicked out, I got caught with possession...” (Kaye)

“I got into a fight at a football game...someone told...got a video” (Herb)

Academic reasons for participants’ removal from traditional high school ranged from being in a lower grade than their same age peers to lacking enough credits to earn a high school credential.

“Everybody here done something bad, something you shouldn’t be doing...lack of credits and stuff like that.” (Herb)

My principal told me I needed one more credit for math. He sent me here so I can get my credits. He just wanted me to catch up here. I didn’t know I was behind in credits. He felt like I could catch up here. (Dock)

Upon entering the alternative school, participants were made aware of the rules and regulations they must obey in order to be accepted into their new learning context. Before they could attend class, they must be in uniform and they must be searched.

“We get searched, we have to take our shoes off, check our bras, we get wanded...” (Kaye)

They felt these rules restricted their freedoms and constricted their abilities to express themselves as unique individuals.

“Sometimes this strictness is necessary for some students, but not all the time.”

(Herb)

“The girls can’t have hair dye.” (Dock)

“Can’t get dreads dyed red...” (Herb)

“We can’t even wear the type khaki pants we wanna wear.” (Herb)

“We have very little privileges here.” (Jass)

“They need to give a little freedom.” (Herb)

“...[We] can’t go to the bathroom unless it is on a break...I didn’t expect it to be like this, like a jail school. We don’t get no rights or freedoms...metal detectors should be left out...” (Herb)

The Initial Week Program focused on character education and it assuaged the participants’ initial fears about attending alternative school.

That one week, it sorta scares you to be honest with you. For that one week you are safe. You are in a small room with one teacher, you don’t class change or none of that stuff. When that week is up, you are thrown in with the rest of us. You don’t know how people will react and how they gon’ respond to you being here. (Jass)

Caring adults led students to think about the impact of their choices and how negative choices often had negative consequences. During this initial week students felt grateful for a second chance.

After Initial Week, students were integrated into the larger alternative school society. The larger society is where participants experienced a wave of negative energy connected to their relationships with peers and teachers. The participants described their peers negatively by referring to them as “Bae Bae’s kids” and “ratchet.” (Kaye) These slang references expressed the idea that participants viewed other alternative school students as undesirable friends.

“The people we don’t know, we won’t talk to them unless we have a class with them...that’s all you talk to—people you can relate to...” (Herb)

“When I first got here, I felt like I was being provoked because I was a new student. Other students will pick on you because you a new student...drama...”

(Kaye)

Nevertheless, new students soon assimilated into subgroups-- not based on race or physical characteristics-- but based on similar behaviors. For example, smokers sought out other smokers, drinkers sought out other drinkers, gamers sought out other gamers, etc.

Everybody here either smokes, drinks, gets into trouble...from the hood... We go off into little subgroups, not even Blacks and Whites...smokers, drinkers, and those who play video games...(Herb)

Students paid close attention to their teachers' behavior toward them. They encountered content area teachers who did not seem to care as much about the students [when compared to the character educators]. The teachers who showed concern and caring were deemed better educators than those who were sarcastic, those who cursed at students and those that appeared uncaring. The participants recognized teachers who tried to understand, but they also recognized teachers who seem unconcerned.

According to Herb, [Teachers should] "try to talk to the student in a nice way without getting an attitude and yelling. Yelling makes a student want to yell back at you. [Teachers should] try to have a good relationship with the student."

Some teachers are real cool. You can have good conversation with them...you can joke around with them; they can joke around with you. Some teachers take their jobs too seriously. You can't joke or nothing. You can't have no fun.

(Herb)

Teachers actually kinda care more about you here than teachers at [names traditional school]. They actually want you to succeed and to try. Well, I ain't gon' say every teacher, some teachers here. (Dock)

Teachers go a little overboard sometimes. Some of the teachers are just rachet. For instance, one student got out of hand. The teacher flipped. She threw her markers and said, "Get out!" She was confusing him. She would tell him to do

one thing and then another...they [teachers] will talk about you to other teachers while you are in the room. They don't care. It's unprofessional. (Jass)

Although the participants entered class seeking a quality education, they often became upset because they felt their educational needs are not being met through alternative education.

"The work needs to be more difficult." (Jass)

When I first got here, I didn't care. I actually started trying. It wasn't easy. This is not for me. I'm not no bad kid. I don't need to be here. The life lesson is more important than the academic lesson. That's why it [alternative school] is compared to jail. The education here sucks. (Kaye)

It's easier than my home school's work. Like we don't read books and stuff like that. It's kind of like we're on a lower grade level than where I'm supposed to be...and the teachers don't really teach you. They just probably show you one time, and they are done with it...and they expect for you to know then and there. That's how it was when I had math. (Dock)

The participants wanted to make progress toward a high school diploma; however, they felt neglected because they were offered course work they had previously taken.

“I expected to come here and learn and get some of the classes I got at my regular school. We don’t have exploratory classes...only PE. We are learning the same thing over and over every year. It is not getting us ready to go back to our home school.” (Herb)

You have to stay on the guidance counselors about it. The guidance counselors should do better. Some of the kids here would be taking classes they already took. I feel like you should have those things in check...(Kaye)

The students want more challenging coursework as well as art education classes; what they get is less challenging work that they feel leaves them unprepared for success when they return to their traditional high schools.

We need extra activities like painting and music and theatre. We don’t get none of that. If they would add that to the school setting, it would be a whole lot different here. The attitude of the kids would change. (Jass)

If we had a little more like art, life intelligence...some people would respect it [alternative education] more if we had AP classes...all this stuff is basic...it is so easy to pass here. In some classes we don’t be doing nothing. We read, get off track, and spend the rest of the time talking. It’s not going to be like that at the home school. It’s kinda like degrading your education. (Kaye)

“As far as my education, it really won’t help me because the work is easy here. But when we go back, it’s going to be even harder.” (Dock)

The longer the participants stayed in alternative education the angrier they became about their situation. They became angry at the thought of entering the alternative school each morning. They felt they have been trapped in a situation where they had no voice and no power.

