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In January 2000, the Alternative and Safe Schools Instructional and Support Division (ASSIS) of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI) was charged with developing guidelines that determined how districts could establish and maintain effective Alternative Learning Programs (NC DPI, 2014). In 2003, ASSIS produced the first revision to the Alternative Learning Program Manual. Unfortunately, this manual was created by reviewing current policies, feedback from existing ALP staff members throughout North Carolina, and research-based information on best practices for improving students assigned to alternative learning programs. Student voice and parent participation were absent from the creation of the guidelines and manual for alternative programs that were designed to be the answer for students who were not finding success in traditional settings.

Today, more attention still needs to be directed to the students' perspectives on why they are disengaged from learning. Educators and legislators have spent time creating a model that conveniently fits the districts' needs to justify how they are reaching students at risk of dropping out (Holquist, 2019), but they have done little to include the students' perspectives. Examining the experiences of students who formerly attended alternative programs for disciplinary purposes will give educators information that could be utilized to provide the appropriate scaffolding and interventions that assist students in alternative high schools to reintegrate back into traditional settings successfully.

In this qualitative study, I focused on acknowledging the voices of former students who spent some time in an alternative programs for discipline during their high school tenure. I asked,

"What are the perspectives and experiences of former high school students ages 18-30 who spent time in an alternative educational program?" The research sub-questions that I addressed in this study were:

1. How effective did they feel the alternative school interventions prepared them to successfully reintegrate into their home schools and/or meet graduation requirements?
2. What did they feel worked best about the alternative educational program?
3. What changes did they think would have helped improve the alternative educational program?

My study findings revealed that several students incurred greater academic struggles while participating in alternative disciplinary programs, affecting them throughout the remainder of their high school careers. My participants also revealed that resources were limited in the alternative setting and were lacking compared to the traditional schools. Following the theoretical framework that I chose for my research; some students did push on and find success while in the alternative school because of their self-determination to have a better life in the future. The data I found in my research includes students' reflective perspectives on their past educational experiences. I truly believe that my findings can be beneficial in designing future alternative programs and possibly begin a dialogue regarding standards for consistency of programming across North Carolina that will benefit students who are remanded to these environments.

PREPARED FOR A FUTURE? EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF FORMER STUDENTS WHO WERE REMANDED TO ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS WHILE ATTENDING HIGH SCHOOL

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The achievement gap has been a continual focus in schools across America since the onset of the "No Child Left Behind Act" (NCLB, 2001). An achievement gap exists when there are differences between the proficiency scores on standardized tests and the high school graduation rate of students from different races and ethnicities. Specifically, achievement disparity exists when Black and/or Brown students lag behind White students. NCLB legislation challenged states and districts across the U.S. to ensure equity in educational programs for all students. NCLB also mandated states to measure high schools by calculating graduation rates using a standard formula for measurement. The mandate of NCLB and the systematic calculations that defined a school's ability to educate all races equitably drew attention across districts to the number of students who did not successfully graduate from high school in four years. This calculation is called the dropout rate (Laird et al., 2007) and has been a standard of contention for many districts across the United States.

In 2005, the National Center for Educational Statistics (Laird et al., 2007) reported that the dropout rate in 2001 was 10.7%. This number represents the percentage of students between 15 and 24 who leave school without obtaining their high school diploma. This means that one out of every 10 students eligible to enroll in high school eventually drops out for various reasons. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that at the end of 4 years, nearly half of the students who entered school would drop out before earning their high school diplomas. This calculation did not include students who had died, transferred to another school, moved out of the country, or could not attend school due to an illness. Attention to such calculations became alarming regarding the "State of our Nation" (NCLB, 2001). In 2016, NCES reported the National Dropout Rate in 2014 was 6.5%. This was a 4.2%-point decrease over 13 years. At first

glance, these calculations showed promise in America's efforts to encourage students between the ages of 15 and 24 to remain in school. Likewise, the Kena et al. (2016) report also discussed the Event Dropout Rate. The Event Dropout Rate represents the number of students who are in high school and leave school between the 10th and the 12th grade without obtaining a high school diploma. This rate specifically casts light on the lives of students enrolled in secondary schools who do not progress toward graduation. In 2001, the Event Dropout rate was 5.0%. Kena et al. (2016) reports that the Event Dropout Rate in 2014 for all students was 5.2%. Notably, NCES also reported that in 2010, the Event Dropout Rate was 3.0%, indicating an increase of 2.2% points from 2010 to 2014.

In 2019, the overall dropout rate continued to improve; however, Irwin et al. (2021) also reported a notable difference in the dropout rate between White, Black, and Hispanic students. The Hispanic dropout rate was 7.7%, the Black dropout rate was 5.6%, and the White dropout rate was 4.1%. The Hispanic and Black rates remained higher than that of White students. Although districts implemented many changes to assist educators in improving pedagogy and to address the overall number of students who graduated from high school, the achievement gap was and is still statistically evidenced and virtually unchanged for 10th- through 12th-grade students. These statistics create concerns about whether some of these programs are truly helping students successfully progress and graduate. One solution implemented in districts across the nation was the creation of alternative schools and programs that would house and sustain students who were at risk of leaving high school before the 12th grade.

As a researcher, I believe the central purpose of all schools should be to serve their country by providing all learners with an education that will allow them to become productive citizens in the society in which they live. Unfortunately, it is difficult to achieve this goal when schools cannot

tailor plans for success to such a diverse group of students with different mental, social, and physical needs. Coupled with environmental factors such as poverty, homelessness, and family pressures, many students lose hope of obtaining a high school diploma because other pressing life issues are too overwhelming (Bradley & Renzulli, 2008; Parker et al., 2020). These environmental factors present challenges for districts, compelling them to design alternative environments that allow learners to maintain a quality education when it is not feasible for them to attend a traditional school setting for some time due to their physical, behavioral, or emotional needs. Most alternative environments are considered a last resort for these students, who are often classified as at risk (Aron, 2006; Kennedy et al., 2019). Some of the factors historically marginalized students struggle with are being retained in the same grade, high student absences and tardies, multiple discipline referrals, substance abuse, criminal records, pregnancy or early parenthood, and low income (Ahn & Simpson, 2013).

Statement of the Problem

Researchers have shown that when student voice links learning to their interest, students re-engage in learning (Ewing, 2012; Finnan & Kombe, 2011; Sobel, 2004; Wootton, 2008). Blaauw (2016) states it best when she refers to students' struggles in school-aged years. She wrote,

> Students' voices need to be listened to, not as a token gesture, but as a way of making a positive difference in their lives at school and therefore strengthen their ability to be a successful member of society in the future. (p. 55)

The voices of our students are important. It is common in our society today to find young people playing the role of change agents in social justice issues. Although seasoned adults tend to cast a pessimistic perspective on their efforts, our youth have impacted movements from the Civil Rights in the 1960s to, more recently, the Black Lives Matter movement (Craven, 2015; Lac &

Cummings Mansfield, 2018). Youth as activists play centralized roles that impact their schools and communities. Unfortunately, Mansfield (2015) points out that their impact is not longstanding, and change is passive and restrictive, which diminishes their voice. The policies that are eventually constructed focus more on minimizing the voices of our youth, eventually silencing them when it comes to making decisions that impact youth's very being. The absence of student voice is the main problem that I have addressed in this study. There is a lack of adequate consideration given to the perspectives of former students remanded to alternative programs. There is also a lack of students' perspectives on the type of interventions needed to address students' behaviors or decisions.

The absence of student voice is also evidenced in other areas of education. Many interventions have been created to improve high-stakes test scores, but the achievement gap still exists. More attention must be directed to the students' perspectives on why they are disengaged from learning. Educators and legislators have spent time creating a model that conveniently fits the districts' need to justify how they are reaching students at risk for dropping out (Holquist, 2019), but they have done little to include the students' perspectives. Examining the experiences of students who formerly attended alternative programs for disciplinary purposes will give educators information that could be utilized to provide the appropriate scaffolding and interventions that assist students in alternative high schools to reintegrate into traditional settings successfully.

Alternative schools have evolved over the years into many types, with many structures intended to accommodate different student risk factors. Districts typically have great flexibility in determining the structure and level of support offered to students in alternative environments. Some districts can afford to create alternative programs for students who are pregnant or have

young children (Bertrand, 2014). Programs have also been created for students who work or maintain full-time jobs during the day and must attend school during non-traditional hours. Some programs have allowed students to attend school for fewer hours to accommodate behavioral needs. Some programs address the needs of students who have been suspended from traditional school settings. Most alternative environments offer small class sizes with low student/teacher ratios. Students often receive varied levels of mental health counseling, tutoring, and physical support, such as transportation and supplies (Bertrand, 2014; Roberson, 2015).

As a result of these variations, at first glance, one might view some alternative programs as ideal in catering to students at risk of losing hope in completing graduation requirements. However, little has been done to ensure consistency in the structure and design of alternative programs to ensure they fit each student's needs once enrolled. Many researchers have conducted exhaustive studies on educators' perspectives on how to improve the dropout rate (Alexander et al., 2001; Carver et al., 2010; DaFonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; Lehr et al., 2009). Washington (2012) pointed out that little research regarding the dropout rate considers the learner's perspective. Lac and Cummings Mansfield (2018) reiterate that research involving students without considering student voice robs them of growth opportunities as leaders. Allowing student voice in decision-making builds students' capacity as they contribute positively to the educational process (Parker et al., 2020; Shogren et al., 2015). Researching former students' perspectives regarding alternative environments and whether they effectively redirect students toward a positive outcome would be greatly beneficial. It would also be helpful to analyze former students' perspectives on practices that assisted in reintegrating them back into traditional schools or meeting graduation requirements from alternative schools with the appropriate skills and credentials to further their careers. Students are living their lives just as adults are living.

They are undergoing the same cycle of learning, growing, adapting, and acquiring new information. Students are going through a maturation cycle in their own lives, which requires them to be considered "experts" in their growth (Lac & Cummings Mansfield, 2018) rather than objects for study. Mansfield (2015) believes it would be difficult to help students in need without considering their perspective of what is needed. It only makes sense that they should be included in the change process in their own school.

Offerings for alternative placement for credit recovery and disciplinary purposes greatly differ in large and small districts. In small districts, there are limited options for alternative programs. Small districts are often hampered by budget constraints that prove counterproductive in creating alternative environments with the necessary resources to address diverse populations (Hughes, 2018). In small districts, these programs are usually monitored by a teacher assistant and one teacher of record who might not be knowledgeable of the skills needed for students to master all curricular areas. Exceptional children with learning challenges who are remanded to these programs might find these environments less engaging and difficult to access the same level of accommodations they would have received in their traditional classroom setting. Often, these alternative environments do not have the same level of instructional support or staffing, making them less suited for incorporating intervention strategies than their traditional high school settings (Halliday et al., 2019). This can lead the students into a circular cycle of hopelessness. They did not succeed in the traditional setting and were sent to a setting unsuitable for delivering the accommodations needed for them to learn.

Some smaller districts rely on regular classroom teachers to deliver instruction to the traditional classroom and students who are remanded to alternative programs. The ability to fund adequate staffing dedicated to serving students in the alternative environment in all essential core

areas is usually non-existent (Halliday et al., 2018). These students are taught via computer-based programs monitored by teacher assistants or only one core teacher. Staffing, student adaptability, and the quality of intervention strategies are all concerns that could influence the effectiveness of alternative programs on the reintegration of students back into the traditional classroom after their assigned period has ended.

Considering the various problems I identified in this section, my dissertation study focused on acknowledging the voices of former students who spent some time in an alternative program for disciplinary purposes during their high school tenure. The data I found in my research includes students' reflective perspectives on their past educational experiences. This data can be beneficial in designing future alternative programs and possibly begin a dialogue regarding standards for consistency of programming across North Carolina that will benefit students who are remanded to these environments.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative research study aimed to examine the experiences and perspectives of former high school students ages 18–30 who spent time in an alternative educational program for disciplinary reasons. I asked former students to reflect on their experiences and the interventions they received and discuss their overall perspectives of the programs to which they were remanded. I believe it is very important to consider how the participants viewed their alternative placement concerning their efforts to complete high school. Including student perspectives can add a richer, more complete description of alternative programming from people with first-hand knowledge.

Hursey (2017) completed research from the perspectives of students currently enrolled in alternative programs. Hursey (2017) stated,

> There is a lack of research regarding the services, interventions, and support that are needed to help students be successful in traditional school, which may reduce their likelihood of having to graduate from a non-traditional setting. (p. 36)

In addition, Means (2015) captured the voices of students between the ages of 15 and 19 who spent at least one year in an alternative program. Means stated that he "sought to empower the study participants through the presentation of their profiles and reflections" (p. 37).

Like Hursey (2017) and Means (2015), I conducted qualitative research to ask former students to reflect on their experiences and describe any interventions used while assigned to alternative programs. I sought their perspectives regarding whether their experiences were effective enough to help them meet graduation requirements when they returned to their home schools.

Research Questions

Given all the concerns surrounding alternative schools, one main research question drove my study, "*What are the perspectives and experiences of former high school students ages 18-30 who spent time in an alternative educational program?*" The research sub-questions that I addressed in this study were:

1. How effective did they feel the alternative school interventions prepared them to successfully reintegrate into their home schools and/or meet graduation requirements?
2. What did they feel worked best about the alternative educational program?
3. What changes did they think would have helped improve the alternative educational program?

Background of the Study

The mandate of NCLB (2001) cast light on the deficits of traditional school districts, leaving them hustling to find effective alternative means to educate students at risk of dropping out of traditional schools. The panic to bridge the achievement gap gave heightened attention to the idea of providing alternative programs or schools for students who struggled in traditional settings. Some educators began to feel that some students would not be able to find success in traditional settings. Thus, the efforts to create alternative educational programs derived from the perceptions and observations of district administrators and principals as a means of intervention for students who were at risk of dropping out or leaving the traditional school setting for various reasons (Kilmer, 2013). Kilmer (2013) highlighted these efforts in her study of the effectiveness of alternative programs in middle school, stating that alternative settings evolved into programs created to meet the needs of "underserved youth." Studies show that alternative programs meet the needs of their learners because they vary in setting, curriculum delivery methods, class sizes, and individualized attention given to each learner (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006). At first glance, these personalized learning programs seem ideal; however, further data review leaves the effectiveness of district efforts in question. An examination of the data collected by Kena et al. (2016) raises questions regarding whether districts' efforts to provide more appropriate alternative educational settings were well planned. How are we truly measuring program effectiveness and impact on students if the Event Dropout Rate has steadily increased from 2010 until 2016? What causes a student who enters high school to leave between the 10th and 12th grade with so many traditional and alternative options to help them complete a diploma program?

Although districts created programs that they felt would greatly impact hard-to-reach learners, few district leaders included student and parent voice in the design of the programs. Parents and

their students' voices were also not included in discussions of the application processes and supports needed to assist in enabling the success of students attending these programs (Lavoie et al., 2016). In January 2000, the Alternative and Safe Schools Instructional and Support Division (ASSIS) of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI) was charged with developing guidelines that determined how districts could establish and maintain effective Alternative Learning Programs (NC DPI, 2015). In 2003, ASSIS produced the first revision to the Alternative Learning Program Manual. Unfortunately, this manual was created by reviewing current policies, feedback from existing ALP staff members throughout North Carolina, and research-based information on best practices for improving students assigned to alternative learning programs. Student voice and parent participation were absent from the creation of the guidelines and manual for alternative programs that were designed to be the answer for students who were not finding success in traditional settings.

As districts continued to turn to alternative educational programs, several studies indicated that building better relationships with students, creating individualized academic support plans, and cultural and family awareness are key themes to closing the achievement gap (Spanner Morrow, 2017). Studies have been conducted which show that regardless of the size of the school or type of alternative programs offered, the achievement gap will close only when the correct focus is given to aligning standards with curriculum, expanding the diversity in the academic setting, and building the correct relationships between parents, students, and educators. While it might be quantitatively measurable to look at the alignment of standards and curriculum by examining testing outcomes and viewing diversity expansion amongst staff and intellectual disciplines, it is difficult to determine the impact of alternative programs on students without listening to the voices of students who have participated in these programs.

There is some evidence that leads to speculation that America has improved in its efforts to reach all learners. The Attainment Rate, or the highest level of education an individual has received, increased in every racial subgroup by 2017. In 2018, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2023), 90.2% of the female population ages 25 and older had completed high school, and 89.4% of males ages 25 and older had completed high school. In contrast, the Attainment Rate also includes those students who dropped out of high school and went back to obtain their GED or who went back and obtained a high school diploma after the 4th-year cohort. The attainment rate also contrasts strongly with earnings. In 2017, individuals who received their high school diploma earned an average of $38,145, while those who did not complete high school earned an average of $26,832, almost 30% less than high school graduates. There is a notable correlation between the attainment rate and poverty. Although much has been done over the years to assist students in obtaining their career goals after high school, more effort needs to be made to ensure they meet their goals during their high school years.

Theoretical Framework

To underpin this study, I used the self-determination theory (SDT) theoretical framework as defined by psychologists Deci and Ryan (1985) in their book *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior.* Self-determination theory suggests that people tend to be driven by a need to grow and gain fulfillment. Self-determination theory (SDT) is considered a macro-theory of human motivation, emotion, and development that focuses on the importance of meeting three specific psychological needs to foster a sense of psychological health and well-being: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ellerbrook & Keifer, 2010; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

The purpose of my study fit with SDT because I collected data that captured former alternative school students' perceptions concerning whether the strategies implemented in the alternative program where they were remanded for disciplinary reasons fostered individual motivation and addressed academic needs and social and emotional concerns as outlined by SDT. Deci and Vansteenkiste (2004) asserted that competence, autonomy, and relatedness are the "heart" of SDT because they are the building blocks that establish the needed foundation for proactivity, optimal development, and psychological health in humans.