“...They don’t care enough. It makes us madder...it gets annoying...they don’t motivate you. This ain’t getting you no where...”(Kaye)

“Most of the time, most kids are mad because they won’t let them go back to their home schools, so they just mad all the time and just act up and don’t care.”
(Dock)

They told me you gonna be here for 45 days. Then it turned into two months. Then I thought they just playin’ with me, and I am not going back. They don’t really tell you. They will give you a window when you should leave. It don’t go like that. They pretty much don’t tell you much about when you gonna leave.”
(Jass)

“They don’t tell you when you can leave and what you gotta do to get out of here”
(Kaye).

The participants felt alternative education left them unprepared and without any hope of obtaining a quality education.

“I been here for three years. Once you been here for so long, you start not caring again and falling back into your old habits. “ (Jass)

“This program brings them down instead of lifting them up...some people this school makes worse. They are bad around other bad students. It makes you even worse. How does it bring you down? (pause)...a lot of negative energy.”(Herb)

Chapter Summary

This chapter began with the presentation of observational information that established the physical and cultural context of my study. This information is important because it may have impacted student experiences and perceptions. I presented the participant profiles. I organized the interview data into unified textual and structural descriptors. I explained my code and recode process which allowed me to reveal themes associated with alternative education. I also presented an invariant structure, which combined the participants' textual and structural descriptors to give the reader an idea of the essence of alternative education. The themes presented in this chapter are interpreted in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

INTERPRETATIONS, ISSUES, IMPLICATIONS

I designed this phenomenological study as an avenue to uncover the essence of alternative education through the lived experiences of at-risk high school students currently being served in an alternative school setting. What does an examination of the experiences of at-risk high school students reveal about the phenomenon of alternative school education? This was the sole question I used to guide my qualitative, phenomenological study. Glesnes (2008) states, “Qualitative research investigates poorly understood territories of human interaction” (p. 211). The lived experiences of high school students educated in an alternative school setting is a phenomenon that has received little to no attention in past research studies; therefore, I considered a qualitative research approach to be the best avenue to explore my question.

During my study, I had to keep in mind that my research approach has limitations. For example, there were only four participants—which is an acceptable number; however, their individual responses were not always independent of one another. In addition, the huge amount of data I collected proved difficult when it came time for me to analyze and summarize it. Another consideration I could not ignore was the possibility of taking the of the participants’ accounts out of context; thereby missing the larger conversation. Also, my findings only represented the students’ viewpoints of

their experiences during this particular time, in this particular context. Nevertheless, I hoped the findings of this study would help those involved with alternative education to purposefully design an educational experience that is beneficial to those students who are at the greatest risk of educational failure. Since the fates of these students have the ability to alter society in a way that is not so positive, alternative education is a segment of education we need to give increased attention.

Interpretation of the Invariant Structure

At-risk students educated in Type II alternative schools (Raywid, 1994) have a genuine desire to learn, and they are offended when they are not properly challenged. I correctly assumed the participants, as high school students, were at a developmental level to express what they were experiencing inside and outside of themselves--they were able to express feelings about the situations they encountered within the context of alternative education.

The participants all expressed that their experiences in an alternative school actually made them value a quality education. They didn't feel this way because their lived experiences in alternative school was so great, but it is because their experiences in the alternative school left them feeling as if they had been cheated out of a quality education. Whether they were referred to the alternative school for academic reasons or behavioral reasons, the participants felt the alternative school was a largely negative environment in which they felt voiceless and powerless. The participants expressed that they wanted to get out of the alternative school environment before they lost all hope.

The students often compared the alternative school to a jail that limited their freedom to express themselves and their freedom to behave as they wanted. They justified these ideas through their experiences of being locked out of the school each morning and then being wanded, searched, and forced to wear uniforms before they were allowed inside. Procedural issues like the ones described above can lead students to behave negatively as well as give them the perception that the alternative school is not a welcoming place. In addition to being wanded, searched and being forced to wear uniforms, participants felt other procedural issues should be addressed such as:

- Scheduling differences between the alternative school and the traditional school;
- Course offerings such as AP courses or electives;
- Better review of transcripts to make sure courses are not taken more than once;
- More transparency when it comes to the length of their stay; and
- A detailed and clearly articulated plan that outlines what they need to do in order to return back to their traditional schools.

McCarger (2011) explores the idea of students getting stuck in ineffective programs where policies and practices within the alternative system work to keep students stuck for the duration of their educational careers. If the idea of students “being stuck” is in fact reality—and not just a notion-- alternative school educators may need to consider designing policies and procedures that ensure the students receive a high-quality education for the duration of their stay at the alternative school.

In addition to the negative environment, participants often commented on the relationships they had with their teachers. When participants first entered the alternative school, they felt fearful. The character educators served to diminish those initial fears.

The students felt their participation in the character education program was beneficial and it helped them to reflect on their behaviors and to make better decisions. They want to work on becoming better people.

The participants clearly valued their relationships with the character educators; however, their relationships with other classroom teachers were not viewed in such a positive way. The participants did not consider teachers as advocates—they saw them as adversaries. Participants relayed several stories that demonstrated widespread unprofessional conduct among their core-area teachers. They cited instances where teachers came to class unprepared to teach them; they also cited instances in which teachers seemed to be uncertain about their course content. The participants reported that this uncertainty led to increased frustration in the classroom. Participants felt that the teachers did not trust them, nor did they trust the teachers. The participants felt that the teachers did not get to know them well, and if the teachers did not know them, then teachers could not effectively provide instruction. Not only were the participants seeking teachers who were focused on teaching content, but the participants were also seeking teachers who were authentically concerned about their well-being.

Study Takeaways and Implications for Practice

When I initially conceptualized this study I was hoping to uncover positives about alternative education that I could add to the body of knowledge. The world has changed. After I thought about it more, I realized it was most important to allow the participants to lead me through the research process if I wanted to get to the meaning of *their* lived experiences as alternative school students. Moreover, I had to operate under

the premise that the data we uncovered through the process of phenomenology, whether positive or negative, would add to the body of knowledge concerning at-risk students who are educated in alternative school settings.

Students at-risk of educational failure need to be encouraged to self-advocate for better educational experiences. They need to find teachers or administrators with whom they feel comfortable enough to share any educational concerns they may have. They should self-advocate to find out where they stand academically and they should self-advocate to find out what they need to do to quickly transition back to their base schools.

Alternative school educators need to be mindful that students are watching and looking to them to exhibit leadership within the classroom. Based on the data, unprofessional conduct leads students to mistrust adults and to feel their time at the alternative school is unprofitable. Teachers should have high expectations for all students—even if the students are considered at-risk for not completing high school. Students want to be challenged. Students are resentful when their instructional time is wasted.

Administrators should understand that the procedures they put in place are important to students. The policies and procedures of the school may be exacerbating risk factors (as the NDPC identified) such as low achievement, poor attendance, low educational expectations, lack of effect, and low commitment to school completion. Administrators should also lead their schools in a way that promotes student success.

Administrators, teachers and students should all recognize that there is power in relationships. Relationships can be simple or complex, positive or negative—but they

cannot be ignored. There is no substitute for caring, committed and trusting relationship between the adults and students in the building.

Based on the findings of this study, students in alternative school settings are in vulnerable situations indeed. As a practitioner, I believe it is imperative for educators to take the lead when students are at their most vulnerable states. To stick our heads in the sand and continue with the status quo, as established in this study, would be detrimental to the students. I recognize that alternative education will not change overnight.

“Rewiring a culture is like turning around an ocean liner—it takes a long time ”

(Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015, p.141).

As I noted in the review of literature, there are no formalized national plans to address the needs of students educated in alternative educational settings. Because there is no “easy button” to press, now is the time to seek transformative leadership in the area of alternative education. “In times of urgent problems and confusing circumstances, people demand leaders who can show the way” (Fullan, 2001, p.45). Given the data collected through this study, a good place for alternative school educators to start improving the experiences of their students is to reexamine the educational movements of the past. For example, the themes revealed in this study suggested the consideration of individual needs and interests were important in alternative education. This idea is in alignment with the thoughts of Progressivist educators. Also, the idea that relationships are key to developing a better school is in alignment with the thoughts of the Social Meliorists. Moreover, alternative educators should reevaluate the questions Tyler (1949) posed given the context of their specific alternative school settings.

1. What is the educational purpose of your alternative school program?
2. What educational activities would help your at-risk students meet the educational purposes you have delineated?
3. How can the educational activities within your alternative school program be purposefully organized?
4. How can you, as an alternative educator, determine whether those purposes have been met?

If these questions are considered with fidelity, the alternative education administrator will be obligated to reflect on the core values associated with his/her school. Once these core values are clearly established, the leader is on track to create a system focused on student learning.

In addition to creating a systemic structure focused on student learning, according to the data collected in this study, alternative educators must also focus on the social side of alternative education. Alternative schools should not be places of mass hopelessness.

In addition to pondering Tyler's questions, alternative school leaders and teachers of alternative school students should consider Dewey's goals of education within the contexts of their specific alternative schools. Dewey believed that "public schools should be working, authentic communities and he emphasized the social aspects of learning" (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p.59). Although Dewey presented these goals decades ago, they are relevant for educators today as we prepare all students for colleges and/or careers. In fact, Fullan & Scott (2014) give Dewey (1916) credit for the ideas contained in their new pedagogies for deep learning. According to these authors, the Six Cs students must master for future success are:

- **Character Education**—qualities (such as grit, tenacity, resilience) individuals must have in order to thrive in a complex world;
- **Citizenship**—thinking like global citizens to solve complex problems concerning human and environmental sustainability
- **Communication**—mastery of speaking, writing, and digital fluencies tailored for various audiences
- **Critical thinking and problem solving**—the ability to evaluate information and arguments critically and the ability to find patterns and connections and the ability to apply knowledge in the real world
- **Collaboration**—the ability to work interdependently and synergistically with a team
- **Creativity and imagination**—having a knack for noticing economic and social opportunities and demonstrating leadership to put new ideas into practice.

Using the Six Cs, alternative educators can change their schools from focusing on merely housing at-risk students to schools that are focused on the development of student-leaders who are able to be of service to themselves and the larger society. These student-leaders will be able to apply their new “entrepreneurial spirit” (Fullan, 2013)--which encompasses, risk-taking and commitment—within the business world and within their social settings as well. If alternative educators are able to effectively develop student-leaders with the aforementioned qualities, the public—including parents and business leaders—would be more optimistic regarding of the work of alternative school educators.

New Research Possibilities/Recommendations for future studies

This study has presented several areas for future consideration:

- How do student-student interactions impact student voice in the classroom?
- What is the best accountability system for alternative educators?
- What are practical ways to build teacher capacity and to increase teacher morale in alternative school programs that serve at-risk students?
- What are effective ways students, teachers and administrators can build trust within the alternative school program?
- Is alternative education part of an avenue for advancement, or is it a dead end road for the students who attend?
- What is the feasibility of a nationally defined system of alternative education that is separate from traditional schools?
- Should per-pupil funding shift to the alternative school if the student becomes “stuck” in an alternative education setting for an extended period of time?

Where do I go from here?

In a toxic culture, it isn't uncommon for teachers to focus on the negative aspects of a school's operations and personnel and even to use these flaws as a justification for poor performance...this type of attitude does not feel particularly negative to the teacher, but necessary in the face of the school's problems (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015, p.59). Unfortunately, this type of thinking was uncovered among students and teachers during the course of my study. As an alternative school educator, I do not wish to see alternative school systems shortchange our most vulnerable students by leading them to become disengaged from school. I do not support pushing at-risk students out of their traditional schools indefinitely, nor do I support isolating them from their regular

school societies for more than a few months at a time. It is not helpful for students to be permanently housed in school systems that do not challenge them. It is not helpful to retain students in systems that leave them unprepared to function in an increasingly complex world. It is not helpful for students to become angry at the thought of being in school. According to the research participants, the longer their stay in an alternative school setting, the worse they behave. Eventually, they lose hope.