When a person's innate desire is to affect the environment in which they interact positively, they are considered competent (Van den Broeck et al., 2010). Likewise, students feel competent when completing an assigned school task and achieving the desired outcome (Brien et al., 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2002). Students who do not perceive themselves as competent academically, emotionally, socially, or psychologically are prone to disconnect from the educational environment. Without effective teacher response and adequate instructional resources, this disengagement could lead to failing classes, being retained in the same grade, and dropping out of high school (Stephan et al., 2011).

People need to feel in control of their own behaviors and goals. This sense of being able to take direct action that will result in real change plays a major part in helping people feel self-determined and is defined as autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In education, autonomy occurs when a student's internal motivation (intrinsic) aligns with the external motivation (extrinsic) to complete tasks. Although educators cannot directly give their students an experience of autonomy, they can encourage and support this self-sufficiency by promoting an 'autonomy-supportive' environment. This type of environment comprises instructional behaviors that foster autonomous behavior, including but not limited to time spent listening to students, providing

rationales, being responsive to student questions, praising improvement or mastery, and acknowledging student perspectives and experiences. When proper support for autonomy is given, it increases students' inner sense of confidence that they can successfully navigate the educational environment (Reeve & Jang, 2006).

People feel a sense of relatedness when they are assured of belonging and have an attachment to others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). An established respect and alliance with others, which results in feeling connected, protected, and supported, is the epitome of relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Roffey, 2012). A sense of belonging is a significant protective factor for students experiencing academic difficulty. While achieving a sense of connectedness is more difficult for students with academic, social, emotional, or psychological issues, feeling connected is critical to students' sense of success and overall well-being (Roffey, 2012).

Over the past thirty years, researchers have applied self-determination theory in various domains, especially in education. When applied to students, self-determination theory targets their interest in learning, how they value education, and their confidence in their own capabilities and attributes (Deci & Ryan, 1991). Self-determination theorists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, along with many other researchers and theorists, suggested that the school climate and its practices can positively influence student motivation, development, and performance by promoting and supporting individual students' competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Troum, 2010). The presence of competence, autonomy, and relatedness are associated with higher levels of self-esteem and self-worth but lower levels of depression (Véronneau et al., 2005). Social surroundings that facilitate satisfying these three basic psychological needs in the school environment can help support student engagement and motivation, resulting in enhanced psychological, developmental, and behavioral outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2008). When the

students feel a lack of support at school, it will likely result in negative impacts and diminished student motivation and developmental processes. These negative attributes can lead to feelings of alienation, poor performance, disengagement, and, ultimately, dropping out (Deci et al., 1991).

Self Determination Theory (SDT) suggests that people are naturally self-motivated, interested, and eager to succeed, but some individuals can become disengaged if they perceive they are in unsupportive social and/or educational environments (Deci & Ryan, 2008). According to Shogren et al.'s (2015) report, student learning and well-being are dependent upon adequate and appropriate in-school support. The school is responsible for providing an effective range of coordinated programs and services to enhance and improve student learning and well-being and deploy the school's core values and beliefs. Student support services enable each student to achieve the school's 21st-century learning expectations. In schools today, a student's sense of psychological well-being is significant to their success and reliant on a caring, supportive environment where competence, autonomy, and 16 relatedness can be achieved. The relationship between SDT traits and student success demonstrates that educators considerably impact student outcomes and, therefore, need to support them socially, emotionally, and academically. Educators such as counselors and teachers, who impact students' personal desires to finish or graduate from school, influence students' determination and their motives for utilizing their self-determination skills based on how they perceive their potential for success in each environment (Parker et al., 2020). If a student perceives their learning environment as racist, punitive, or restrictive, they might be hesitant to use their self-determination skills to persevere through the learning process. Teachers can impact a student's internal motivational construct by satisfying their sense of belonging, empowerment, and confidence as a learner (Parker et al., 2020). When these basic psychological needs are met, students can more positively

impact their outcomes for success in meeting their educational goals (Shogren et al., 2015). This is especially evidenced in research involving African-American students (Parker et al., 2020), who have been the focus for many years when viewing the achievement gap. Research regarding these historically marginalized students encourages educators to reflect on the culture, background, and students' lived experiences as we construct equitable practices in the classroom, which influence students' self-determination skills (Cunningham, 2022).

Brief Description of Methods

I conducted a qualitative study that allowed participants to tell their stories about their experiences in alternative disciplinary schools. I interviewed the former students, who are now older than 18, to discuss their placement in the school, their families' support, educational support system, and interventions used to assist them in seeking success.

Researcher Positionality

Before obtaining credentials as an educator, I spent over 7 years employed as a business professional in various industries. I came to education with a desire to assist students in obtaining job-ready credentials before completing high school. In my early educational years, I worked in various capacities, which allowed me to intimately view the structure and scope of several alternative programs throughout several schools in North Carolina. Specifically, I was employed for six years as the assistant principal of a predominantly minority urban high school, as a National Board-Certified Teacher in three different urban high schools for twelve years, as an instructional technologist for 3 years in an urban high school, and for 3 years in an urban middle school as a classroom teacher. I have taught in schools with a generous amount of funding to invest in special programs and schools with limited funding to support alternative programs. I have assisted with the development of alternative programs, curricula used to serve students who

have been remanded to these programs, guidelines that determine the length of their assignment, and conditions regarding re-entry into the traditional high school setting.

At the time of this study, I was employed as an elementary school principal in a large urban district in North Carolina. In my prior position in a much smaller district, I directly oversaw a portion of the alternative programs designed for secondary students in a small inner-city high school. After 6 years of working with both the high school and alternative school, I truly desired to understand what interventions could be implemented to assist more students in successfully reintegrating into the traditional school setting and completing graduation requirements without receiving additional referrals to alternative programs.

Significance

In the United States of America, we pride ourselves on having a democratic society that provides a free and public education for all. We believe in protecting these freedoms and frown upon practices that impact our democracy. Education should be one of the freedoms we value and highly regard for all. Consequently, policymakers continue to impose unfunded mandates on our schools and districts, such as NCLB, that leave central office staff members and administrators in a panic to meet the demands of continually changing regulations. As a result of these mandates, which are imposed on schools, districts design quick fixes and programs that reform school environments rather than cater to the needs of our students and transform educational practice. These programs and practices often leave out the learners' voices participating in these settings. This can yield ineffective structures that are not nurturing and do not cultivate success.

Alternative educational settings come in all types of structures and designs. Originally, alternative schools were viewed as innovative and engaging environments that were not taxed

with the same mandates for standardized testing. After the onset of NCLB, alternative environments began to house more students who experienced behavior problems and difficulty remaining in traditional school settings. These programs were created to mainly focus on credit recovery purposes to assist students in meeting graduation requirements and disciplinary purposes to keep students in school who were suspended from traditional schools. My research aimed to inspire districts to reconsider their alternative settings to ensure they are designed to personalize learning for students who so desperately need the proper nurturing and cultivation to be successful in the future. This research challenges districts to dig beneath surface voices to truly consider students' experiences who have spent time in these settings while trying to meet their high school diploma requirements. My commitment to this research will hopefully give students an understanding of their rights to a free and "appropriate" education, which provides hope and tools for them to succeed in the future. Likewise, my education and experiences made me a fitting candidate to conduct this research on the perceptions of former students who have spent time in alternative settings. I had the appropriate passion and drive to complete a thorough investigation and offer findings for the interest of future administrators, policymakers, and students who can work with each other to impact the design of these alternative environments in a way that offers personalized learning for all who attend.

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro challenges its learners to align with their commitment to education. They believe in promoting causes, fostering caring environments, and furthering our nation's democracy. As a student member of the University's Department of Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations, I chose to research a topic about which I was passionate, which allowed me to advocate for student voice in transforming the learning environments of those disenfranchised from traditional settings. As an administrator, I will

utilize the results of this research to inform practice and work with other administrators, district leaders, and policymakers to create regulation that considers the voice and perceptions of students beyond surface compliance to direct effective, sustainable change.

Overview of Chapters

This qualitative research study looks at the experiences and perceptions of former students of alternative educational programs. I conducted interviews, which allowed participants to tell their stories in the way they remember in response to a series of questions. This qualitative research allowed students to reflect on their high school years individually.

This chapter provided background on how alternative education programs became a focus in the United States. With the need to address gaps in achievement and graduation rates, districts placed more emphasis on finding ways to keep learners in school. Alternative programs were formed for credit recovery purposes and to remove students from traditional settings while providing some form of learning opportunities when students were disciplined instead of out-of-school suspensions. Although these alternative learning environments were created, little to no consideration has been given to students' perspectives on the impact of these settings on motivating students to complete high school. In Chapter II, I looked more closely at research related to three specific areas: underserved youth, student voice, and the impact of alternative programs. In my literature review, I paid particular attention to disciplinary practices concerning Historically marginalized students. In Chapter III, I describe the methodology for this research and data collection methods, data analysis, and study limitations. Chapter IV details findings from participant interviews, common themes, and commonalities expressed by the participants. It also summarizes the profiles of each participant, including background information, support from family, and current career status. Finally, in Chapter V, I analyze my findings and discuss

implications. I also provide considerations for policymakers in education regarding alternative programs.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

It is probably not in the plan of any adolescent when he or she is going to school, to be assigned to an alternative educational program for disciplinary reasons. Because navigating their high school experience is not an easy task for many students and it becomes significantly harder if there are other factors impacting that experience, there is no one-size fits all remedy when students become unable to thrive in the traditional school setting (Hursey, 2017). There are several kinds of exclusionary discipline strategies, including in-school suspension (ISS), out-of-school suspension (OSS), expulsions and assignment to alternative schools. Currently, alternative educational settings are the primary strategy employed by school systems to address all the disciplinary, environmental, and emotional issues students bring into the school setting (Welsh & Little, 2018a).

The purpose of my qualitative research project was to document the perspectives and experiences of former high school students, ages 18–30, who spent time in an alternative educational program for disciplinary purposes and credit recovery. Historically, educational decision-makers have utilized alternative placement as a strategy to address students who exhibit chronically non-conforming behaviors, and until recently, there was little evidence that students' perspectives were considered in the design and implementation of these alternative educational settings (Blair & Valdez Noel, 2014). Student perspective or student voice is trending upward in educational decisions at all levels along the educational continuum from middle school to high school and even in college (Blair & Valdez Noel, 2014). In my study, I documented the perspectives and experiences of former high school students who spent time in an alternative educational program to add to the discourse related to the value and benefit of utilizing student

voice to make educational decisions. This literature review contains research on important themes related to my topic, which includes the following:

- Impact of Alternative Programs
- Underserved Youth
- The Importance of Student Voice

Impact of Alternative Programs

History of Alternative Educational Environments

Although alternative educational programs have existed since the beginning of the public-school institution, modern day alternative education programs had their origin in the Civil Rights Movement (Lange & Sletten, 2002). By the late 1900s, alternative education had split into two broad categories: alternative education programs outside of the public education system and those within the public school system (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Alternative education programs that came to the fore during this period included Freedom Schools and Free Schools, which were begun to provide a more equitable and humane education experience for African American students, put forth the idea that the existing system of education which was not accepting of major segments of society could no longer be allowed to rule the day (Raywid, 1994). An additional contribution of this historical period was the recognition that not all students learn best in the same educational setting and therefore educational choice began to garner the spotlight and the reform movement was launched within the public school system (Raywid, 1994).

By the year 2001, federal standards for school districts across the United States became a reality as legislation mandated greater accountability for the high school dropout rate in each district (NCLB ACT, 2001). Shirley (2009) cites various researchers such as Hargreaves (2003), Ediger (2002), and Aron and Zweig (2003), who emphasize the neglect of curriculum to foster

real world experiences as a primary reason for students dropping out of traditional schools. Shirley (2009) highlights students' lack of vision and connection to the relevance of how education can help them obtain a viable career in the future. Schools scrambled to search for ways to educate youth at risk of dropping out. Districts began to address these concerns by increasing the various forms of alternative learning programs offered to include programs for credit recovery and disciplinary reasons in leu of out of school suspension.

Although inequities in US education existed long before NCLB, alternative schools gained momentum in the United States when the U.S. Department of Education placed emphasis on closing the achievement gap in public schools (Billig et al., 2005). Rod Paige, the U.S. Secretary of Education in 2004, advocated for the creation of innovative methods in meeting the needs of all students. Using this emphasis as a springboard, districts across the nation began to create alternative schools, which offered more choice for students and parents. Alternative schools are not just limited to publicly supported settings. These schools include private schools, Christian schools, home schools, and other types of schools. Unfortunately, the origination of alternative schools carries a negative connotation. Before de-segregation, alternative schools were created to educate racially segregated African Americans who were not allowed to attend traditional public schools. Before de-segregation, alternative schools, such as Freedom schools, were created to offer quality education to students of color. These schools operated in churches and in storefronts with hopes of educating people of color who felt disenfranchised in public schools (Frey, 2016). In the 1980's, many alternative schools were opened with promises to serve low performing students with behavior problems in the traditional school settings. These schools began to shift focus from becoming more engaging and innovative to becoming discipline focused, yielding a shift in perception to the learner being "underserved." The National Center for Education

Statistics (Wirt et al., 2003) reported that in large districts there were an increasingly larger number of alternative schools being created in mostly urban areas and particularly in the Southeast. Consequently, the NCES also reported that the largest percentage of enrollment in these alternative programs came from low socioeconomic districts and that enrollment is at least 3% of the total districts' population (Wirt et al., 2003).

NCES also indicated that districts were concerned with maintaining order and discipline in regular school environments (Shirley, 2009). The alternative schools began to be used as placements for students who received punishment for disciplinary infractions instead of suspensions or expulsions. Alternative schools gave districts an opportunity to relax standard rules, routines, and procedures to address the needs of their distressed youth and their families. Kilmer (2013) quotes Dynarski as saying:

Alternative schooling is not an option, but an absolute requirement in every American community. Alternative schooling opportunities will be needed to accommodate the educational needs of its youth because the traditional school system, and particularly the traditional high school, can no longer serve the needs of the student and their family lifestyles common in the 1990's. (p. 17)

With the continual focus on the mandates of NCLB, alternative programs continued to form in many capacities with varying purpose, structure, and program design. Although they are continually evolving, many alternative programs are being created to address the needs of students who cannot succeed in a traditional classroom setting with great flexibility given to rules and policies, class sizes, grading, curriculum, and instructor responsibilities. Now, countless forms of alternative learning environments have been created to address learners with various needs; however, little has been documented to include the students' perspectives with

regard to the design of these learning environments, curriculum, and interventions to assist students in successfully returning to the traditional school setting.

Common Structures of Alternative Programs

There are many types of alternative programs in the United States today. It has been estimated that there were nearly 100,000 alternative programs, including traditional alternative schools, classical alternative school programs, thematic studies alternative programs, and "unschooling" alternative programs, which take the approach of letting a child pursue their own interests with or without adult supervision (Frey, 2016). These programs serve various groups of students, including underserved youth who have not been successful in the traditional school setting. Raywid (2001), one of the pioneers in researching alternative education, made three classifications of alternative programs or schools based on enrollment. These classifications of programs are:

1. Voluntary enrollment schools such as magnet schools, schools within a school, or STEM schools. These programs cater to students who are seeking individualized instruction, authentic and innovative engagement.
2. Disciplinary programs where students are assigned for behavior modifications and interventions, and credit recovery purposes.
3. Schools that assist students with academic or social issues such as day treatment facilities.

The first category of programs typically offers a challenging and enjoyable educational experience for students. Administration and teachers emphasize various types of instructional strategies, which cater to all learning styles, and which prove both effective in addressing the needs of future ready workforce opportunities. The second type of program classified by

Raywid, has a structure that fosters opportunities for behavior intervention strategies to be utilized. These strategies give the learner tools to make better choices in everyday environments. According to Raywid (2001) these programs give few considerations to academic growth. The third program was designed for students who need professional treatment to overcome situations, which requires therapeutic interventions. These programs offer professional counseling along with academic support. Raywid (2001) reorganized her conceptual framework of alternative programs to encompass programs, which bring change to students, programs which change the school, and programs which change the educational system.

Aron (2006) and Tissington (2006) expanded Raywid's classifications with the creation of a new typology that highlights the overall focus and perspective of alternative education. Aron created a table that highlighted the full view of alternative educational programs and their efforts to increase opportunities for underserved youth in more authentic learning environments. Since the creation of the typology, there have been many changes and amendments in the structure of alternative learning programs (Roberson, 2015). Roberson defines the relevance of three purposes in alternative education: programs that attempt to correct student behavior, programs in highly innovative schools which focus on curricular changes, and programs that attempt to change the overall educational system. Today, all these factors must be considered for the purpose of comparison and analysis of alternative programs or schools.

In looking at the literature, the terms program and schools are used interchangeably and sometimes there is not a clear distinction between alternative programs and alternative schools. The accountability of alternative forms of education is extremely difficult (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Alternative programs today have very few regulations regarding consistency and program

offerings. The wide range of districts using alternative programs continues to draw attention to concerns of quality in planning and delivery of instructional objectives (McGee & Lin, 2020).