In spite of my findings, I am neither jaded nor discouraged. I am excited and encouraged about the possibilities. Education in the foreseeable future

... is about collaborative learning through reflection in action in order to become better at negotiating the messy, fuzzy, dilemma-ridden context of real-world life and work with positive impact. It is about developing an attitude of mind, a set of values and the personal, interpersonal and cognitive capabilities identified repeatedly in studies of successful early career graduates and those leaders who have helped create more harmonious, productive and sustainable workplaces and societies (Fullan & Scott, 2014).

I am excited and encouraged when I think about forging ahead and delving deeper into the inner workings of alternative education. There is a lot of work left to do to change the system of alternative education—and such work is not for the faint at heart.

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APPENDIX A – CONSENT FORM

The following consent form was used to get permission for students to participate in the study.

The Essence of Alternative Education:

A Study of the Lived Experiences of Alternative School Students

Dear Adolescent Youth:

You are invited to participate in a study of the experiences of alternative school students who have attended both a traditional high school and an alternative high school. My name is LaTunya Means and I am a doctoral student at the University of South Carolina, Department of Educational Leadership. I want to know what you think and how you feel about your experiences as an alternative school student in order to find out more about alternative education.

I am asking you to participate in this study because you will be able to provide a first-hand account of what life is like for a high school student being educated in an alternative school setting. This research may help us to find ways to: reduce the dropout rates, improve student experiences in alternative schools, and identify strengths and weaknesses of alternative education. I expect to have up to ten participants in the study.

You will be asked to do the following:

- Participate in an individual interview with the researcher;
- Participate in a focus group discussion that will last approximately 1-1/2 to 2 hours during one school day, and it will be video recorded (only the researcher will view it);
- Create an artifact (project) that best captures your thoughts and feelings about your experiences as alternative school students. (A flash drive will be provided if you wish to create digital artifacts. Colored pencils and sketch paper will be provided if you wish to create sketches or drawings.)
- Openly discuss experiences, perceptions and interpretations related to alternative education; and

- Agree to attend any follow-up meetings to see if the researcher clearly expressed your thoughts and feelings.

The individual and focus group discussions will require you to answer questions for example:

- How are you successful/unsuccessful in the alternative school?
- Describe how being an alternative school student will affect your future goals?

Participation in this study is voluntary. You will not be paid to participate. You are free not to participate or to withdraw at any time, for whatever reason, without negative consequences.

Participation in this study is not related to your regular course work and does not affect your grades whether you participate or not. In the event that you withdraw from this study, the information you have already provided will be kept in a confidential manner.

There are no known risks associated with participating in this research except a slight possibility of a breach of confidentiality, which remains despite steps that will be taken to protect your privacy. Privacy and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in group discussion; however, all participants will be asked to keep all discussion confidential. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and any information that can be identified will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Your responses will not be linked to your name in any written or verbal report of this research project.

You will be identified using a pseudonym (fake name), and the researcher will be the only person able to link your information with your name. This pseudonym will be used on project records rather than your name. Study information will be stored in locked filing cabinets and in password protected computer files at the University of South Carolina. The results of the study may be published or presented at meetings, but your identity will not be revealed.

You may be dismissed from the study without parental consent for various reasons, including the following:

- If you do not keep appointments for study visits or fail to complete study activities.
- If you do not follow the instructions as they are given.
- If you are disrespectful or antagonistic to other participants or the researcher.
- If the researcher believes it is not in your best interest to continue in the study.

For more information concerning this research, or if you believe you may have suffered a research related injury, contact LaTunya Means at (864) 206-6992 or means@email.sc.edu,

or contact Dr. Zach Kelehear, my faculty advisor, at (803) 777-3075 or email Kelehear@mailbox.sc.edu.

Questions about your rights as a research subject are to be directed to, Lisa Marie Johnson, IRB Manager, Office of Research Compliance, University of South Carolina, 1600 Hampton Street, Suite 414D, Columbia, SC 29208, phone: (803) 777-7095 or email: LisaJ@mailbox.sc.edu. The Office of Research Compliance is an administrative office that supports the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (USC IRB). The Institutional Review Board consists of representatives from a variety of scientific disciplines, non-scientists, and community members for the primary purpose of protecting the rights and welfare of human subjects enrolled in research studies.

We have read the description of the study entitled *The Essence of Alternative Education: A Study of the Lived Experiences of At-Risk Secondary Alternative School Students*, and we understand what the procedures are and what students will be asked to do in the study.

I give permission for my child to participate in the study, and I know that he/she can quit the study at any time.

Parent Signature

Date

I have received permission from my parent(s) to participate in the study, and I agree to participate in the study. I know that I can quit the study at any time.

Student Signature

Date

<p>For IRB Staff Use Only University of South Carolina IRB Number: Pro00038604 Date Approved 9/30/2014 Version Valid Until: 9/28/2015</p>

APPENDIX B – INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The following list of questions was used as an outline for the individual interview questions.

1. Describe your perception of the overall purpose of attending alternative school.
2. Describe how you are successful/unsuccessful in the traditional school setting.
3. Describe how you are successful/unsuccessful in the alternative school setting.
4. Describe any aspects of alternative education that are successful.
5. Describe any aspects of alternative education that need improvement.
6. Describe how being an alternative school student will impact your future goals and aspirations.

APPENDIX C – INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL GUIDE WITH PROBING QUESTIONS

The following list of questions was used to further discussing during the individual interviews if needed.

1. Describe your perception of the overall purpose of attending alternative school.

How did you become enrolled in this school?

Describe the daily activities and services provided at this school.

What did you expect the school to be like before you enrolled? How were you right?

What was different than you expected when you enrolled?

Do you think this is the best type of program for the students enrolled here? Why or why not?

2. Describe how you are successful/unsuccessful in the traditional school setting.

What are some reasons you were motivated to be successful in the traditional school setting?

Describe any factors that helped you to succeed in a traditional school setting.

What are some reasons you were unsuccessful in the traditional school setting?

Describe any factors that contributed to your not being successful in the traditional school setting.

3. Describe how you are successful/unsuccessful in the alternative school setting.

What are some reasons you were motivated to be successful in the alternative school setting?

Describe any factors that helped you to succeed in an alternative school setting.

What are some reasons you were unsuccessful in the alternative school setting?

Describe any factors that contributed to your not being successful in the alternative school setting.

4. Describe any strengths of alternative education.

What is positive about teacher-student relationships?

In what ways are you made to feel included?

What are the best parts about instruction here?

How are the social skills of students developed here?

What services and programs offered here are helpful to students?

How are students' achievements recognized?

How are parents and community members involved in the school?

Are there any other positive aspects of being a student here that we are overlooking?

5. Describe any aspects of alternative education that need improvement.

What about teacher-student relationships need to be improved?

In what ways are you made to feel that you don't belong?

What are the worst parts about instruction here?

How are the social skills of students made worse as a result of attending school here?

What services and programs offered here are not helpful to students?

Are there any other negative aspects of being a student here that we are overlooking?

6. Describe how being an alternative school student will impact your future goals and aspirations.

What are the qualities of a successful alternative school student?

What is going to inspire alternative school students to stay in school and be successful?

What do you think should be included in an alternative education?

What do you think should be left out of alternative education?

APPENDIX D – FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The following list of questions was used as an outline for the focus group interview.

1. Describe your perception of the overall purpose of attending alternative school.
2. Describe how you are successful/unsuccessful in the traditional school setting.
3. Describe how you are successful/unsuccessful in the alternative school setting.
4. Describe any aspects of alternative education that are successful.
5. Describe any aspects of alternative education that need improvement.
6. Describe how being an alternative school student will impact your future goals and aspirations.

APPENDIX E – FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL WITH PROBING QUESTIONS

The following list of questions was used to further discussion during the focus group questions if needed.

1. Describe your perception of the overall purpose of attending alternative school.

How do the adults communicate the purpose of the alternative school program?

Are the vision and goals of the school focused on high levels of learning?

Describe the daily activities and services provided at this school.

What did you expect the school to be like before you enrolled? How were you right?

What was different than you expected when you enrolled?

Do you think this is the best type of program for the students enrolled here? Why or why not?

2. Describe how you are successful/unsuccessful in the traditional school setting.

Are there high expectations for you to learn in the traditional school setting?

How is success communicated in the traditional school setting?

Are there any role models in the traditional school setting?

What are some reasons you were motivated to be successful in the traditional school setting?

Describe any factors that helped you to succeed in a traditional school setting.

What are some reasons you were unsuccessful in the traditional school setting?

Describe any factors that contributed to your not being successful in the traditional school setting.

3. Describe how you are successful/unsuccessful in the alternative school setting.

What are some reasons you were motivated to be successful in the alternative school setting?

Describe any factors that helped you to succeed in an alternative school setting.

What are some reasons you were unsuccessful in the alternative school setting?

Describe any factors that contributed to your not being successful in the alternative school setting.

Are there high expectations of learning?

What do you do to make sure you are learning?

What do you do to prevent you from learning?

4. Describe any aspects of alternative education that are successful.

What is positive about teacher-student relationships?

In what ways are you made to feel included?

What are the best parts about instruction here?

How are the social skills of students developed here?

What services and programs offered here are helpful to students?

Are your school leaders visible and accessible?

What are the things that lead to a positive and supportive culture?

How is success communicated in the alternative school setting?

How are parents and community members involved in the school?

How are students' achievements recognized?

Are there any other positive aspects of being a student here that we are overlooking?

5. Describe any aspects of alternative education that need improvement.

How can instruction be better?

How can communication be improved?

How can interactions between students and staff be improved?

How can interactions between students be improved?

What about teacher-student relationships need to be improved?

In what ways are you made to feel that you don't belong?

What are the worst parts about instruction here?

How are the social skills of students made worse as a result of attending school here?

What services and programs offered here are not helpful to students?

Are there any other negative aspects of being a student here that we are overlooking?

6. Describe how being an alternative school student will impact your future goals and aspirations.

What are the qualities of a successful alternative school student?

What is going to inspire alternative school students to stay in school and be successful?

What do you think should be included in an alternative education so that students to pursue college or gain more skills for future employment?

What do you think should be left out of alternative education?

APPENDIX F – TEXTUAL DESCRIPTORS

- Behavior issues, to get credits, just not doing good in regular school
- “I came here because I had too many referrals...”
- “He [my principal] sent me here so I can get my credits.”
- I will probably be here a year.
- “I kept getting ISS and stuff like that. That’s what the referrals stacked up on. That’s kind of the reason why I’m here too. Like teachers here, like when I had my meeting, they was like ‘You shouldn’t even be here because it’s a stupid reason.”
- “...sleeping in class, I still made good grades, I never got in trouble at a
- traditional school, got kinda lazy...”
- “Everybody here done something bad, something you shouldn’t be doing...lack of credits and stuff like that. “
- I had too many referrals...being disruptive...not turning in homework...small stuff
- “They told me you gonna be here for 45 days. Then it turned
- into two months...they pretty much don’t tell you much about when you gonna leave.”
- --lack of extracurricular classes
- --opportunity to show where things went wrong
- “The purpose of this school: 25% punishment, 30% education and the rest reality...reality is this is what you need to do to get yourself right and get back to your homeschool.”
- We get searched, we have to take our shoes off, check our bras, we get wanded, we get breakfast, we get three minutes to go to first period.”
- --You don’t get to talk to most of your friends
- --no homework at alt./ homework at traditional school
- --we gotta wait outside before we come in the building
- “You get headphones taken here.”
- “The girls can’t have hair dye.”
-
- “In a traditional school you would have homework.”
- “We’re not even allowed to bring books to school...no notebooks...”
- “...can’t play football...”
- “They tryin’ to make us pay to wear our school colors and ...let us wear our little rags...you feel me?”