For this study, I have classified *alternative schools* as standalone institutions that are free to address curriculum needs, delivery, and awarding of course credit without the assistance of the traditional school. *Alternative programs*, conversely, rely on the expertise of the traditional school for instructional purposes and student support, grading, and awarding of course credit. Some school districts offer alternative programs as well as alternative schools. The distinction is the ability of internal staff of the program to operate independently in relation to the above criteria.

Benefits and Barriers in Design of Alternative Schools and Programs

Benefits

There are many positive findings that have been presented by researchers who have detailed the benefits of alternative programs. In this section I will discuss the following benefits of having alternative schools and programs:

1. Alternative schools and programs have a positive effect on reforming underserved youth.
2. Students take more responsibility for previous actions and preparation for growth.
3. Assist students in building positive relationships with peers and adults.

A quantitative study completed by Roberson (2015) showed one benefit is that alternative programs had a positive effect on reforming underserved youth. The study centered on the perspectives of ten educators who worked in alternative environments. The highlights of the study indicated that 47% of survey participants, all educators, agreed that office referrals for negative student behaviors were down. Seventy-one percent of survey participants agreed that

students and parents were informed about behavioral progress, and 94% of survey participants agreed that the alternative programs assisted with reforming behaviors. Although a benefit of Roberson's study was its consideration of the educators' perspectives, which were favorable for alternative programs, student and parent perspectives were not evidenced or considered. Another benefit of Roberson's research was also that it mentioned success was demonstrated by a few programs that utilized the Performance Level Progression Plan, which is a behavior modification plan. Simultaneously, however, the Plan lacked a detailed description of how it was utilized nor were the measurements for success given. Roberson's (2015) research indicated the benefit that formation of positive relationships between teachers and students built upon the learners' desire to graduate with a high school diploma. Although Roberson (2015) hinted at the importance of a student's desire or mindset to graduate, he did not indicate a need to determine from a learner's perspective what motivated this desire to achieve the high school diploma.

A benefit of alternative programs offered at the middle school level has also been found to assist students in building positive relationships with their peers and adults. A study conducted by Kilmer (2013) regarding students' perspectives on time spent in alternative programs while enrolled in middle school showed the above positive benefits. The study further provided information indicating that at the end of the alternative placement, students took responsibilities for their previous actions and preparations for future growth and development. Although students at the high school level did not complete this study, the results of Kilmer's research were of value since it encompassed the perspectives of the individual learners.

In 2017, Hursey completed research regarding the perceptions of alternative education from students ages 18-21. Hursey conducted a narrative study that focused on services, interventions, and supports that high school students, enrolled in alternative environments, perceived were

necessary in assisting them to graduate from a traditional school setting rather than an alternative environment. Claims related to the formation of healthy relationships pointed out that elementary and middle school students have fewer teachers leaving students more time to form relationships with those who directly impact their education (Hursey, 2017).

Roberson (2015) also lays out the foundation for building proper relationships in the middle school years by pointing out the nine "Cornerstone Strategies" produced by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. These strategies show that if the proper steps are not taken in the early years to personally identify with students socially, academically, and personally, the students become at risk of dropping out of school even before they reach the high school years. Kilmer (2013) studied the effectiveness of two alternative middle schools in relation to career preparedness found that students valued their small class size and teacher student relationships. Kilmer's findings underscore the urgency of this problem for students to build trusting relationships in the middle school years to drive success in secondary schools. Much has been researched to define and characterize underserved youth, but little has been done to ensure that underserved youth are properly addressed and stimulated in a positive manner that promotes them to thrive in a regular school setting. La'tunya Means (2015) attributes this problem to inadequacies in educational leadership. Students interviewed by Means indicated they were voiceless and unable to express their views. This research corresponded with McCargar (2011) who believed that children felt like they were pushed out of traditional schools or hidden in alternative programs.

Barriers

There are also several barriers found in the research. In this section, I address the following:

1. Teachers focus more on credit recovery, leaving little time to address students emotional and psychological needs.
2. Staff lack suitable training to address social needs.
3. Exclusionary punishment which leads to feeling of hopelessness

A zero-tolerance disciplinary policy that gained popularity in the 1990s when so much emphasis was directed toward violence prevention and prevention of drug use increased the chances of African American students being assigned to alternative education programs (Heitzeg, 2014), which often lacked adequate resources to fully address what students needed. The basic premise for alternative schools stemmed from the desire to provide an effective educational experience to certain groups of students, especially African Americans, for whom the traditional school models and settings were not working. Alternative schools typically had a lower student-teacher ratio, which was designed to address the academic needs of underserved students. The problem with this is that teachers tended to focus solely on credit recovery without considering that students might need more than just academic support (Lehr et al., 2009), which created a barrier to lasting or sustained changes. Another barrier is that many of the staff employed at or assigned to alternative education programs lack suitable training to adequately address the social needs of these students (Ashcroft, 1999). The greatest barrier to alternative education programs demonstrating their usefulness is the lack of cohesive research that clearly shows how alternative programs have been effective (Quinn et al., 2006).

Perhaps one of the more controversial studies that I found regarding alternative schools came from McCarter et al. (2020). The results of their study demonstrated a connection between legal factors such as the severity of the offense and the type of crime and extra-legal variables such as the juvenile's attitude, family involvement, gender, and race, and school-level factors

including grades in school, social economic status, discipline record, to predict juvenile involvement with the criminal justice system. The study compared 2006–2012 matched data from both the education and justice systems. McCarter et al. (2020) refer to the purpose of alternative schools as a secret pipeline to throw away students by coercion and involuntary placement eventually leading to the juvenile justice system. Additional research highlights the inequitable use of exclusionary discipline given to students of color (Kennedy et al., 2017; Milner et al., 2019). These researchers found exclusion to be problematic because it discourages students who are accused of offenses from being accepted or even wanting to return to the traditional school community.

> Exclusion from the classroom disrupts academic progress, fuels negative attitudes about the school on the part of the student and promotes a feeling of alienation between the offending student and the school community. (Milner et al., 2019, p. 42)

Students who are removed or banned from the traditional "acceptable" learning environment feel alienated and develop a sense of hopelessness in their ability to accomplish their educational goals. Research suggests that these practices of exclusion increase the chance that students will repeat grades or failed coursework, drop out of school, and eventually become a product of the justice system (Milner et al., 2019). Milner's research also affirms that minoritized students are negatively affected by inequitable systems of discipline that rely on suspensions, expulsions, and remandments to involuntary alternative placement programs. These discipline systems followed by administrators in schools of poverty with majority minoritized populations of Black and Brown students are more likely to exercise punitive discipline practices rather than restorative justice practices (Milner et al., 2019; Payne & Welch, 2015). These

findings should be consideration for policies in classroom management and exclusionary discipline practices utilized by administrators.

Exclusionary Discipline Practices

Effective school discipline is an ongoing challenge at all grade levels across this nation (Welsh, 2022). When students who are enrolled in public schools repeatedly display non-conforming and/or dangerous behaviors, school personnel begin to seek ways to stop the behavior as effectively as possible. Once a student reaches middle school age, acting out behaviors can be more severe than those infractions teachers see in elementary school and therefore the discipline received is more severe (Vogell, 2017). It is an unfortunate reality that when the harshest discipline is applied, the recipient is usually African American, male, poor and low performing academically (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018).

The problem of educational disengagement and/or disenfranchisement is not a one issue situation. Educational leaders are faced with a myriad of co-occurring issues when they must address acting out behaviors from students. A non-conforming student in middle school does not always have only one deleterious issue. If the student manages to successfully complete eighth grade, the negative issues become hindering factors as the student tries to transition into high school Ninth grade is the grade where most counter-productive behavior patterns become more visible (Welsh, 2022). The desire to separate the "problem" students from their non-problem peers becomes a "go to" when discipline is handed out. It is reported in the literature that certain student groups: students with disabilities, poor students, minority students (especially African Americans), students who identify as gay or nonheterosexuality and male students are assigned to exclusionary discipline settings more than their peers (Welsh, 2022).

There are multiple exclusionary discipline practices that educational leaders and teachers employ to punish these "problem" students. Most studies have focused on suspensions, but there is also in school suspension, out of school suspension, expulsions, and assignment to alternative settings (Welsh, 2022). While suspension used to be the most frequently applied exclusionary discipline, in recent history, assignment to alternative settings has become the most popular. This is due primarily to the passage of the No Child Left Behind statute that is now known as Every Student Succeeds Act (Welsh, 2022). Few of the studies I found included student voice as a serious component of disciplinary strategies. It is for this reason that I have decided to conduct a study of students who were assigned to alternative schools during their high school tenure.

In an earlier work, Bradshaw et al. (2008) stated that when students who are considered underserved experience ineffective alternative school programs, this can negatively impact them and prevent them from advancing, not only academically, but in their personal lives as well. The results for these marginalized young adults, who are oftentimes largely people of color, is that a larger number of them were affected by strict discipline policies and practices that pushed them out of schools and eventually into prisons. The participants in these alternative settings also yielded low graduation rates. Other researchers support McCarter et al. (2020) by concluding that initially designed alternative learning programs were designed to be positive but have transitioned into separate retributory schools for children who are deemed undesirable (Aronowitz et al., 2021).

Impact of Alternative Programs

Alternative education has historically had as its overall mission the intent to support students, who for various reasons, are not functioning successfully in traditional school settings while striving to provide innovative and effective curricula that re-engages marginalized learners

(McGee & Lin, 2020). Even though alternative programs originated from a need to offer more equitable and effective academic opportunities to minority students who were not being adequately served in traditional school settings, they have evolved into settings focused almost entirely on separating underserved students from the conventional setting for a myriad of disciplinary infractions (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018). When the focus of alternative schools began to change and with the application of NCLB and ESSA laws, alternative schools of multiple varieties became popular (Porowski et al., 2014). But, since there is no uniform federal or state statues governing alternative school programming, it has not been easy to document which programs are effective and which are not.

In the past 30 years, student enrollment in alternative programs has continued to increase, especially in urban school districts throughout the United States (Medler, 2018). During school year 2007–2008, there were 646,500 public school students enrolled in alternative schools (Carver et al., 2010). However, the most recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), data indicates the number of students currently enrolled in alternative educational programs is significantly lower at 435,088 public high school students housed in 4,548 alternative high schools for the 2014–2015 school year. These numbers account for 3% of all high school students and 17% of all public schools (Jimenez et al., 2018). The lower numbers are aggregate and upon initial look, appear to be trending toward fewer students being assigned to alternative programs. Disaggregating the data reveals that many of these alternative programs are in cities and most of the students represent minority and low socio-economic households (Fresques et al., 2017).

The significant presence in alternative programs of students of color whose families live in poverty has important societal implications as the nation continues to wrestle with the dropout

epidemic and inadequate graduation rates (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018). A longitudinal study conducted by Vanderhaar et al. (2014) found that 40% of students assigned to alternative school in middle school were detained in a juvenile justice facility by the time they should have been going to the 10th grade in high school. Negative outcomes including incarceration disproportionately impact black and brown students, which spotlights the fact that educators disproportionately choose harsher disciplinary actions for them than their white peers, when there are infractions (Aud et al., 2010; Noltemeyer & McLaughlin, 2010; Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace et al., 2008). These researchers again assert that the disparity in disciplinary decisions between minorities, low socio-economic students and their white peers is fueling the school-to-prison pipeline (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Unfortunately, teachers and administrators have autonomy to determine the perception of an infraction and the consequence or discipline administered when minoritized students are referred to the office.

Teachers' Roles in Alternative Programs and the Impact on Student Outcomes

Teachers are the frontline adults interacting with students. Their actions are the primary reason for disciplinary consequences. As human beings, teachers come into the classroom with their individual perceptions, beliefs, biases, and subjectivity, which influence their decisions when meting discipline to students for infractions. Response to what is considered inappropriate behavior by students is often tainted by teachers' beliefs about the students (Kennedy et al., 2017). Many times, when students of color express disagreement in the classroom, teachers perceive the expressions as disrespect or defiance rather than simply disagreement. Implicit bias by the teacher tends to search for opportunities to teach students a lesson rather than looking at disagreement as opportunities for collaboration and understanding of differences in cultural cues. When the discipline gap between white students and minority students is examined, it is found

that teacher-level and school-level punishments demonstrate "over selection" and "over sanction" of minorities for harshest consequences, rather than there being significant differences in non-conforming behavior (Skiba et al., 2014). Valencia (2010) put forth a concept called deficit thinking to explain why Black and Brown students as well as poor students disproportionately experience school failure.

In current educational discourse and practice on student performance, marginalized students are being blamed for their poor educational outcomes when educators often lack the efficacy to effectively work with them (Valencia, 2010). Valencia has named this "blame the victim" approach as deficit thinking. According to Valencia (2010) there are six characteristics of deficit thinking: blaming the victim, oppression, pseudoscience, temporal changes, educability, and heterodoxy. These six characteristics are defined in the table below.

Table 1. Valencia's (2010) Six Characteristics of Deficit Thinking

Characteristic	Description
Victim Blaming	Asserts "person-centered" reasons for school failure; students' personal characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language of origin) are assumed to be the basis for the student's poor school performance
Oppression	Provides evidence that those who are doing the victim-blaming (i.e., educators) will have undue power and authority over those who are blamed (i.e., underserved students), which can result in an oppressive power hierarchy
Pseudoscience	Occurs when deficit-oriented views are validated through researchers' and educators' inappropriate use of supposedly supporting evidence or data, which have been obtained or interpreted through a presumed deficit-oriented model
Temporal Changes	Ascribes students' failure to a set of accumulated deficits that are environmental or cultural in nature and that change depending on the current discourse around inferiority (e.g., genetics, family structure, culture, class)

Characteristic	Description
Educability	Finds deficits in the ability of students to benefit from interventions; deficits are used to predict inadequate progress and as justification for the prescription of limiting remediation
Heterodoxy	Challenges the presumed orthodoxy of deficit thinking and its entrenchment in society and education by revealing places in which deficit thinking can be challenged and orthodoxy can be dismantled

In addition to deficit thinking, some educators, particularly those in punitive alternative programs, also attribute poor academic achievement among marginalized students to poor home environments, lack of value for education and disrespect for educators (Shukla et al., 2022). Deficit thinking is still prevalent in disciplinary alternative school placements and the educational outcomes for these marginalized students who are consistently being harshly disciplined.

Alternative Programs: Implications for Research

The discussion and in some instances debate about the effectiveness of alternative schools and programs is ongoing at present. Because there is no uniform guidance for how alternative programming should be structured and there is limited cohesive research on what constitutes a successful alternative school program, there is demonstrated need for a national design/framework to offer some uniformity for this work. The research does indicate some issues that provide useful starting points for such a design. The first issue that needs to be addressed is the reduction of subjectivity in relation to how students get assigned to an alternative setting. More attention needs to be paid to the disparity in discipline between minorities and their white peers. Welsh (2022) argues that policymakers should create policies and push for practices that will reduce the use of the harshest exclusionary disciplinary consequences, particularly for subjective offenses and attendance-related infractions.

Another important distinction that Welsh (2022) advocated is for alternative programming for middle school students to be clearly different than alternative programming for high school students. He suggests more focus on behavior remediation and quicker return to home schools for middle school students versus a more academic remediation and credit recovery focus for high school students. Welsh (2022) also pointed out the need to focus on transition grades, eighth and ninth grade, especially. This is important because the literature indicates that dropouts who leave school around the age 14, are leaving for struggles other than being poor, African American, or illiterate (Phillips, 2019).

Hursey (2017) also researched interventions utilized that could help learners who were assigned to alternative programs. Interventions suggested by Hursey to assist these learners in alternative settings included a low teacher/student ratio, recommended 1:10, clear discipline codes, caring faculty, high expectations, IEPs based on student expectations and learning styles, flexible scheduling, and commitment to each student's success. Programs in alternative settings focused more on building positive caring relationships that promoted academic success. Another significant aspect of research about alternative educational programs is looking at what process or processes are needed for successful transition back to the home school (Welsh, 2022). There is serious need for further research to determine how best to reacclimate an underserved student back into the community of his/her home school if the reason for the severe exclusionary discipline placement involved violence or the threat of it against classmates and/or teachers. It is critical for school systems, school leaders, teachers, and all other stakeholders to be sensitive to the need for there to be effective policies and practices which allow for the smoothest and least problematic integration of returning marginalized students with their non-marginalized peers.

Student safety, teacher safety, and building-level safety are paramount concerns for school leaders (Welsh, 2022).

Another further research consideration is the need for policymakers and school leaders to seek innovative means to address drug-related infractions. The school that Welsh (2022) spotlighted in his study, in the 2018–2019 school year chose to refer students to a drug and alcohol class instead of using exclusionary discipline for first-time, minor possession of drugs and/or alcohol. This allowed them to document many initial positive results, including reduced drug infractions and lower percentages of recidivism. The takeaway from this school's results is that approaching drug use/abuse in creative and meaningful ways can be helpful for reducing the need for assigning students to alternative programs (Welsh, 2022). There is still the need to include student voice because theirs is the perspective that can offer first-hand experiential knowledge related to conditions in alternative programs. Looking closely at staffing is another needed area for future research. Finding out why teachers choose to work in alternative settings, why they stay as well as why they leave can add to the discourse on ways to improve instruction, school climate and student outcomes. Further research would also be useful regarding the racial makeup of student to teachers in alternative settings. Difference in ethnicities between students and teachers has been linked to disparities in disciplinary outcomes (Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Welsh & Little, 2018b).