- The alternative school offers PE, ELA, Computer lab (A+) plus “they make us do virtual school.”
- “It’s easier than my home school work, like we don’t read books and stuff like that. It’s kind of we’re on a lower grade level than where I’m supposed to be. And the teachers don’t really teach. They just probably show you one time, and they are done with it. They expect for you to know it then and there.”
- About Initial Week...”They talk about the reason why you are here, getting the monkey off your back, things you can do better, talk about how you gotta have a good grade point average...”
- “You can’t drive to school.”
- “We not even allowed to bring no pencil or paper.”
- “We can’t even wear the type Khaki pants we wanna wear.”
- “...yeah, no sports...”
- “We really can’t go to the bathroom...we can’t go to the bathroom at all really. WE get wanded [sic], checked, searched...can’t wear coats..tuck in [shirts]everyday, belts, no belt equals ISS.”
- “A teacher has to be in there [restroom] with us. Girl teachers can walk into the boys bathroom and check (pause) not while they are using it (pause) before or after.”
- Missing freedoms]:“...to wear what we want, to bring food to school, bring phones and all that kind of stuff. We can’t bring nothing, we can’t bring gum, candy, carmax...”
- “We don’t have exploratory...only PE
- “We are learning the same thing over every year.”
- “[In a traditional school] sports take my mind off everything (pause) sports, lifting weights, and girls. If I can’t be around a lot of girls, I can’t do it.”
- “The students here do not get to attend vocational school.”
- “...Everybody here either smokes, drinks, gets into trouble, from the hood...”
- We really don’t even learn much here, you don’t gotta raise your hand, you just speak out.”
- --smaller setting
- “We have very little privileges here.”
- Attending alternative school is “pretty much like regular school: class changes, go to lunch, and go home.”
- Characteristics of alternative school: smaller setting, one-on-one time.
- “...the work is pretty much easy.”
- --“Get you on track”
- --to give you another chance
- --too old for grade
- --fighting
- They [alternative school teachers and administrators] don’t really ask our opinion for much. We can ask questions all day long, but whatever they say goes.
- -uniforms are mandatory
- -the teachers are more lenient here

- “There ain’t even no recess” (laughter from the group) Shoot, we got to get up and walk outside, talk, socialize...here we can’t even get up...go...”
- Alternative school don’t call your house.
- Alternative school is very restricted.
- Alternative school gives you boundaries.
- “They don’t tell you when you can leave and what you gotta do to get out of here.”
- “I’m just saying I don’t think that there’s no other alternative school that do the stuff they do. “
- “We go off into little subgroups, not even Blacks and Whites...smokers, drinkers, and those who play video games...”
- “The people we don’t know, we won’t talk to them unless we have a class with them...that’s all you talk to—people you can relate to.”
- “Initial Week...it’s good...first week here...they ask why you are here, what you can do differently, how to control your anger, how you can handle the situation differently it’s a lot of good work, it’s good, it makes you think...”“I been here for three years. Once you been here for so long, you start not caring again and falling back into your old habits.”
- “When I first got here, the primary reason I was here was because of my attitude and how I was quick to react, like go off on people and just explode and so, being here kinda helped me with my anger and the way I think (pause) and how I react to things.”Overall, it really did help me [attending alt. school] but it was boring to be honest with you.”
- Write-ups keep you from leaving. Teachers thoughts, lack of communication, we really don’t know how it works.”
- “We need more classes...different classes, like the regular school provides, so that we can catch up on our credits and be ready for when we go back to the home school. “
- No AP classes, no honor roll, no college prep—they put anybody in a class—you may be in class with 9th graders—higher grades and lower grades are together.”
- “I am trying to work on myself [while at the alternative school] so that I will be prepared when I go to the home school.”
- “...classes, better teachers, better work...They need to do better with computers (pause) get better computers, libraries and more stuff to get people’s credits up..., elective credits”
- Counseling would help. Counseling is not mandatory. You can request to see the counselor. They so busy, they have so much to do. So much on their plate. You can ask to see them second period, and you won’t get to see them until after lunch.
- Leave out metal detectors and dress code. Leave out the strictness.
- “We need extra activities like painting and music and theatre, we don’t get none of that. If they would add that to the school setting, it would be a whole lot different here. The attitudes of the kids would change.”

- “This is not completely the best program...it’s not dysfunctional really...we need more alternative electives. If we had a little more like art, life intelligence...some people would respect it more if we had AP classes.
- “We should have more electives...field trips...”
- “We can do more stuff...go out to (local business) to see their lines and how they work...their robots and stuff.”
- “It will help me get my credits that I didn’t get in my regular school...”
- “We’re not even allowed to bring the books homes.”
- “...Do what’s right to get outta here. Go back to your home school and graduate.”
- -“Being here is stopping me from running track.”
- We went to (local community college) a week or two ago...we got to see stuff I ain’t never seen. It opened my mind up.”
- “I am supposed to be a senior. I know I am not going to graduate on time.”
- “...she’ll teach you something like once and expect you to get it...like, she aint’ teach you no more...she teach you that one day...”
- “They [alternative educators] help me work on my attitude.”
- It kind of gives you the opportunity to see different, and like, how school are. Like you went to [traditional school] and you see like how the teachers treat you there. Like the teachers there treat you like they are better than you. These teachers here treat you like this ain’t your last chance.”
- The teachers here treat you] like you can be somebody, like you can go places. Teachers [at the traditional school] doubt you.
- “Some of the students walk over teachers here, some don’t (pause) like me, I don’t walk over them. They actually try to speak some sense into the kids. Some kids don’t want to listen, but some do. The teachers actually act like they want to help you most of the time. “
- “...Whatever the teacher say is it. The teacher can be making lies on you, they [administration] will not listen to you, they will listen to the teacher. You can’t do something without somebody being on you. Some of the teachers try to get you in trouble. They push you to say something. Some teachers try to be sarcastic. The teachers, some teacher be doing things, but when a student try to do it, they try to get mad and write them up.”
- “The teachers actually care more about you here and they try to prepare you for life, not so much as studying school work, they just try to help you and get you prepared for the real world.”
- “I pretty much have good relationships with all my teachers, so I can actually come to them about stuff that isn’t related to school. I mean me and my teachers have a good relationship. We talk, it’s kinda nice.”
- Sometimes we talk about life. We are reading a book about this abusive child, it is real.
- “Their life lessons became a part of mine and they changed my point of view. It’s not the program, it’s the teachers. You should try to take that in if they open up to you.”