Underserved Youth

Underserved students are usually most of the population in alternative settings. Webber (2018) identified characteristics of student risk factors and keys to successful intervention programs for these students. According to the Webber, students who were classified as underserved lacked effort in academic settings, low achievement, had a low commitment to school completion, and

poor attendance. Hammond et al. (2007) also highlighted family factors as a criterion for the "underserved" classification citing that social class, or low socioeconomic status, high family mobility, low education level of parents, large numbers of children in the home, not living with biological parents, are also factors which qualify students for being underserved youth. Hursey (2017) cites characteristics of students who are underserved to include: disadvantaged, deprived, disengaged, or disconnected. Hursey also states that no student is free of becoming marginalized because of the factors that could influence them throughout their educational years such as homelessness, death of a family member, and mental illnesses.

One concept explored by Milner (2018) is students' perception of control. Students experience so many traumatic events in their lives that they may feel they don't have control over opportunities for improvement. Some of these traumatic events are hazardous environments and living conditions, housing instability, crime infested communities, poverty and often limited food, limited transportation, and lack of proper health care. Milner (2018) revealed direct links between trauma and academic performance, ability to complete educational goals, and incarceration. The more trauma students experienced the more likely they were to have academic and behavior challenges. Milner and Richard furthermore claimed when students were experienced two or more traumatic events, they were three times more likely to miss at least two weeks of school and more likely to engage in risky and unsafe activities due to their lack of faith in opportunity and coping skills.

Much has been researched to define and characterize underserved youth, but little has been done to ensure that underserved youth are properly addressed and stimulated in a positive manner that promotes them to thrive in a regular school setting. La'Tunya Means (2015) attributes this problem to inadequacies in educational leadership. Means suggests that there are no systematic

plans to address the needs of students who are unsuccessful in a traditional high school setting. Means sought to address this by studying the direct perspectives of students who are marginalized and are currently being served in alternative programs. Means's (2015) study shed some light on practices that were counterproductive in assisting students to find success in traditional classrooms. The participants in Means's (2015) study spent at least one year in a traditional school setting and at least one year in an alternative school program during their high school years. Means study gave voice to students' perspectives who overall felt they were powerless in the face of the rules and disciplinary policies of the alternative schools to which they were assigned. The students did feel like they valued their education more after being in the alternative setting, however, they felt the alternative environment was very negative and they needed to leave before they lost hope.

This research corresponded with McCargar (2011) who believed that children felt like they were pushed out of traditional schools or hidden in alternative programs. Students interviewed by Means (2015) indicated they were voiceless and without the ability to express their views. These are some of the same feelings that students have when becoming frustrated in a traditional school setting. Educators who review Means (2015) research could use the results of the study to develop practices which included student voice in decision making, curriculum, and policies which had lasting effects on the future educational opportunities. If the alternative schools do not actually offer alternatives to student frustration, dropout might become a quicker reality. McCargar's (2011) research yielded student views regarding policy concerns in alternative schools which led to feelings of hopelessness including: lack of rigorous course offerings, clearly detailed plan to re-integrate the student back to the traditional high school, transparency in rules, policy, and the length of their stay, and better understanding of their

transcripts and courses needed to meet graduation requirements. Gopalan and Nelson (2019) conducted research to examine the discipline gap between white students, black students, and Hispanic students and found that there was not a measurable difference between White students and Hispanics but there was a considerable difference between the number of suspension and length of time Black students were disciplined compared to White students. Gopalan and Nelson noted that the discipline gap remains unexplained because heterogeneity differences such as student behavior were not observed.

Importance of Student Voice

Other themes noted in the research involved the importance of student voice in relation to making changes in educational environments. Some researchers believed that student voice was of little benefit because most students were only self-serving when expressing their opinions (McLeod, 2011; Shaffi, 2009). In the most recent literature, the discourse on student voice indicates that listening to student voice fosters increased understanding and therefore enhances educational research and improves practice (Paris & Alim, 2017; Quaglia & Corso, 2014). In addition to the value of student voice for leadership and research, it also increases student engagement (Mansfield et al., 2018). When leadership takes considering student voice seriously, Mansfield et al. (2018) asserted that the educational experience for students is more ethical and socially just because the programs planned and implemented are student-focused and therefore can result in more balanced research and reduction of oppressive school leadership structures. This means student voice brings more positive and innovative educational settings for students. The overwhelming view of student voice still indicates that more needs to be done to include learner perception in shaping policy. This inclusiveness places students at the heart of the system

which leads to better teachers, improved preparation for the job market, and greater transparency (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Seale, 2010; Shaffi, 2009).

Education leaders and decision makers have been realizing more and more that there is value in engaging student voice when making educational decisions and planning academic programming. Currently, there is a trend occurring in K-12 education where teachers are seeking student input in developing lesson plans, principals are including students in identifying strategies to improve school climate, and at the district level, advisory boards have been established in which students work side-by-side with school leaders addressing policy issues (Mitra, 2018; Conner et al., 2015; Murphy, 2016). The 21st century has ushered in this positive shift which manifests as a more student-centered approach in the design of school reforms (Conner et al., 2015; Mitra, 2018). Information that has brought forth increased and improved understanding of young people along with the sweeping changes happening in the dynamics of schooling have fostered a growing belief inside the education community that "students can contribute a valuable perspective on education" (Spires et al., 2008, p. 497, as cited in Murphy, 2016, p. 28).

There is no one definition for student voice. Student voice is often used synonymously to mean student participation, student perspective, student eyes, student representation, active citizenship, youth leadership, and youth empowerment (Mitra, 2018;Murphy, 2016). Each researcher offers his/her own definition for student voice in their writings, but there is general agreement that student voice does mean whatever specific effort or action taken those results in the inclusion of student experiences from the students' perspectives in decision making. For this study, I aligned with the definition put forth by Holquist (2019), which defined student voice as "the ways in

which all students have opportunities to participate in and influence the education decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers" (p.5).

There is limited research available that addresses student voice being represented in school policy making and/or decision-making circumstances because much of this kind of research has just been done in the 21st century (S. Murphy, 2019). As has already been stated, there is not one definition of student voice on which all scholars agree, however, there is agreement that inclusion of student voice has been increasing significantly as opposed to previous decades during which adult values and voices carried the day (Bragg, 2007). Schools, from the perspective of the adults forming them, were places where adults dispensed knowledge and students took that knowledge in (Holloway & Valentine, 2004). Student voice was completely ignored for years and years because they were considered incomplete and incompetent beings whose voices were not meant to be heard (Schultz & Cook-Sather, 2001; Lodge, 2005).

Two important factors in the past 30 years contributed to the change in how students and their voices were viewed and valued: (a) educators began to understand students differently and (b) the dynamics of schooling changed (J. F. Murphy, 2016). According to Burke and Grosvenor (2003), the cultural shift began as adults modified their views of students from thinking they were passive human subjects within the social structure and acknowledged students as "being active in shaping their social identities and as competent members of society" (p. 3). It has further been asserted that when a society sees its students as competent social actors, "it enables students to construct accounts of their lives in their own terms" (Holloway & Valentine, 2004, p. 10), which creates space for students to participate in the broader societal landscape, including educational settings.

Mansfield (2015) asserted that listening to student voice is critical for creating safe space where teachers and other adults in authority demonstrate their commitment to engaging students in meaningful conversations rather than speaking for them. Listening to student voices is essential for creating a learning environment that is student-focused and leads to increased student engagement (Mansfield et al., 2018). Using student voice is supported by SDT, also (Mansfield et al., 2018). Student voice literature points out that an additional value of allowing students to be authentically involved in decisions about their education results in them being more willing to persist in their academic pursuits. In other words, when students are afforded the opportunity to share power with the school leadership, they have a higher level of commitment. Shared leadership creates a more positive and balanced school climate (Welton & Freelon, 2017). Lac and Cummings Mansfield (2017) argue that listening to student voice is vitally important not only to the advancement of socially just policies, but also it provides invaluable information useful for improving student performance, retention, and progress.

Summary of the Chapter

In my review of the literature, I discussed relevant topics related to the research question, "What are the perceptions and experiences of former high school students ages 18–30 who spent time in an alternative educational program?" I discussed the history of alternative programs and the common structures and/or types of alternative programs. I also showed that the terms alternative school and alternative program can sometimes mean the same things. I then described some of the characteristics most often associated with underserved students and indicated that children who are considered underserved are the students who are most likely to be assigned to alternative programs. In the section on benefits and barriers, there is evidence that oftentimes highlights situations that can be considered a benefit, like a lower teacher-to-student ratio. However, these

situations can also be a barrier if the teacher is not properly equipped to address the students' social needs. The teacher's role in the academic tenure of students is one of tremendous influence since the teacher is the adult in the school who has the first and most contact with students daily. Existing research indicates that teacher biases and lack of understanding for underserved students may lead to over-selection and over-sanctioning of minority and poor students to the harshest exclusionary disciplinary results, up to and including expulsion and/or assignment to alternative settings. There is still a need for more research to clearly articulate the impact of alternative schools on the academic trajectory of underserved students, whether it is positive or negative. There is also a need for policymakers to work with school leaders to seek out and utilize student voice in decisions intentionally. Some researchers believe that only when student voice is treated as a serious component of educational decision-making will the educational experience for students, especially underserved students, be more equitable and fairer.

In Chapter III, I discuss my methodology for conducting this qualitative study.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This qualitative inquiry aimed to explore the personal perspectives and experiences of former high school students, ages 18–30, who were assigned to an alternative program. In this chapter, I detail my research methodology, including the research design that I used to gain access to the different perspectives of my participants regarding my research questions. I also describe the procedures and methods I used to collect data. Additionally, I provide details regarding population demographics, sample size studied, and a description of data analysis and reporting.

Research Methodology

Qualitative research allows an understanding of unique situations in each setting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research is not necessarily a predictor of what might happen in the future but a reference point for making sense of experiences at a particular time. The research methodology I used in this study is what Merriam and Tisdell (2016) call "basic qualitative research." To avoid any negative connotations represented by the term "basic," I used "qualitative research" to describe my approach. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) cite storytelling as the most natural form of making sense of our experiences.

> Narratives are how we share our daily lives, whether it be through cave drawings in ancient times or in a contemporary context, through Facebook … The key to this type of qualitative research is the use of stories as data and more specifically, first-person accounts of experience told in story form having a beginning, middle, and end. (p. 34)

By allowing the participants selected to tell their stories and addressing prompts in an open format, participants had an opportunity to illustrate the details of their experiences. As the interviewer, I also had an opportunity to ask the participants for clarification when the interview

was conducted so that participants could provide clarity in their expressions about their experiences.

Sample Population and Participant Selection

The study population consisted of a target sample size of five participants who were no longer enrolled in traditional high schools, were ages 18-30, and spent time in an alternative program while attending high school. When interviewed, no participant was affiliated as a student at an alternative school or program. No participant was excluded based on race, socioeconomic status, or gender. Creswell (2013) suggests using the convenience-based sampling method to save time in selecting the appropriate participants that would be easily accessible for interviewing. Participants' time, accessibility, and willingness to participate in extensive recorded interviews were assessed before they were considered for participation in the study. Guetterman (2015) notes that the researcher should focus on choosing the number of participants that will yield a rich array of data; therefore, I chose my final participants based on the amount and quality of data I gathered. Purposeful sampling was used to choose participants who provided data that addressed the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015).

I recruited students for this study by handing out flyers describing the study and/or initiating participation requests via Internet media and personal contacts. I connected with principals and former students who could assist me in recruiting students for the study. These former students provided me with the telephone numbers and email addresses of students interested in participating in this study. All participants in the study participated voluntarily and could excuse themselves at any time from the study. The names of the participants and the school were changed to protect their identity.

Data Collection Method

The first step in the data collection process was to conduct initial interviews of all individuals willing to participate in the study. Creswell (2013) cautions the researcher on power dynamics that hinder open dialogue and would create only one-way conversations. A thorough review of current literature helped me, as the researcher, to construct interview questions that were clearly relevant to my topic.

As the researcher, I met with participants individually at a specified time and place to allow them to tell their stories in a comfortable setting. Since we were still fighting the COVID pandemic, I gave participants a choice of having interviews via Zoom virtual meetings to minimize contact and maximize the safety of each participant. In-person interview locations were both neutral and non-threatening, such as a public library room with comfortable seating or a conference room at a local organization that is non-school related. The environment was carefully chosen to allow the participants to freely tell their stories without looking at the researcher as an authority figure. All participants' interviews were recorded. Interviews were transcribed using professional transcription software (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell caution researchers to choose recording devices carefully to be non-intrusive and not cumbersome. All participants permitted interviews to be recorded and were comfortable telling their stories as the interviews progressed.

Participants were invited to participate in two rounds of interviews to ensure the collection of rich, meaningful data. Since I am a former high school principal, I benefited from being familiar with the policies and processes established to assign students to alternative settings. I was unfamiliar with the daily interventions used by staff members in alternative settings during rehabilitation. I was also unfamiliar with individual student background

information that might have influenced their behaviors that led to the alternative placement. As the participants communicated their stories, I recorded the conversations. During interviews, I took notes regarding physical details that communicated participant mood or behavior, such as participant laughter, cries, long stares, nervous reflexes or repetitive behaviors, signs of agitation, or gestures, to name a few. A recorder was beneficial in ensuring I could correctly transcribe the participants' stories so that details of my research would be properly informed.

Interview Instrument

The interview questions I asked the participants aligned with the research questions. The interview questions provided rich data regarding their experiences in alternative education programs and what if any, "self-determination" strategies the participant utilized and additional coping or reforming strategies used to either improve their educational outcomes or abandon them. Interview questions were designed and organized to address the three sub-questions to the problem of this study.

The first-round interviews were more exploratory, allowing participants to share their personal background, demographic information, family life, and influences in their decision-making. In the initial interview, I asked participants to reflect on what led to the alternative placement assignment, their experiences during the placement, and what assisted or hindered them while they were assigned to the alternative program. In the second round of the interviews, I continued to ask about their experiences, sought clarifications regarding their responses during the first-round interview, and discussed their reflections about their current life and future goals. I include the first- and second-round interview instruments in Appendixes A and B, respectively.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis was an ongoing process throughout the study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that the data quality is more important than the quantity. I focused on taking rich field notes throughout the data collection process and planned follow-up questions for discussion as I reviewed notes. Informal data analysis took place during and immediately after each interview session. Information received or the "text," which details the participants' experiences, was used to inform my research, and interpret the meaning of my data.

The last phase of this qualitative study was to analyze all the interview data I collected. I took extensive time reviewing each transcript in its entirety and all the data collected. I coded the transcripts using one-word signifiers to identify several main themes that represent my findings. Each participant's interview was coded by identifying keywords so I could easily identify important facts, develop themes, and clarify patterns that transcend from one participant's data to the next. As I coded data, I kept in mind my personal biases brought into the study due to my background, knowledge of individual students, procedural differences, and beliefs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Along with the recordings of the interviews, I kept and reviewed field notes, timetables, and reflections on learning as I interviewed participants. After each interview, I also reflected on how the information I received corresponded with current research.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

I have previously acknowledged my positionality as a former principal in a high school for over 16 years. This is very important because I, as the acting principal in a high school, could control remandments to alternative high school programs, influence policy regarding how the students received educational services, and determine when they could return to the traditional school setting. In some respects, one might think that I reviewed the effectiveness of my own

job. However, this study was not designed to determine the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of any employee working in or with alternative programs. Therefore, as one who was aware of my positionality and its possible influence on the research, I used methods that assisted me in addressing my subjectivity as I conducted the study and analyzed findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I kept a reflexivity journal throughout the data collection process and ensured my reflections were noted as researcher reflections so that they did not take on the role of the direct opinions of the participants. The reflexivity journal was needed since I was an insider to the study because I have specific knowledge of practices and policies in assigning students to alternative learning environments as a former high school principal. As participants were telling their stories, I needed to note my internal biases and response to what was being said so that these responses did not impact what the participants were truly communicating (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

To ensure validity, I recorded all interviews, and all participants agreed to the recordings before the interview. All tapes were transcribed in their totality and were not shared with anyone other than participants. Pseudonyms were used to represent the identity of participants and the school to ensure the participants remained protected. I also took the advice of Creswell (2013) and conducted member checking to ensure accuracy of the transcripts. My research structure, design, data collection methods, coding, and process for data synthesis are fully described in my dissertation so that other researchers can utilize my methods for future research and studies. After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, I followed the requirements, guidelines, and ethical practices that would not harm any individual or institution. I also ensured that I had consent from all participants (see Appendix C), protected the identity of all subjects

included in the research, and remained continually aware of the role and impact that I played on relationships that I have or may form throughout the study.

Limitations

Due to the small number of participants, this research study did not uncover universal truths about alternative programs. Revelations found in this qualitative research were limited to the perceptions of a few participants who attended alternative programs or schools. Additionally, future researchers will not be able to replicate the results of this study because the participants are all unique individuals with varying experiences. Findings in this study are limited to the information given by voluntary participants. I relied on the understanding and accuracy of the participants when obtaining data for review. This study was not designed to evaluate the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of employees working in alternative settings.

Summary

This chapter included details of my research methodology and methods. Specifically, in Chapter III, I detailed the research methods I used in the study, participant selection methods, instrumentation used, data collection and analysis, ethical considerations, and study limitations. The research findings are presented in Chapter IV, including details of educational experiences and reflections presented by the participants, themes and commonalities that emerged from the participants studied, and any extraordinary phenomena. Chapter V includes the study summary and implications for future researchers in the field. Chapter V also provides considerations for policymakers in education regarding alternative programs.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present my findings concerning the questions I sought to explore at the beginning of the research. To recap, my main research question was, "*What are the perceptions of former students ages 18-30 who served time in an alternative school for discipline?*" My secondary research questions were:

1. How do former students perceive interventions used in alternative schools impacted their success in returning to a traditional school and/or meeting graduation requirements?
2. What do they perceive worked best about the alternative educational program?
3. What changes do they think would have helped improve the alternative educational program?

After completing Chapter III and defending my proposal, I obtained approval to continue my study by the Institutional Review Board. I then prepared to advertise and conduct interviews according to the Methodology described in Chapter III. Using the theoretical framework of self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985), I organized my interview questions to identify why participants struggled in high school and determine the driving force that motivated each participant to try to graduate. As discussed in my review of the literature in Chapter II, SDT focuses on ensuring that schools provide the processes and support to enable student success (Lavoie et al., 2016). In line with existing research on alternative programs (Stephan et al., 2011), I also specifically asked participants questions that would indicate whether the practices and supports in the alternative school fostered individual motivation, assisted students academically and provided the proper social and emotional support needed to impact their efforts to graduate from high school.

In this chapter, I describe the alternative school or program that participants participated in. I also present profiles of all the participants. The profiles provide background information, including home life, participants' opinions on original placement in the alternative setting, and summaries of what helped motivate them while in the alternative school. Some profiles include participants' perspectives on how educators can better serve students in alternative settings. After presenting participant profiles, I discuss general themes that emerged from conversations with the participants.

Alternative Settings of the Participants

There were two different types of alternative settings to which the participants were remanded. The first setting was an Alternative High School. This school was described by one participant as a separate school from the traditional school. The school was in a medium-sized district. This alternative school had a principal, guidance counselor, and subject specific teachers. They also had the ability to award course credit independent of the traditional school. The school also held a graduation service independent of the traditional school. For this study, I refer to this school as "Alt School #1."

The second setting described by participants was an Alternative Program that was operated as a high school within a high school. This program was housed in a separate building from the traditional school. This program was described by participants as a school that operated under the guidance of a traditional high school. Although the alternative school had an assistant principal, each participant was still under the guidance of their principal at the traditional school and their counselor from the traditional school. Work was delivered to the students by their teachers from the traditional school and questions regarding assignments were referred to teachers in the alternative school who would then contact teachers in the traditional schools for

clarity. The participants were monitored by enrichment teachers. Four of the participants referred to this program as their placement. For this study, I refer to this program as "Alt School #2."

Participant Overview

I selected five students from two different traditional schools in North Carolina to participate in the interview sessions. There were two females and three males. All participants identified as African American. Two participants identified as gay males, while one participant identified as a lesbian female. The first participant I selected requested to participate from a flyer that was seen on social media. The second participant was made aware of the research by a current principal. The final three participants learned of the study from text messages circulated by former students. The participants contacted me with a request to participate. I analyzed background information from surveying the participants, field notes that I collected, and answers to interview questions to determine if any initial trends existed among the students. To protect the student's identity, I chose pseudonyms and used them throughout my dissertation.

Participant Profiles

In this first section, I share profiles of the participants. These profiles include their experiences and perceptions regarding their time in high school. I have provided insights into some of the participants' reactions during the interviews in italics.

Table 2. Participant Demographics

Alias	Participant Demographics	Graduation Status	School Attended
Females			
Connie	Connie is a 24-year-old. Connie is currently working full time as a forklift operator.	Did not graduate. .	Alt School 2
Fancy	Fancy is a 24-year-old female and single parent. Currently working full time but has a desire to finish college.	Diploma. Graduated on time with class and attended one semester of college.	Alt School 2
Males			
Ronnie	Ronnie is a 23-year-old. Currently working part-time.	Graduated on time with class.	Alt School 2
John	John is a 29-year-old. Completed education by choice at alternative school.	Graduated from alternative high school	Alt School 1
Jordan	Jordan is 25 years old. Identifies as transgender. Currently working as a nursing assistant Has a desire to further his education.	Graduated on time with class. Indicated received nurse aide training at technical college	Alt School 2

Participant John

Background

John was the first participant who agreed to meet to discuss his alternative placement. John's first and second interview was conducted online. After reading the interview purpose and allowing time for John to ask questions, I opened the conversation by asking John to tell me a little about himself and his family. John identifies as a Black male. He came from a very large and supportive family. John's mother was a single parent initially who was raising him and his sister, but John quickly shared that he had the full support of both parents, and his father was very active in his life. John's family lived close to him and most of them graduated from high

school. John indicated that his family was able to help him with his studies. John identified his family as loving and close. He stated he never really had any family problems.

John's daily routine is described in his words below:

> Um, days went in high school. Days went more so in the morning, get up, shower, ready for school. I was getting on the bus at that time. Go to school, go through a normal day of school, come home from school. Um, normally be food out already. My mom normally was at work, so it'd be me watching after my little sister. Or if not be a, she'll go to after school program. I'll go to after school program, or I go with my friends.

John did not describe the obligation of caring for his sister as a burden. He also shared that he had time to hang out with his peer group. John spoke of influences in his life. Outside of his family, John believed that he made his own decisions but sometimes listened to his crowd and peers. He stated, "That's why I made a lot of bad choices."

John spoke about the culture of his traditional high school. He stated it was a place he went to but did not like because it was a popularity contest, and his popularity among other students did not help him. John also voiced his belief that the coach/athletic director was unfair. This was also his math teacher in school. John perceived that he was judged for a fight outside of school and that his position on the team was taken away and given to another player that he fought outside of school. He also indicated that students would build relationships by hanging out with the principal, and that influenced the principal's opinion about other students. He indicated that he wasn't that type of guy. Therefore, John thought he was popular with the students but treated unfairly and then disliked by teachers and the principal based on gossip. John explained,

> Between, it was the, it was the setting of, um, public school that I didn't like. It was more so like a popularity contest, getting in good with teachers, and then everybody would get in good with teachers and principals and stuff. And I wasn't, and I wasn't into that. So, it was a, it was really hard for me --------- because of the fact that, um, a couple decisions I made had a lot of, I had made a lot of bad decisions with, gave me bad blood with my principal and a lot of my teachers, which kind of prevented me from graduating on time. And then sent me to the alternative school. It'd be a lot of he say, she say in the school where it's like everybody's playing telephone and words, just getting around. And I felt like my, the principal that I had was too personal and use to outside of school business. He wouldn't like you for something that was said from another student.

John's Perceptions About Alternative School Placement

John also perceived that his popularity got him into trouble several other times. He believed he was smart enough to complete his assignments, but when he finished his work, he became the class clown, which became his peers' expectation. John discussed the very first time he was sent to an alternative school. John indicated he was set for a bad year. (*I noted that John paced back and forth outside as he told this portion of his story. He seemed very intense in his descriptions, as if this happened yesterday).* He stated he had a bad schedule, taking classes with upperclassmen and learning to adjust to high school. He was picked on a lot because he was the smallest guy in the class and was younger. It was obvious that John could clearly feel the effects of the bullying that he received from classmates. He shared that the math teacher was also the football coach, and his teammates were bullying him. He stated he ended up having an altercation in the hallway with one of the players, who continued to pick on him in class. John welcomed the fight. After this, John's schedule still was not changed, and he endured the

bullying and continued to have altercations with the player until almost the end of the year when his schedule was finally changed.

Later in the interview, John stated that he fought a player on school grounds, which led to him getting kicked out of the traditional school. He moved to another district briefly with his father but returned to his mother's home and was placed in the alternative school. John stated that this was in his best interest but felt the placement was unfair because the other student did not receive a consequence, and the bullying was never addressed. He also stated that the administration did not see the fight, but the principal issued his punishment from hearsay.

> Um, I started getting aggravated with the fact that I was in a class with upperclassmen. It was nothing but upperclassmen in the school. And so that I ended up getting into it with a guy that was an upper classroom. Cause basically just picking with me, because I was the smallest one in the class, and I'm a young dude. He wanted to pick with me. He was also a star football player. And the math coach that I had was the football coach.
>
> So, when me and him got into it in class, you know, me basically just not, not wanting him to keep bothering me, but not really backing down. It led to a big altercation in the hallway, which I, I was trying to fight. I ended up switching to a different teacher, same class. Um, and while I was playing football, now that the coach didn't have me and me and the coach wasn't agreeing with each other, I disliked him. So, when I went to football practice, and then it led from me having a starting position to somebody else starting over me. We got into a whole fight after school and after we got into the fight after school, I was kicked out of the traditional school, and they told had to go to alternative school because I fought right in front of the school.

John classified his experience at the alternative school as positive. He stated that when he returned to the traditional school, he spent his junior and senior years trying to get back down there. He stated that he finally bonded with one principal who shared what he could do to get placed back in the alternative school.

John's Supports and Interventions in Alternative School

John's alternative school provided everything for him that his traditional school provided. He was able to interact with other students during class changes; students had subject-specific teachers who specialized in the curriculum, counselors who met with them regularly to encourage them and keep up with their progress, and a principal whom John identified as personable and encouraging. John stated that although he was sent to the alternative school, it was his choice the second time because of his positive experience.

John's Relationships in Alternative School

The alternative school allowed him to avoid his troubles at the high school and receive personalized attention. John stated that the most effective interventions used at the alternative school were simple: teachers were outside waiting to greet them as the bus pulled up. He said all staff members, including the principal, greeted them by name. As an example of the relationship and impact the staff had on students at the alternative school, John stated the counselor is like an "Auntie." The counselor was someone John could visit whenever needed and would call him in if she noticed his day was not going smoothly.

John stated that the alternative school also had different gangs who did not like each other, but the culture at the school was non-combative, and you would never catch them fighting there. John received a citation from the courts because he participated in fights at the traditional school. John explained,

> It was more, than, learning at the alternative school it was controlling my anger in school. Cause this ain't the environment for that type of behavior. Like stay away from, stay away from the negativity and if you feel like fighting is your only way to get through it, then just don't go, which meant keeping my mouth shut at times when I felt some things need to be said or just not getting into a lot of the arguments and situations because that's, even if they was doing it, that's not what I was there for. Yeah. And it was, yeah, it was different groups of people, and it was, you know, you got different people that don't like each other from different sides of town and people probably grew up fighting, but you wouldn't catch 'em fighting there.

John's grades improved at the alternative school. John did state that the alternative school lacked resources. They were not able to assign homework because they did not have enough books to go around.

John's Perception on the Impact of Alternative School

John acknowledged that it is hard to change people's perceptions of you. Even though you might change, sometimes other's perceptions hinder you from your restart. Although John was a believer of the alternative school, he did not give them credit for helping him to thrive in the traditional school when he went back. He said their function was to help him deal with his personal issues about himself. He reiterated that is why he returned to the traditional high school. John stated that when he went back to the regular school, he still faced the same principal, staff, and resource officer whom he felt were all out to get him regardless of how he had changed. John credits the alternative school for eventually helping him to obtain his high school diploma. John did not "want to go through the same spiral" that he had gone through in his previous years, so he was motivated to change and finish. John shared that his final motivation for graduating

was that his little sister was entering high school, and he did not want to be in school with her. He laughed lightly at this notion.

Participant Ronnie

Background

My next participant was Ronnie, a 23-year-old graduate who grew up in a single-family home with his sister and mother. Ronnie identifies as a Black male who is gay. He is currently seeking a job and lives with his mother and sister. Ronnie shared that he came from a supportive family. He explained his family was very strict on him and that they just wanted him to do good in school. Ronnie also shared that he is considered a student with a disability. He needs additional support with the curriculum.

Ronnie voiced that he had problems with his sexuality while going through school. He was just finding himself and figuring out that he was a gay man. (*I noted that Ronnie was apprehensive when telling this part of his story).* He stated being gay was really challenging. Although he shared that being gay was an open topic in high school, he said it was really hard. Ronnie stated that knowing this about himself influenced his decisions and actions which led to him going to the alternative school. Ronnie also shared that his mother did not know about his sexuality at first. Once his mother found out, Ronnie explained she was not supportive of his sexual preference. This was very frustrating for him, and Ronnie conveyed that this was on his mind a lot during school and at home. (*I noted that Ronnie paused often during this part of the interview and became a little uneasy. I decided to conclude the first session for Ronnie. Afterwards, Ronnie thanked me for having him and giving him the opportunity to share his story. We made an agreement to meet again to discuss in detail his experiences at the alternative*

school). Ronnie also received a citation from the courts as a result of bringing a weapon to school, an incident I describe in more detail below.

Ronnie's Perceptions About Alternative School Placement

Ronnie hung around a lot of girls whom he describes as being "messy." Ronnie stated he needed an alternative setting to get away from the drama. Ronnie explained that his parents were supportive of him while he was remanded to the alternative school. Ronnie was first placed in the alternative school when he was in the middle school.

In middle school, Ronnie was placed in the alternative several times for fighting. He believed that the influence of his friends caused him to get into situations in which he really should not have been involved. Ronnie explained,

> Well, I had, um, started out going there when I was in middle school. Oh, okay. For fighting. It's always a fight that led up to me going to the, um, alternative settings. Some, some friends. They were pushing me to, um, go back there. Or some of 'em I did engage in, in myself, but that was because I just had a bad group of friends. Honestly. I would get into their stuff without even being issue with me. And, um, yeah, I think that's where I messed up about it.
>
> Um, I just always been that kind of friend. Like, if you talking to my friend, like this kind of way, I'm finna talk to you back that kind of way because don't do that to my friend type things.

Ronnie recalled that he was initially placed in the alternative school for bringing a weapon to high school. He stated he brought the weapon to school because a friend asked him to for protection. In looking back at the past, Ronnie shared he would not make those poor decisions again. He recognized that it was not worth it because the friends will eventually grow

apart. Ronnie also conveyed that he felt the placement to the alternative school was fair. He noted,

> Cause you, it's like you do the crime, you gotta do the time. So yeah, I do feel like it was fair. Maybe they, uh, sent me there because when I did used to get in trouble, I used to get upset with them as well, who was sending me to these places. And yeah, that's probably a main reason why, that's, I think that's just policy.

The above data allude to the fact that the participant relates the alternative school as a prison, suggesting that his actions were punishable and that the alternative placement was the ruling for the crime. Ronnie mentioned that he was placed in the alternative school about three or four times in high school. He states his longest punishment was 45 days for the weapon. He said the 45 days felt like torture, but he was only there for 45 days. Ronnie did not blame the school for his placements in the alternative school. He referenced his mother when stating that he was responsible for where he landed. He remarked, "Um, it really wasn't a school's fault in my case. Um, it was mainly just on me. Really, really. I just had to get my stuff together at school. Like my mama always told me."

Ronnie's Supports and Interventions in Alternative School

Ronnie expressed that being in an alternative school was very difficult for him socially and academically. As a student with a disability, Ronnie needed much support to understand the curriculum. He shared that teachers would come down from the high school on their break to assist if they had time, but it was not enough to help. He said he had to attempt to figure things out on his own. The alternative school was housed in the middle school's basement, making it difficult for teachers to reach him. The students in the alternative school would be sent work from their teachers through a principal or an assistant. The alternative schoolteachers were

coaches; one was Ronnie's football coach, and one was his cousin. He said they were supportive but could not help him understand his studies. Ronnie explained that he received help from his EC teacher, a Caucasian female, regularly. He could test in a separate setting and had help with "read-aloud" if needed.

Ronnie did not remember having the support of his counselor while in the alternative school. He shared that you came to school every day, waited on your work in your cubicle, and remained quiet. The only time you were allowed to talk to even adults was when you were having trouble or felt like you were about to fight. Ronnie stated the alternative school was beneficial because he had time to consider his behavior. This made him reflect on his decisions and know he did not want to return. He was not given any behavior guides or reflective sessions, but he learned that this was not the environment where he wanted to spend his time.

Ronnie's Relationships in Alternative School

Ronnie acknowledged that he lives for his social life. He stated he was social, and going from an open environment to one where you could not talk for hours out of the day was the most difficult for him. He stated he had time to catch up on his work, but it was difficult to do things independently. Ronnie explained that his Coach, one of the alternative schoolteachers, often fussed at him about getting himself together. He said he made friends with the new people coming to the alternative school when they could talk at lunch or outside, but he missed being with old friends because they were in the traditional schools. Although Ronnie made new friends, he stated he could see why some students were sent to the alternative school. He said he thought about some of the students down there. He does not know what could have helped them because it seemed like they just wanted to stay down there. Ronnie remarked,

> Um, honestly, I really don't even know because it just seemed like they didn't want help. They just wanted to stay down there. Because I guess it was a way away from all the other people, like bullies and type stuff like that. And they felt safer down there. But some of the people in the traditional school would feel like they were the, were the bullies.