- It [class] can be chaotic or everybody bored that day, or people are sleep. It's depending on your teacher. ..some teachers make you do it, some teachers just kick you out and send you to the office."
- "You can't bring your own food here. You can't bring no type of food...nothing...no soda, no drink..."
- "If you get wrote up, they don't call the parents. You gotta break the news to the parents yourself. I don't really think they [parents] are much involved."

APPENDIX G – STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTORS

- “I like it here, it’s good. I don’t like having to be here a whole year.”
- “I got three weeks left, I don’t care.”
- “I didn’t expect it to be like this, like a jail school. We don’t get no rights or freedom.”
- “I expected to come here and learn and get some of the classes I got at my regular school.”
- “When you leave, you don’t ever wanna come back. That’s all I know, that’s all I think. Most students who do leave, do come back for some reason.”
- “The school does not make you feel welcome.”
- “Then I thought, they playing with me, and I am not going back.”
- “Once you have been here so long, you lose all hope.”
- “I feel like we are here to get a good education—just like anywhere else—and it’s undereducated here. The class is easy.”
- “For me, I come in and try to keep a focused mind and not play around too much and do my work.”
- “I thought it would be laid back, with a bunch of Bae Bae’s kids running around. It is what I expected, teachers cursing back, Bae Bae kids, uniforms.”
- “In some classes we don’t be doing nothing. We read, get off track, and spend the rest of the time talking. It’s not going to be like that at the home school. It’s kind of like degrading your education.”
- --makes you value education
- “They treat us like we’re jail inmates.”
- I didn’t feel successful. I didn’t really try my hardest; that’s why I’m here (looks down)...I can kinda say I tried harder my 9th grade year. 10th grade I didn’t try hard; I was worried about girls than what was going on at school. I was not really focusing and [I was} worrying about problems at home.”
- “I’m successful there too. I don’t have no problems with none of the teachers.”
- “I was successful in traditional school. I played sports, got good grades, teacher’s pet, wrestled...I didn’t have any problems with people in a traditional school. I wasn’t a problem kid or nothing like that.”
- “I thought it was gonna be like prison or something; it’s not as bad as prison, but are [sic] strict...”
- “In a traditional school setting, I wasn’t vey successful...I like being in a smaller setting, and you know I’m more one-on-one with my teachers. I just really did not feel like I could come to my teachers about my work and stuff like, I couldn’t just be like can you help me with this because there were so many students that
- needed help too...I couldn’t get the attention I needed (pause) and that was the only problem.

- “You don’t get away with anything if you are a bad kid.”
- “... It’s hard to stay out of trouble because you get tempted to do so much stuff. If you going to put me on probation, just be a little lenient.”
- teachers here are more lenient
- “There ain’t no trust here, that’s what it is, no trust.”
- “Yeah, like we’re animals or something... like they really can’t trust us at all...”
- “...yeah...we can’t use the bathroom now because one crazy dude just wanted to throw his stuff across, on the wall in the bathroom. Like that’s stupid. They feel like they can’t trust no one, they ain’t gon trust all of us...like it’s communism...like they tryin to dictate us...uniforms...it’s a lack of personality.”
- “I feel like school [traditional school] is racist and discriminant. Some of the teachers were okay. Some of their work ethics, I didn’t comprehend them well. I wasn’t applying myself. The crowding, the judgment of teachers (pause) it’s a lot more to worry about there. It is degrading to be at the traditional school setting. You got people just judging you like that. I am talking on my perspective of them.”
- “I hated it [traditional school], it’s not humanitarian[sic] to me, it’s not. They act like it’s the 1930s...like we just got segregated or something, unseparated. If you’re not a jock or basketball player, you are looked down on, it’s just dumb.”
- “That [alternative school not calling when the student got into trouble] gave me a reason just to not care. I would not tell. I would go to a homegirl’s house and not go to school.”
- --people are always judging us
- get treated like little kids
- The home school writes you
- “I went back my 9th grade year and I got in trouble again. I got sent back here. We can’t even get one referral, we can do anything, we get sent right back here.”
- -not as much judgment from certain teachers
- -education is slack
- -rules are more breakable
- -“food is just as nasty”
- -no trust
- “They need to give a little freedom.”
- “They don’t tell you when you can leave and what you gotta do to get out of here.”
- “I’m just saying I don’t think that there’s no other alternative school that do the stuff they do.
- It is strict.
- “This program brings them down instead of lifting them up. Some people want to drop out of school from here. Knowing you have to come here every day makes you mad. Doing the same stuff and knowing nothing is going to change about it. How does it bring you down (pause) a lot of negative energy.”
- “We go off into little subgroups, not even Blacks and Whites...smokers, drinkers, and those who play video games...”