Although Ronnie shared that the alternative school gave him much time to think and that he did not want to go back to the traditional school, he shared that he went back several other times. When asked what finally stopped him from going back, he stated, "my assistant principal." Ronnie elaborated,

> Um, my assistant principal <laugh>. That's what really stopped me from going back. She, she was really on her whole class. She was onto everybody but me. I feel like she just, Hmm. I feel like I just didn't want to disappoint her really. And oh, mm-hmm. make her upset with me cuz I, I hated when she was upset with me. <laugh>. Because my coach, he was just like somebody I could, um, I just practice with. He, we ain't really making no connect here. I ain't really have a connection with any of my coaches really. I just, Ms. Love spent more, Ms. Love, she spent more time with me. She talked, like, actually talked to me, my family, and I really loved her. Uh, yes. She just kept me in check. She just helped; she pushed me to be a better person more mainly. And yeah, she just true I feel like she genuinely carried and loved me for real.

Ronnie's Perceptions on the Impact of Alternative School

Ronnie graduated on time with his class and received his high school diploma. He said his experience in the alternative school helped him in more ways than one. He could keep a job because he left school before the other students did. He could not attend traditional school

activities, so his social life was limited. This helped him to focus more on things that were important for life. Ronnie said he also became more disciplined and independent. He said alternative school taught him how to deal with failure. He equates not getting a job like an "F" on your report card because you did not show up.

Participant Connie

Background

Connie experienced several problems with the juvenile court system for activity in and out of school. She was eventually banned from all participation at the traditional high school. When Connie entered the room, her first words to me as the researcher were, "I have waited a long time for this day." *(I noted that her body language seemed very direct but anxious).* She then explained, "I have waited a long time to tell her story because I am hurt by what happened to me."

Connie identifies as a Black female who is lesbian. She is married with one child. Connie currently works as a forklift driver in a factory. Growing up, she lived with her mother, grandmother, one older sister, and a few cousins in her grandmother's house. Connie recognized her mother as her parent back then. She also shared that her mother died shortly after high school, and now she recognizes her grandmother as her parent. Connie's sibling did not live with her. Connie said all she really had growing up was the support of her grandmother and mother. She said they had their ups and downs, but everything was alright. She said she remembers her grandmother working many days and running back and forth with the kids.

Connie discussed her motivation to continue in school. Connie initially came to school every day, even when she was remanded to the alternative school. She spoke of her grandfather's desire for her to graduate before he died and her desire to make that happen. Connie did not work

while she was in school. She said her job was to finish school. Connie stated that many of her friends quit school before the end of the freshmen year because they did not have parents. She said they were out there for themselves, and some who had parents were not pushed by their parents to stay in school. She explained her mother used to tell her, "I ain't going to jail behind you." She said that motivation really did help a lot.

Connie describes her typical day in school as a full day of avoiding class. She stated that she spent her time skipping in the hallways and got away with it most of the time, but one teacher knew her routes and would catch her. She spoke of one teacher, Ms. Brown, who was not her direct teacher but always caught her skipping. Other than that, Connie thought that school was a game and, ultimately, she would be passed on to the next grade. Connie does not blame anyone but herself for her decision to skip classes. She explained,

> Uh, first period. Who? I'll walk the halls a little bit. I ain't gonna lie. Depends on who my teacher was or, I don't know. I tried to go around system a little bit. But, uh, I can say Ms. Brown always had me in the hallway. <laugh>. She, I think she knew my routes, I do remember that … But other than that, uh, when I was in class, my class, I've gotta tell the truth. Um, I mean, I was a pretty good student. I mean, I was really just known. I really wasn't, my problems weren't in my class. It was just outside wandering and stuff. But other than that, I think I was a pretty good student during class. I really felt like it was a game at that time., because of how middle school was, I'm not gonna lie to you. Everything was just, okay, you do this and they gonna push you on, they gonna push you on, they gonna push you on. I didn't realize until at the end how serious high school was. When my friends passing me and I'm still at the same level or the same standpoint and I'm like, oh, I'm getting older, not younger. So, it's like eventually I ain't gonna be here

no longer. Mm-hmm. And regardless, as my friends going tonight, y'all gonna have to give me a time limit to get my stuff together. But I didn't realize it until the end. I ain't gonna lie. I thought it was just getting pushed on.

Connie acknowledged the agony of realizing she was behind her classmates due to her behaviors that led to her being placed back and forth between traditional and alternative schools. She spoke of the desire to fill her grandfather's dream of her graduating from high school and the sadness she felt when she realized it would not happen. She elaborated,

> At that time when I figured I was behind was when I had a, a meeting with the superintendent. I didn't know I was I knew I was behind, but I didn't know it was that serious. Like, oh, I really played and life, pass me by. Oh, it's fun now and okay now. But then it's like at that time I was really sad cause in middle school I had my granddaddy and he wanted one thing before he left. So, I'm like, okay, I gotta get that done. And then in high school I'm like, oh man, I gotta get this done because now I got somebody else looking for that I know is not going to finish with me. So, I'm like when they had that meeting with me, I really realized it. Like I really messed up. I think that's the time already, you know, I messed up.

Connie's Perceptions About Alternative School Placement

Connie shared that her parents supported her but did not support her attending the alternative school. She stated that it was like a day care and her parents knew this. Connie did not view the alternative school as a school. She felt she was there consequently for her actions, not for education. She describes the program at that time as a place where she received counseling for half of the day and then academics for half of the day. She describes the program as therapeutic and even stated she graduated from it. When Connie got to high school, she thought

the alternative school would run the same way since it was in the same location, in the basement of the middle school. Connie states she continued to get sent to the alternative school because she just could not be still. She did not feel she could stay in one place and learn. Connie also shared the placement was unfair. She felt like many other options could have been chosen to work with her, but the school did not want to be bothered. She explained,

> Because administration didn't want to? I feel like I ain't wanna deal with me like, I don't know, maybe I didn't see myself trying but as educators I feel like that you should, you feel me? Try to wasn't no try. I didn't feel like you want no try left in me. I feel like you could have done something, you feel me. Mm-hmm, I ain't feel like I'm just that worthless like I wasn't that … Like come on now it wasn't that bad. It got a little rough. But I done had teachers that carry with me since like elementary school and still reach out to me to this day. You feel me? So, I'm like I know it wasn't that bad. Cause if y'all still, I can't be that bad. Y'all supposed to been forgot about me. That's the case. <laugh>, all these kids y'all Done seen throughout y'all career, y'all still remember me? Come on now, I ain't that bad?

Connie did not find that the high school alternative placement welcomed her as a student. She felt her job was to show up, be watched all day, and then go home. Connie expressed further that she never felt like anyone cared for her at the traditional school besides the one teacher who would find her in the hallways and the principal who lightly cared for her. She also stated that teachers who knew her before high school would check on her, but that was about it. The interview ended with Connie looking as if she was in a state of hopelessness.

Connie's Supports and Interventions in Alternative School

Connie described the alternative school as a place where no learning took place. She states she wishes she would have received the support of a guidance counselor to do something besides just get her a schedule. She said nothing prepared her for high school, and no one prepared her for a career. She recalled other people getting help, but no attention was given to the kids in the alternative school to help them build a future. Connie stated the teachers in the alternative school were a coach and a teacher assistant. She said they could not help anyone. Connie also shared how frustrated she was with always being behind. She said no one in the alternative school taught the curriculum that could assist her. Connie also shared that she needed to be able to do hands-on work and have hands-on assistance. She said she did not even remember having a teacher who helped her learn. She stated she sat in class, lost and behind most of the time. She commented,

> Yeah. It's like okay now I'm behind on this and I gotta think about that. But I don't know this, and I can't tell you that. But if I do tell you, it's like what can you really do? I guess, I dunno. I'm just, I'm all over the place. I know one subject, ninth grade, one subject, 10th grade, one subject in every grade you want. I don't think I ever went to Spanish, and I've been there four years, never even had Spanish. So, it's like certain stuff I be talking to my friends about, and I'll be hating like having conversations like that cause it do be thinking, like having me feel a little sad and stuff. But it be like, dang, I never took Spanish. I never took this. Like I don't even know what that is. Y'all. And I really was there four years like oh God. But yeah, that's a lot of stuff. I really dunno. And that be making me feel like I don't, I want my high school diploma get my G E D but I, I don't know if I done got too old to the point where I ain't teachable in school no more or

something or I love that school man. No matter how many times it's like, I don't know. It's just wanting the same resources.

Connie did not feel she was provided the same resources to learn or had the same access to help.

Connie's Relationships in Alternative School

Connie had a very positive experience in middle school when she was sent to alternative school because of her principal. Connie explained,

> See we had this principal, Ms. Heart. She was a black principal, who loved students' hands on everything. But she passed away about seventh grade. It took a real toll on all kids, like everybody know Ms. Heart. And I feel like after that it just, I don't know, just like, yeah, don't really care no more. I feel like she was the person really cared. Like she was a real hands-on principal. Like even outside of school. Like yeah, she came to people, football games, all that. Like she was really, yeah. But for my class, I say class 2016, I feel like that was really like when we got to the eighth grade, it was like all you just here do your work, and you can go to high school. It wasn't, nobody really came down there and showed us what high school was about besides going to orientation or if you had like an older sibling or something.

As time passed, Connie realized that her friends were moving along in high school to the next grade, and she was in the same place because she had not earned any credits in school. She felt like, at some point, teachers ignored her and disregarded her. Connie stated that part of the reason why she did not do well was because she did not have anyone who listened to her. She stated no one really wanted to hear her, and she did not know how to express herself. Connie lamented,

> I feel like the whole world was against me. And if I don't deal or stand out and get my point across, it is never going to get there. But at the end of the day, you really ain't do nothing. Push me back for me. And I just really wanted somebody to listen. You feel me? Maybe that could have just been the turning point of me changing, just listening.

Connie's Perceptions on the Impact of Alternative School

Connie also attributes the unfair placement as a factor that kept her from graduating. *(I noted that Connie showed great remorse and paused several times during this part of the interview. The pain in Connie at this point was very visible, and she answered slowly with jumbled words.)* She stated,

> Um, now like since I ain't got no, I ain't saying I couldn't already go get my G E D but since I ain't had no high school diploma, it's been hard. It ain't been hard. But it used to be hard for me to get a lot of jobs that I wanted in that I have to provide for myself with. I mean I'm gonna work at Burger King but the life I live now I can't have a Burger King job and then your job is gonna pay some money and hold me down. Mm-hmm Cause I'm happy by myself. So, you know, sometimes it be that, but other than that or you know, you still see little cousins grow up before your eyes and you next thing you go they graduated. I'm like there come another one walking<laugh>. It's kind of, be messing with my mind sometimes, like I'm in a race with my little cousins and to get something cuz I can't let them pass me. That's all I be thinking about. I got a little cousin now. I said Uhuh. Um, it be kind of sad sometimes. But I feel like I came with like half time you be thinking like what's the purpose for real for real, because I'm already a failure.

The one thing Connie really wanted to do was make her family proud. She said if she could do it all over again, she would not spend time trying to impress other people, stating: “a lot of things that I felt like was good and funny … ain’t funny now.”

Connie expressed that now she has times when she is frustrated because she must learn from her spouse to keep from being embarrassed or “looking slow” when she is out in public. She states she is still working on expressing herself without getting mad and blowing up. Now, Connie is motivated by life’s experience. She said she had lost her mom and was now alone.

Profile of Fancy

Background

Fancy is a 24-year-old single mother who attended school in the same area where she was raised. She stated she identifies her biological mother and father as her parents, but her dad was always in and out of her life. Fancy does not have any siblings. Fancy also stated her mother went to jail when she was in middle school and got out at the end of her senior year in high school. Fancy had some assistance from her extended family members, but she basically raised herself. She lived where she could, eventually ending up with her friend who needed help with a sick mother dying of cancer. She and her friend were both in the same grade in high school. Eventually, the friend’s mother passed. Fancy and the friend remained at the home until about the end of her senior year. They kept each other going, working, attending school, and paying bills until almost the end of Fancy’s high school year. Fancy stated she worked at Arby’s her entire time in high school. She said she worked to buy the things she needed that she could not get from her parents, “school clothes, supplies, personal items, phone.” Since Fancy worked almost daily, she did not attend many school activities.

Fancy stated it was very difficult to be in high school, especially when she received awards.

> Like, I see other parents, but I didn't have mines there, so it was like, you know, like a, an ill feeling. But as time went by, I got used to it and like, kind of like, you know, this, it's not my reality, but it is right now, like, things, things will change, but like, it's like, you know, you gotta go through the bad to get to the good, so mm-hmm.

Fancy mentioned that although her parents were not there, she refused to give up.

> I'm saying yeah, because it was kind of like, sometimes I used to be like, I, I, I just want to give up just because my parents weren't there. But then it was also like, just because they're not there, they don't mean give up, you know, you just still make them proud and they're not there, so.

Fancy admitted that not having parents made her very difficult to deal with at home and school. She did not have parents to discipline her, and she acted independently for survival, making it very difficult for other adults to tell her what to do. Fancy believes if she had received encouragement and discipline from her parents, she probably would have never gone to the alternative school. Fancy is currently in a community college and hopes to earn a bachelor's degree one day. She attended a university for one semester but dropped out.

Fancy's Perceptions About Alternative School Placement

Fancy thought her behavior warranted her placement in the alternative school. She stated that sometimes she would miss her mother, wake up mad and rude, and take it out on the teachers. She said one day, she was talking outside the classroom door to her mother on the phone. Her mother was in jail and could only call her once a day at a certain time, and she really wanted to speak with her. A teacher saw her on the phone and took it away while she was speaking to her mom. She said she lost it because she needed to hear from her mom, which was her only chance. She said the teacher would not listen and took her to the office. The principal then called the

number back and realized it was a prison. Fancy felt like the teacher was trying to embarrass and expose her business.

All her pain about being without her mother and anxiety about being alone came out, and she expressed it with great anger on the teacher. She ended up in the alternative school for cursing the teacher. She believed the placement was fair because she had to be disciplined, but she did not think it was fair that he did not listen to her. Fancy acknowledges that the alternative placement was not bad for her. She believes that it was a beneficial opportunity to keep students in school rather than suspending them out of school. The alternative school started earlier than traditional school, and you could only catch the alternative school bus to go there. The students were separated from others in assigned rooms and could not communicate with anyone.

> Get on the bus and, you know, you, you get outta school early, but you can't ride on the bus with the same kids. And it's like, you are really an outsider, but it's not nobody's fault but yours. So, you know, it, it is what it is.

Fancy's Supports and Interventions in Alternative School

Fancy believes there was adequate support in the alternative school because she lacked discipline. She stated there were adults there who were very strict but cared. Fancy said you could do what you wanted at the school, but at an alternative school, you must listen, or you get more time added to your remandment. Fancy stated the alternative school told her that you don't have to always agree with your teachers to comply with them. She said it might not always have been how she wanted things, but it was probably "for her best," so she learned to comply without talking back. Fancy also stated that there was no favoritism. She said kids did not have to feel like they were being treated differently because everyone got treated the same. You were there

because you got in trouble, and to get out, you had to show up and work. Fancy stated she had some "F's" before coming to the alternative school, but when she left, she had "A's."

> Um, as far as like in alternative school, um, like if I had questions that, um, the people down there couldn't answer, then my teachers would come over and help me. But most of the time, I mean, it wasn't rocket science. I mean, I might have like struggled a little bit, but I could figure it out most of the time.

Fancy acknowledges that the resources were different in the alternative school. The subject level teachers were in a different building at the traditional school and could only come on their planning. They did not have computers or iPads, and they had to search whatever textbooks were available to try and find answers to their work packet.

> Most of the teachers down there were, um, substitute teachers. Um, they teach, um, they didn't teach main classes. They might have taught like a music class or something like that, or they might have been, um, teachers for the kids with, um, special needs or something like that. Or there might have been some teachers for the kids who couldn't learn or focus on class.

Fancy believed the students were placed in rooms at the alternative school based on "how bad they were." All the good kids who made poor decisions were in one place, all repeat offenders were in another room, and the real bad kids were in a different space. Fancy stated if she could change one thing about the setting, she would change the isolation. She acknowledges how sad she felt for the students who needed curriculum help but could not get it, or needed counseling and could not get it, or just needed someone to speak to. She said you already felt alone, and now you're isolated. She said there are kids you will not be able to get through to, but if you could just try, maybe you can save more. Fancy recognized that the alternative school was

run very differently from middle school. She benefited from knowing some of the adults in the alternative school, but it was a difference. Fancy stated in the future, there should be assigned times for teachers of all subjects to come and see students and give them the same attention as students in the traditional schools.

Fancy also shared that some students wanted to be in an alternative school, which conditioned them to be okay with incarceration. She stated she had a friend in alternative school when she was in high school, and he just had fun. Now, he is in prison and has told her he is also having fun there. She believes the encouragement should move you out, not make you feel at home. She also remembers her mother telling her jail is not a place you want to be.

Fancy's Relationships in Alternative School

Fancy had several established relationships in the alternative school from her middle school years. She stated the principal in the middle school was a "man with integrity" who used to be over the program. He used to remind her that she might get in trouble, but don't let it weigh her down. She also said she had a teacher assistant who would mentor her.

> Ms. Kendler kind of got me through like some hard times down there, like with the books. Like, she used to read me books from Barnes and Nobles and like, I, I used to be a reader, but not really until like, I met Ms. Kendler. Even like when I met her in middle school. Like I started reading in middle school following Ms. Kendler. Um, it was kind of like, like therapy. So, like I might be having a hard day down there. She might be like, well, Fancy, you know, I got another book for you to read. She gimme a book. I might be like a big book. I'll probably finish it maybe in a day and a half. It just depends on if I got work to do. If I don't got no work to do, then I'll probably finish the book … So it's kind of like, I was reflecting like, well when I grow up I don't wanna do that, be in this

> situation. And then, you know, this happened., so those kinds of books she was bringing, um, Ms. Vende, she was kind of like an enforcer. Like basically, you know, you come down there and you do wrong, and then you like, well I did this cuz of this, or, um, I don't think what I did was wrong. And she'll be like, well, you kind of trying to put the blame on somebody else when you need to reflect on yourself. So, they were like my main three.

Fancy stated Ms. Kendler was a White female, and the principal and Ms. Vende were Black. She said race did not play a part in whether they influenced her or spent time nurturing her. She spoke about her positive relationships and stated that many students need them.

> Like sometimes, problems come from home. So, everybody is not like strong-minded or can't really overcome a lot. Like sometimes, students really need they parents or really need love. So, it's like when, when they go to school, they trying to find that. And sometimes some, some teachers are, are not willing to give that they just, you know, they might be nice and whatever. But as far as like loving and trying to shelter or trying to step out and like help them, they don't be, they don't, they won't do that. So yeah.

Fancy's Perceptions on the Impact of Alternative School

> Like, you, at some point in life, you gonna have to realize this is reality. And when you go out in the real world, and you act like this, this is not gonna be the consequence where you can come and be like, okay, well, they can give you another chance. Sometimes, you don't get another chance.

Fancy's statement almost sums up the alternative school's impact on her and her life experiences. She believes that life is what you make it, and she also believes in herself. She said she is proud that she is independent and making it independently. She has a steady job,

transportation, a place to live, and goals. She also acknowledges being a good mom and caring for her son independently. Fancy stated life could have been better if she had not fumbled her opportunities.

> Yeah. But I just felt like I had the opportunity then, and I kind, I kind of fumbled. Have you ever heard of the saying fumble the bag? Like you fumbled the bag? Like you basically, I'm saying like, the opportunity that I had, I took advantage of, and I should have took advantage of it in a different way, but it was like, I wasn't really focused. So, it's like, now that I'm really focused, it's like sometimes I, I have like regret, like I should have did this when I had the chance, and I probably would be in a better situation. Not saying that my situation is bad, but it could be better, every, everything could be better. So, it's like I'm just, you know, working, trying to fix my mistakes and, you know, be better every day.

Fancy will be working to fulfill her goals of finishing college, purchasing her first home, and one day becoming a business owner.

Profile of Jordan

Background

Jordan is a 24-year-old male who has graduated from high school. Jordan was raised by his mother and grandmother. He lived in the home with two additional siblings. Jordan knew his father but shared that his father was not in his life when he was growing up. He has now established a relationship with his biological father and two additional siblings. When Jordan was younger, he shared that he had a very close relationship with his brothers and grandparents. He also stated that when he got to his high school years, that closeness with his mother changed as he struggled to establish his identity. As Jordan discovered more of his feelings, he became

close to a person whom he called his Godmother. Jordan expressed that his Godmother was instrumental in helping him accept who he was and handle how others would perceive him.

> Um, near in high school, I was still going through my transitional changes with being with who, who I am, and myself. So, um, I would say, like when I was in middle school in alternative school, I had more of those connections with my mom when we would talk, and we would go through situations, and she would tell me what was going on, but when I got to high school, I would deal with my god mom because of the things that me and my mom were going through as far as me being who I was and coming out as a person. So, um, I would go to my grandma because she was more of a, a stern figure. Like, she didn't play about me, but she also gave me like the best advice, like, just to, you know, it was, it was like mother, it was motherhood, mother figure advice. So that was kind of like my, I don't want to say inspiration, just my person to be there for me.

When Jordan first started high school, he had mutual respect for his teachers and administrators but shared he did not really have an authentic connection. He shared that the administration changed as the years went on, and school began to feel like an extension of his family. He contributes to this shift, from school as a business to school as a family, as the game changer in helping him eventually control his behaviors and graduate from high school. Jordan shared that he had a close relationship with his assistant principals and did not want to disappoint them. Jordan shared that he could talk to them as if they were his parents at school. Jordan also shared that he grew apart from his mother partly because of his acceptance of his feelings and identity.

Jordan thinks his mother always wanted the best for him and was very strict with him. When he was placed in an alternative school, Jordan did not feel like his parent supported him

because he said that he was raised better and knew right from wrong, so the placement resulted from him not following what he knew was right.

Jordan currently works as a nursing assistant. He stated that he does not want to do this job long because he wants to open his own wedding planning business. Jordan shared that at one time, he hoped to go back to school to become a registered nurse but needed a break from the troubles of school, and now that he has been out awhile, he does not think he could do well if he went back. Although Jordan was raised in the hometown where he went to high school, he now resides in a different county. He said he spends his time working and then staying to himself.

Jordan's Perceptions About Alternative School Placement

Jordan stated that he had been placed in the alternative school in middle school. He also shared that he received seven placements in the alternative school in high school. Jordan did not think he expressed himself the way he should have when dealing with adults. He attributes this to why he was often placed in the alternative school. When Jordan had problems, he said he knew the outcomes or consequences before deciding how to deal with his problem. Ultimately, knowing the outcome of his actions was not a deterrent from making bad decisions. Jordan often suffered the punishment for the opportunity to express his feelings forcefully when talking to adult staff members. Jordan said that being remanded to the alternative school could have been avoided at times if someone had just listened to his concerns. Jordan also expressed that his mother was embarrassed about his reamendments to the alternative school. Jordan expressed disappointment that he was never recognized for his improvements.

> I just felt like I was always in such a group that, like, from my previous issues and like the stuff that I would have, I would, I always felt like my growth wasn't noticed when I was, you know, when I was trying to improve and stuff like that. I always felt like the

> negative things outweighed it. Like, I felt like my, my negative situations would be spoke upon or, um, acted upon just a, just based upon how I handled earlier situations. And I always felt like I would get half a chance and not a whole, you know, I always felt mm-hmm. That's how I felt about things. Or they kind of already figured like, I already had this rep, I already have this representation of who this student is, so I kind of know-how, know how to go about it. And I, I just felt like some, some teachers were nick, picky, like with my situation about like how I could go to alternative school so quick, like because my mouth or the things that I would say, and sometimes I just felt like it was just nitpicking and just judging my past.

Jordan's Support and Interventions in Alternative School

Jordan described the alternative learning school as a place where no learning took place. He described the environment as cubicles where you saw three brown walls beside and in front of you, and if you looked back, you would see some adult sitting in a chair on his phone or playing on their computer. No adult appeared to be interested in being academic teachers. If students needed help, the adult monitors would email their teachers, but the teachers rarely showed up. He shared that there were adults in alternative schools to talk to but no one who could help him figure out what he could do to better himself or how he could transition back to high school. Jordan stated that the alternative structure in the middle school was more effective because they had regular teachers assigned that knew how to teach the subjects that the assigned students were taking. Jordan also shared that the middle school had counseling sessions that helped individuals discuss their issues. He said he was sent to the alternative school in high school, and after the 2 weeks were over, he still was the same. He describes high school alternative school as a place for those cast aside.

> It was, um, sometimes it was hard for me only because I didn't like being secluded from other people, and I'm very sociable, so mm-hmm. I didn't like being secluded from other people and just for that time and then also at the times where I felt like I was, like I said, left out or being like, I don't know, I just felt like sometimes I was thrown to the side, like, just go ahead and put 'em in alternative school. We had enough.

Jordan used self-talk to help him fight his restlessness in the alternative school. He reminded himself that he could make it through the assigned times. This was the strategy he used until he was released. He said he did not even try to look at what he did wrong, only looking at the time he had left to survive in that environment.

Jordan's Relationships in the Alternative School

Jordan struggled with the alternative school environment because he was very social. He said he was somewhat of an influencer and could not develop any type of relationship at the alternative school. Jordan shared that he always surrounded himself with many people at the high school. Jordan was not allowed to have a job in high school. When Jordan was remanded to an alternative school, he was also punished at home. His ability to socialize after school was halted until he was assigned back to the high school. Jordan also shared that he did have teachers who still checked on him, but he felt they had given up on him improving his life.

Jordan's Perceptions on the Impact of Alternative School

Jordan spoke about the negative impact on his grades. He said his grades dropped. If he had a class to sit in at the alternative school, he felt his grades would have been better. He tried to do the work he received, but he rarely understood it. Sometimes he received his work, and sometimes he did not. He also shared that he had much to catch up on when returning to the regular school. Jordan resented that he could not attend any high school activities, sharing that he

missed his senior class pep rally, which was devastating. Jordan said he eventually stopped getting in trouble when he felt the teachers and principals were his family. They could not fix his problem, but he felt they loved him anyway.

Jordan moved away from his hometown because he wanted a restart in life. He has completed certification as a nursing assistant and has maintained a steady job for years. He also states that when he visits his hometown, people still know him as the troublemaker who was continually sent to the alternative school. Instead of greeting him and asking how well he is doing, people first ask if he has been in trouble. Jordan shares that he has not been in trouble with the law as an adult. He believes the negative perception people have about him still impacts his success. He said there are police officers who dealt with him in high school who still look down on him. Jordan has a fear of being stereotyped. He said he believes police officers in his hometown have grouped him in a "little minority alternative school group."

> Um, what made me decide to move was the, the town period. Everybody knows everybody. So, like I said, like those things that I previously did in high school and stuff like that, like it traveled with me. So, it's like people still feel like you kind of the same, and it's more so your growth is less noticed than your problems than what you went through. Like nobody never really look at the growth part … Like they think that's you, and that's how you're gonna adapt to things for the rest of your life versus your adult life.

Jordan has hopes and aspirations of returning to school but fears he can no longer handle the work. Jordan aspires to start a wedding planning business. For now, he has decided to stay to himself and continue working to support himself while he hopes for a brighter future.

Themes

In this section, I describe several themes that emerged across my profiles.

Theme 1

All participants believed that the administration followed policy for placing them in their alternative environments, but several believed that those policies should change or other factors should have been considered.

The first theme that emerged across the profiles was that the participants were clear on whether they believed their placement in the alternative school was fair. All participants believed that the administration followed policy for placing them in their alternative environments, but several believed those policies should change or other factors should have been considered. In the case of John, he was being bullied, and he did not believe the bullying was addressed. If the bullying would have been properly addressed, he didn't believe he would have fought his teammate. He also believed the other student should have received a consequence for fighting. Connie knew the policy for her placement but thought it was a harsh punishment for someone who did nothing more than skip class. Fancy and Jordan understood that their punishment resulted from how they spoke to teachers, but they shared that no one heard their voice or the points they were trying to make, leading to the outbreaks. Ronnie believed most placements were fair because all students received the same consequences.

No matter how long the participants had been out of school, they remembered the reason for the alternative school placement, their reaction to it, and whether they agreed with it. The participants felt placements were issued according to the school's policies; however, some indicated that the administration should have looked at other circumstances, even if the outcome still led them to placement in the alternative school.

Theme 2

Relationships with adults in the alternative schools helped some students overcome and graduate

The next theme was that each participant was positively impacted by their relationship with the principal/assistant principal, who visited them in the alternative school. Some participants were impacted by prior relationships with staff members and adults in the alternative setting that helped them to rationalize their actions and improve, eventually graduating from high school.

In the case of John, Ronnie, and Fancy, their relationships with their administrators were trusting and centered on care. They recognized the assistant principals as someone they could go to when frustrated. They looked to them for guidance and eventually hope for the future. Jordan recognized her new administration as an extension of his family that he did not want to disappoint. This eventually helped him not to return to the alternative school. On the other hand, unfortunately, Connie longed for affection but felt that she was cast away continually to the alternative school and eventually pushed out.

Theme 3

Core teachers were necessary for students to be successful in alternative schools.

The third theme noted was that the students expressed the need for teachers to be assigned to the alternative school that taught the curriculum to foster student learning. All participants shared that the resources in the alternative school were not equivalent to those in the traditional school. John had teachers in the alternative school who taught him subject matter, which helped the environment feel like an authentic learning environment. All other participants shared that no relevant teachers, counselors, or therapists were available to assist them, and for

the most part, this led to students getting behind. They also shared that the resources given were inappropriate to address the homework.

Theme 4

The participants reported that alternative schools negatively or positively impacted their grades.

Connie and Jordan clearly expressed the alternative school's negative impact on their grades. They talked about how ill-equipped the instructors were to help them. They also shared that when they were sent back to the traditional school, they were so far behind on their work that they were led to participate in the same behaviors that placed them in the alternative school. However, Ronnie, John, and Fancy believed the alternative school benefited them. In Ronnie's case, he received pull-out attention each day from his EC case manager. Ronnie felt the private setting gave the teacher more time to focus only on his needs, and it helped him to understand his learning more in the smaller one-on-one setting. Fancy shared that she was talented academically, and the alternative school break allowed her to refocus and learn without her peers judging her and her circumstances. She said she found ways to teach and motivate herself, but it was also fostered by her relationships with adults in the alternative school. Lastly, John shared that the alternative school provided the perfect atmosphere for him to learn. He stated they had every support staff member at the alternative school as the traditional school.

Theme 5

Alternative school impacted the future of the participants, some in a positive manner and some in a negative manner.

The last theme noted was that the alternative school impacted the participants' future. John stated that the alternative school allowed him to learn freely away from bullying and ridicule. John stated that he probably would never have graduated without being placed there. Ronnie and Fancy shared that the alternative school taught them discipline and what they did not want in life. Even though the comparison was made to prison, they stated they knew it was a place they did not want to go to. Ronnie and Fancy both stated it gave them time to think and reflect. Connie and Jordan saw the alternative school as a place they were thrown in, a holding cell for bad kids. They both believed that the placements negatively impacted how they are perceived now in their hometowns even though they are older, out working and supporting themselves.

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed the research questions and detailed the profiles of each participant. I also revealed the themes found in the research. I summarize my findings in Chapter V and draw conclusions for future consideration.

CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The nature of my study was to seek out the perceptions of students sent to alternative schools during their high school years. I conducted this study because I am a former high school principal with students sent to alternative schools for discipline purposes. I have a great interest in learning more about the impact of these alternative environments on students' education and after students leave high school. I was also interested in finding out if these former students' stories could help us understand how better to educate students who have had difficulty in traditional schools.

The profiles I presented in Chapter IV revealed the perceptions and experiences of former high school students who were remanded to an alternative school or program for disciplinary purposes during their high school years. In this chapter, I begin by answering my research questions with the findings I identified in Chapter IV. I deepen my analysis by connecting my findings to the existing research reviewed in Chapter II. Next, I discuss my recommendations for future research, policy, and practice before concluding with my final thoughts.

Analysis

Primary Research Question

In my primary research question, I asked, "*What are the perspectives and experiences of former high school students ages 18-30 who spent time in an alternative educational program?*" As I listened to the participants' voices in this study, I noted several themes that emerged across the profiles I listed in Chapter IV's conclusion. These five themes help answer my overall research question:

Theme 1: All participants believed that the administration followed policy for placing them in their alternative environments, but several believed that

those policies should change or other factors should have been considered.

Theme 2: Relationships with adults in the alternative schools helped some students overcome and graduate.

Theme 3: Core teachers were necessary for students to be successful in alternative schools.

Theme 4: The participants reported that alternative schools negatively or positively impacted their grades.

Theme 5: Alternative school impacted the future of the participants, some in a positive manner and some in a negative manner.

Research Sub-Questions

Along with addressing my overall research question, I also collected data to explore three specific sub-questions. In my first research sub-question, I asked, *"How effective do participants feel the alternative school interventions were for preparing them to successfully reintegrate into their home schools and/or meet graduation requirements?"* Means (2015) and McCargar (2011) discussed how children remanded to alternative programs felt pushed out of traditional schools or hidden in alternative schools. Connie's description of the exclusionary punishment resembles the findings of this prior research. Connie bragged about completing the program in middle school but also shared that she missed that hands-on influence when she entered the alternative school in high school. The exclusionary discipline she experienced in the alternative high school caused her to feel like she was thrown away by adults who gave up on helping her. Connie spent her days in the alternative school, counting her time. Unfortunately, when Connie returned to the traditional school, she felt even more excluded because she was behind on her work and lost in

class. This led to Connie continuing the negative behaviors only to repeat the cycle of receiving additional placements to the alternative school to address what principals considered chronically non-conforming behaviors (Blair & Valdez Noel, 2014). Connie eventually dropped out due to the cycle of circular hopelessness into which she fell.

Fancy also shared that the positive influence from an alternative school teacher in the middle school years was impactful enough to drive her decisions when she was sent to the alternative program in high school. Fancy, Ronnie, John, and Jordan all credit their assistant principal's care as the intervention needed to build their courage and determination to push forward. Jordan shared he eventually stopped getting in trouble. He said that when the new admin team came to the traditional school, they developed a culture that felt like family, and it was this culture that he did not want to disappoint. The research indicates that relationships are key to helping students grow and develop (Spanner Morrow, 2017). Therefore, the intervention that helped him wasn't the atmosphere in the alternative school but the cultural shift made in the traditional high school that did not project positive relationships.

John was the most complimentary of his alternative school environment. For John, the alternative school allowed him to learn without the bullying and ridicule he experienced. John attributes his placement as a welcomed opportunity created by his assistant principal, whom he praises. John enjoyed his smaller setting and did not feel he could safely transition to the regular school because the bullying was not addressed. John stated that the alternative school staff made him feel welcomed and loved, something he did not get from the traditional school. Although John shared that the alternative school lacked physical resources, which would have made instruction easier, he accredits the warm environment as the most important factor in helping him succeed. With John, relationships were more important than resources. The interventions that

were given to John were his weekly counseling sessions, open collaboration with teachers, and a friendly and welcoming environment.