- “The people we don’t know, we won’t talk to them unless we have a class with them...that’s all you talk to—people you can relate to.”
- “Initial Week...it’s good...first week here...they ask why you are here, what you can do differently, how to control your anger, how you can handle the situation differently it’s a lot of good work, it’s good, it makes you think...”
- “I been here for three years. Once you been here for so long, you start not caring again and falling back into your old habits.”
- “People say that we are high risk of dropping out and stuff. I don’t really see it as that. I feel like they’re labeling us. But I mean, me being here personally, I think it is giving me a second chance...”
- “I am trying to work on myself [while at the alternative school] so that I will be prepared when I go to the home school.”
- “When I first got here, the primary reason I was here was because of my attitude and how I was quick to react, like go off on people and just explode and so, being here kinda helped me with my anger and the way I think (pause) and how I react to things.”
- “Overall, it really did help me [attending alt. school] but it was boring to be honest with you.”
- “Write-ups keep you from leaving. Teachers thoughts, lack of communication, we really don’t know how it works.”
- “No AP classes, no honor roll, no college prep—they put anybody in a class—you may be in class with 9th graders—higher grades and lower grades are together.”
- “I don’t even feel like I’m challenged here.”
- “There is no program to make you be successful; it helps. It’s your choice if you want it to or not...you do your work, it will take you far.”
- “[Teachers should] try to talk to the student in a nice way without getting an attitude and yelling. Yelling makes a student want to yell back at you. Try to have a good relationship with the students. Speak in the hallway.”
- “You don’t have to yell at them [students] or stuff. Pull them to the side, get them in the hallway or something. Actually try to find out why they act like they do. Instead of criticizing and talking about them. Half the student go through so much, and that’s why they act like they do.”
- “A lot of time they [guidance counselors] don’t know how to really help you because they don’t understand. They haven’t been through what you have been through. You would have to go through what I have gone through to actually be able to talk to me. If you haven’t been there and done that you can’t really talk to me.”
- “They haven’t found the real reason we act out. They should spend more time connecting with the students and bonding with them.”
- “...as far as my education, it really won’t help me because the work is easy here. But when we go back it’s going to be even harder.”
- “It teaches me a lot of lessons..I think it impacts me being here. I can say like staying out of trouble, uhm, me learning my lesson, doing better in life and no matter that I came here, I can always go back and do better and still succeed.”

- “I won’t make the same choices...won’t get mad as easy. I will learn how to control my anger. I don’t want to come back here...don’t wanna end up in jail or something like that because of my attitude.”
- “I think this school makes you value education more. It actually makes you wanna be in regular school ‘cause like she said [pointing at Kaye], the work here is too easy.”
- “Now some of the teachers, they do talk to you with sense though...”
- “Now if we were in a regular school, we probably would have been gotten into trouble for something we done did, but here it is not like that, they kinda understand a little bit better, some teachers do.”
- “Teachers actually kinda care more about you here than teachers at [traditional school]. They actually want you to succeed and to try. Well, I ain’t gone say every teacher, some teachers here.”
- “They actually made me want to go to college. They actually made me wanna finish school and try harder...talking to some of the teachers, uhm, they just made me wanna be a better person in life.”
- “[Mr. C.] He’s a good person...that’s really like the person who talked to me about getting into college, that I can do it...stuff like finishing school. He just made a big impact in my life.”
- “...Most teachers here don’t care if you are doing bad or not. If you are missing work, they won’t tell you. I know it’s your responsibility. Some teachers don’t tell us our grades; they won’t help us.”
- “Some teachers try to get me wrote up. I ain’t like other people. I ain’t gon’ talk back [or] get no attitude with teachers. Teachers gon’ always be right. They got cameras in this school they can check. Even if they do it [check cameras], they gonna always be right.”
- “...Students talk back to teachers...cursing out teachers, talking back and get attitudes everyday. It’s usually the teacher is telling them something, they [students] get an attitude...”
- “Some teachers are real cool. You can have a good conversation with them...you can joke around with them, they can joke around with you. Some teachers take their jobs too seriously. You can’t joke or nothing. You can’t have no fun.”
- [Future students need to] “learn how to get on teachers’ good side instead of their bad side. Last year, I wasn’t, this year I am better. I don’t talk back. I just say, ‘word’...don’t have a bad attitude or have a teacher to hold a grudge against you. Keep talking back and making it a ordinary thing, the teacher ain’t gon’ like you like that.”
- “I thought it was going to be like no one really cared about you here and all of the teachers were evil and mean...not all of them, mine are good.”
- In response to treatment at traditional school Jass says, “ I started failing my classes, and I was like well this teacher don’t care about me...They didn’t really motivate me. I meant I know that I should really motivate myself, but its always nice to have somebody you know.”
- “Teachers go a little overboard sometimes. Some of the teachers are just wrachet. For instance, one student got out of hand. The teacher flipped. She threw her markers and said, ‘Get out!’ She was confusing him. She would tell him to do

- one thing and then another. They will talk about you to other teachers while you are in the room, they don't care. It's unprofessional.
- "I feel like we need to learn how to better ourselves, but some of the teachers are just as well disrespectful as we is" [sic].
 - "People say Ms. Teacher's class is hard, but whenever I'm in her class, like we just be sittin' there chillin' really. We just talk about life instead of reading and doing our work."
 - "I mean Ms. Teacher's class is easy."
 - Teachers were coming at me rude
 - Them getting on to you was trying to open your eyes.
 - [about an argument with a teacher] "I don't provoke people, I get provoked...I speak my mind...I was like man why you doing that, that's childish. I started calling him nigga, it wasn't racist, I'm mixed, we started cursing each other and we just started going at it...he said 'Your Mama'. I threw a trash can at him. I won that."
 - Some of the teachers, it [cursing] just slips out of their mouths. We just being real and saying what's on our minds
 - Teachers here care about you
 - "Teachers there, they gonna be judging me for every move I make. If you hang out with a certain crowd, they gone look at you and think you act just like them. It is just annoying...the teachers use their authority too much, if they wanted you to do something."
 - "Teachers not saying what they did wrong (pause), y'all not perfect...They don't have to come at me like I'm a child; they come at me 'cause I'm young."
 - "I didn't care, I didn't do my work."
 - "Before (coming to alternative school) I have always had a little rebel in me, then I realized there is a better way to be. I am more at peace with myself. I am doing better."
 - "This program brings them down instead of lifting them up. Some people want to drop out of school from here. Knowing you have to come here every day makes you mad. Doing the same stuff and knowing nothing is going to change about it. How does it bring you down (pause) a lot of negative energy."
 - "I don't even feel like I'm challenged here."
 - "People say that we are high risk of dropping out and stuff. I don't really see it as that. I feel like they're labeling us. But I mean, me being here personally, I think it is giving me a second chance..."