In my second research sub-question, I asked, "*What do participants indicate worked best about the alternative educational program in high school?*" John was very complimentary of his alternative high school. He shared that having access to a counselor every day was essential in working through his anger and feelings of no one listening to him. John could pick up strategies by working with the counselor one-on-one to help himself. John further shared that his alternative school felt like a small traditional school. He shared that his school allowed the small number of students attending to change classes, have recess, go to counseling, eat in a cafeteria, and work with core teachers. John enjoyed this atmosphere so much that when he was sent back to the traditional school, he looked for ways to get in trouble so that he could rejoin the alternative school. John attributed his motivation to stay to the loving relationships in the alternative school. Although the students were sent to the school for disciplinary purposes, John's alternative school did not treat them as bad students.

Ronnie was a student with exceptional needs. Although his regular teachers from the traditional school did not visit him often in the alternative program, Ronnie did receive one-on-one services from his case manager, which Ronnie attributes to assisting him in catching up on his grades. Ronnie shared that when his case manager visited him, she could work with him in a private setting, which helped to increase his understanding. Research expresses the need for students to receive the same support in alternative schools that they received in traditional schools for students to be successful (Halliday et al., 2019).

All other participants mentioned how the encouragement of specific teachers and/or their assistant principals sparked their motivation to succeed. These relationships helped spark

students' ability to become re-engaged in their futures. The Center for Promise (2015) researched the role relationships play in graduation. This research considers the perspectives of students. The research emphasized the need for supportive relationships as the most important factor in encouraging students to graduate from high school. As the above participants indicated, positive relationships were the key to helping them complete their alternative assignments and graduate.

As I noted in discussing my conceptual framework in Chapter I, Self Determination Theory also plays a major role in students' ability to find success (Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT is based on the principle that we all desire to achieve unless we become disengaged. An example of this can clearly be seen with Fancy, who had no secure home, no local parents, and no physical or monetary support. Fancy had no consistent adult in her home life for 4 years of high school. Fancy shared that she worked for the entire 4 years in school, eventually securing her own apartment to live in while managing her studies. Fancy ended up obtaining acceptance into a 4-year university. Fancy's investment in herself was fostered by a middle school teacher and then cultivated by a high school administrator. These relationships helped Fancy to re-engage and invest in her future. The one spark that kept Fancy going was the relationship that she developed with one teacher who would bring her books to read that modeled courage and endurance. She also trusted her administrators to guide her success. Fancy shared that the authentic relationships gave her the confidence needed to reach her goals. As a single parent, Fancy sets her own goals and is confident she can achieve them. Her self-determination has helped her to become independent, confident, and hopeful for a better future. Connie, on the other hand, did not feel as if her life had value. She had goals but voiced that she was already a failure. She expressed that no one believed in her and that she disappointed her grandfather. Although Connie expressed that she had a steady job and a friend, she did not feel like her friend valued her educational

knowledge. Connie showed a lack of competence in her abilities. Connie did not show signs of self-determination, contributing to her failure to be thrown away in high school. Likewise, Jordan expressed that he felt like others in his hometown only looked at his past. He referred to his time at the alternative school as something others remember about him instead of recognizing that he had changed. Jordan did not feel like his teachers believed in him. He expressed that he was only sent to the alternative school so that teachers and administrators would not have to be bothered with him. Jordan stated he did have one principal who believed in him, and he stayed in touch with her. He shared that she pushed him to get out of the alternative school. Jordan's relationship with his principal activated his self-determination to graduate from a technical school eventually. Unfortunately, Jordan shared that when he would return home to visit, people still reminded him of the years he was put away in the alternative school. He did not feel he could overcome the negative perception in his heart.

My third and final research sub-question asked, "*What changes do participants think would have helped improve the alternative educational program?*" Participants expressed that they needed authentic connections to adults who could influence their direction and determination to succeed. Existing research questions the quality of alternative programs to address the needs of students instructionally (McGee & Lin, 2020). In the case of Connie's alternative program, she did not feel like anyone cared about her success. Connie felt like she was just thrown out of the traditional school with no direction on completing her work or staying current with her assignments. Connie would have benefited from a transitional meeting that seriously considered the voice of not only students but of parents as well (Pereira & Lavoie, 2016). Connie became frustrated daily due to the lack of assistance and direction. Connie shared that now she can barely read. Research also questions the ability of alternative programs to

address the needs of all students due to funding (Hughes, 2018). Connie needed more assistance in understanding the curriculum, but her needs were not sufficiently supported. She was embarrassed to acknowledge that she spent twelve years in school and now must secure the assistance of her wife to complete simple forms and applications. This lack of knowledge makes her feel like a failure daily. Connie's parents cared for her, but she expressed that she missed having someone in her academic environment to listen and assist with her direction.

All participants clearly suggested that the alternative schools and programs need updated resources to help students. John shared that the books received were outdated books sent to them from the traditional schools. Fancy shared that they needed electronic resources in the alternative program that she attended. Jordan shared that they did not have computers in his alternative program. Overall, the alternative program was viewed by participants as a place that received second-hand resources or none at all. In addition to material resources, all participants stated the importance of counseling specifically designed to address their underlying issues. The participants also expressed the need for transitional meetings to create proper entry and re-entry plans. John expressed that to be successful in a traditional school, he would need several transition meetings to address the perceptions and attitudes of the adults in the traditional school.

Implications

This research implied that some students successfully graduated from high school after being placed in an alternative school or program, and some were not. The research also indicated that students who received positive affirmation from influential adults could overcome their circumstances and graduate from high school. Participants who showed self-determination were inspired by the feeling of being loved and supported first by someone who believed in them. The research also implied that some participants could overcome external factors such as negative

homelife, race, or money (Parker et al., 2020). Students who developed a sense of self-worth were determined to complete the requirements to graduate high school on time successfully.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Educators

Students need individual reintegration plans that would assist them in getting back to the traditional setting. This should first involve listening to the students' voices and addressing any concerns that the students perceive as troubling or unfair (Means, 2015). Holquist (2019) emphasizes the need to listen to students' perspectives on why they are disengaged. All students should also have access to resources that align with the standards and expectations for their grades. This starts with core teachers, counselors, and administrators dedicated to all programs or schools of learning. Alternative programs or schools should have the technical resources to be competitive and physical resources to explore the curriculum in various ways.

Discipline of students should not feel like desertion to the students. Exclusionary discipline conditions leave students feeling left out or thrown away. Learning environments should first promote learning and not seclusion. John mentioned that his learning environment had some students on different sides of the track, but learning came first at school. Students moved freely throughout the campus to their classes. John shared that there were no real troubles or fights and that the expectations were clear. The other participants mentioned the need for some socialization in their alternative program.

Administrators should also listen to the full perceptions of students before they decide to punish them. The students all discussed the ability of positive relationships to influence their futures. If more time had been spent building those relationships in the traditional environments, students might have avoided the consequence of an alternative placement (Spanner Morrow,

2017). We must get past the perception that all teachers are right. This deficit thinking can break students in unrepairable ways. Teachers can be supported and still corrected where misconceptions arise. The impact of students should be at the heart of our decisions. Educators should consider transcending past using the word "punishment" and move towards something more positive, even if the placement results from student behavior.

Recommendations for Policy

John shared that he hoped the alternative school would become a regular option for learning for students who really wanted the smaller setting. John shared that he also wished the perception of alternative learning would change to something more positive than just a place to house bad kids. The perception of alternative schools has long represented a place of discipline, but all schools should first represent higher learning. The expectation that students learn and thrive should be the same from one school to the next, and the quality of learning should not be minimized (McGee & Lin, 2020). Without considering the perspectives of all students served, we silence them from making decisions that impact their very being (Lac & Cummings Mansfield, 2018). Policies should be implemented to ensure that student voice is heard in creating growth and transformation plans. Policies should direct districts to change the image of alternative schools or programs from a place for discipline to an environment of transformation. The name of the school should not leave a negative perception in the minds of the community. Policies should also be created to ensure students who exit alternative environments complete exit surveys to utilize in yearly program evaluations.

Standards at the state level regarding personnel serving in alternative settings also need to be consistent. Often, personnel assigned to these settings are ill-equipped to teach the students placed for discipline. As I shared at the beginning of this study, there is also a need for

accountability at the district and state level for time students spend in alternative settings (Kennedy et al., 2017). An alternative program or school environment should allow for some socialization, relevant and consistent adult interaction, and support, along with routines and structure. Ultimately, students must feel connected and protected in the environment that they grow up in (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, there is a difference in setting the tone for positive transformation instead of conditioning the participants for prison (Kennedy et al., 2017; Milner et al., 2019). All programs should have learning at the heart of their environment (Center for Promise, 2015).

Recommendations for Future Research

There is so much that can be learned from different versions of the type of study that I conducted. Future research can be generated on the number of students who served time in alternative settings and then graduated from a college or university. Researchers can look at the number of students who never transitioned back to traditional schools. A researcher could explore the number of students placed in alternative settings who were bullied in high school. A quantitative study should be done on compliance issues in alternative schools regarding EC student services, teacher allotments and certifications, and resources. A quantitative study could also be conducted to determine if race is a factor in assigning alternative placements when Principals consider options for discipline.

Although the participants of the study were all minorities, this study did not show that race was a hindrance in the motivation of students. Several students felt loved and supported by personnel of the opposite race, indicating they did not want to disappoint them. Many studies have indicated poverty and homelife was the number one factor that improved students' behavior. However, this was not revealed in the data from Chapter IV, which supports some

current research (Phillips, 2019) regarding the environmental impacts of underrepresented populations. Some participants of this study conveyed that love and trust overcame all barriers. This indicates what could be done to help students before they receive exclusionary discipline such as these remandments. Although districts focused on the creation of alternative schools to address the dropout rate (Holquist, 2019), more studies should be conducted on how educators can create authentic relationships that build, positively impact, and inspire students to change and grow at traditional schools without remanding them to environments in which they feel are exclusionary.

Final Thoughts

Exclusionary environments can lead students to feel that they have been discarded or thrown away. Our educational institutions should be designed to teach our students how to value and appreciate each other as citizens, working and living in unison. As stakeholders in learning environments, our students should be heard when considering their needs when designing disciplinary practices and creating alternative educational environments. Students' voices should not be devalued if the goal is truly to help them become successful. Most importantly, students should be taught how to value and appreciate themselves. When our learners leave high school, whether willingly or unwillingly, if they do not have the foundational pillars of self-efficacy, will they mentally be able to transition in life to a place of productivity?

Perhaps the most impactful perceptions revealed in my study were the power of adults to influence some participants to graduate. An example of this can be heard daily as Dr. Darrell Harris, principal of a local high school, would tell the students, "You are loved, you are important, you are appreciated, and there's nothing you can do about it." This impacted the environment of scholars he served and noted during the 2023 graduation speech of the school's

Valedictorian. Inspiring educators like these provide hope for students that carries them throughout their lives. Regardless of what happens in the home, whether homelessness, poverty, instability, or lack of parental support, some participants in my study revealed that they still believed they could make it because they found some adult in their school who took the time to love them. John felt his assistant principal loved him, Jordan said his administration felt like family, Fancy said her teacher empowered her, and Ronnie said his assistant principal loved them all. In contrast, our food for thought as educators can be the emptiness that remains with others like Connie, who lost hope in the alternative school, who felt cast away, and like the adults with whom she longed for a relationship, she gave up on herself. Love, the most powerful motivator, as indicated by participants in this study, requires no income to produce, carries no barrier, has no color, and is still the most impactful element in changing our students' determination to succeed.

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APPENDIX A: FIRST-ROUND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS/GUIDE

My name is Monique Studevent Curry, and I am a graduate student at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro. I am conducting research on students who attended an alternative school or program during their high school years. The purpose of this qualitative research study is to examine the experiences and perspectives of former high school students ages 18-30, who spent time in an alternative educational program. Specifically, I would like to hear the voices of those who had the experiences in an alternative program or school. You are not required to participate in this study and can ask to stop at any time. I will give you a consent to participate form for you to sign, and I will keep it on file. Your name will be changed for this research for confidentiality purposes. I will be recording this interview, so that it may be transcribed and coded for analysis. I will share your transcript with you for you to review. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions either now, during the interview, or after we have completed the interview.

Background

1. How do you describe your gender and race/ethnicity?
2. Did you grow up in this area?
3. Please tell me about your family when you were in high school.
4. Who would you identify as your parents?
5. Do you have any siblings who grew up with you?
6. How would you describe your daily family life while going through high school?
7. What was the name of your high school?
8. What or who influenced your decision making in your high school years in general?
9. Did you experience any difficulties getting through high school?

Experiences and perceptions of alternative educational programs

10. Why were you sent to the alternative school?
11. Please tell me in general about your experiences in the alternative setting.
12. Were your parents supportive of you while you were placed in the alternative program?
13. Share decisions you made that you interpret as reasons for your placement in an alternative program.
14. Do you feel like this placement was fair?
15. What do you think influenced this placement?
16. How many times were you placed in an alternative program?
17. What was the period for your original placement? (# of weeks)
18. How long did you spend in the alternative setting?

APPENDIX B: SECOND-ROUND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS/GUIDE

Second Round Interview Guide /Questions

You have already participated in an initial interview, and I would like to thank you for your continued participation in a second round of questioning. As previously explained, I am conducting research on students who received an involuntary placement to an alternative school or program during their high school years and either graduated or dropped out of high school because of the placement. The purpose of this qualitative research study is to examine the experiences and perspectives of former high school students ages 18-30 who spent time in an alternative educational program. I have asked you to return for this second interview so that I may seek clarity on the data that you previously shared. You are not required to participate in this study and can ask to stop at any time. I will give you a consent to participate form for you to sign, and I will keep it on file. Your name will be changed for this research for confidentiality purposes. I will be recording this interview so that it may be transcribed and coded for analysis. I will share your transcript with you for you to review. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions either now, during the interview, or after we have completed the interview.

How effective do they feel the alternative school interventions were for preparing them to successfully reintegrate back to their home schools and/or meet graduation requirements?

1. Did you have adults that assisted you with your homework?
2. Did you have regular teachers in the alternative school?
3. Did you have counselors in the alternative school or a therapist that assisted in helping you to understand your negative behaviors?
4. Do you think the alternative school helped you to overcome your behaviors that removed you from the regular school setting?

5. Did the placement in the alternative setting impact your grades?
6. Did the placement impact your ability to socialize or make friends?
7. Reflecting on your experiences, how do you perceive your teachers? Other staff members? Students assigned to the alternative setting.
8. Did your experience prepare you to return to the traditional high school setting?
9. Do you feel like the teachers in the alternative setting treated you fairly?
10. Did you receive your high school diploma? Did you graduate on time?
11. Do you feel like high school prepared you to accomplish your life goals?
12. Did you graduate with your class or in an alternative setting?
13. Are you the first person in your family to receive your high school diploma?

What do they feel worked best about the alternative education programs?

14. What do you feel worked best about the alternative education program?
15. Did you maintain a job during your assignment in the alternative program?
16. Do you know of anyone who preferred the alternative setting rather than the classroom?
17. Did you have a person of the same race or ethnicity as a motivator?
18. What was the racial and ethnic background of the teachers/counselors/ administrators in school who supported you through the process?
19. What were some of the support systems that were in place at the alternative school?
20. Were there organizations outside of the alternative school that helped influence you?
21. What strategies were used to assist you in meeting your goals during your placement?

What changes do they think would have helped improve the alternative educational program?

22. Have you struggled because of decisions made by educators in high school?
23. Were you placed in an alternative school by choice?

24. What obstacles did you encounter with your placement in the alternative school?
25. What were your feelings once you found out you were placed in the alternative environment?
26. Did the placement impact your social life at school in a negative way?
27. Did the placement impact your social life at home in a negative way?
28. Was higher education supported while you were in the alternative program?
29. Did you receive the same curriculum support while you were in the alternative program?
30. What changes do you think would have helped improve the alternative education program?

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent Agreement
(Waived under approval of IRB)

Prepared for a Future?

"Perceptions of Former Students Who Were Remanded to Alternative Programs While Attending High School"

You are invited to participate in this study. Before you agree to participate in this study, you should know enough about it to make an informed decision. The principal investigator, Monique S. Curry, is a doctoral candidate in the Graduate School for Educational Leadership at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro. If you have any questions, ask the investigator. You should be satisfied with the answers before you agree to be in the study.

Purpose: The purpose of this narrative study will be to examine the experiences and perspectives of former high school students ages 18-30 who spent time in an alternative educational program for disciplinary purposes.

Participants: This study will use a sample of 3-5 students over the age of 18 and will be conducted in various settings contingent upon their geographic locations. You will only be considered for participation in this study if you return a signed consent form. This is a small study, and the acceptance in this study is on a first-come, first-served basis. Participants have the right to not answer questions that they do not want to answer. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary.

Procedure: If you participate in the study, you will be interviewed individually during a designated time at an agreed upon location. With the researcher, you will discuss your high

school experience during your placement in an alternative setting. If you indicate at any time that you want to stop the interview, the researcher will stop, thank you for all your time, and you will be excused.

Risk/Benefits: There are very small risks if you decide to participate in this study. Your responses will be kept confidential. This means that the researcher will protect your information so that others are unable to view your responses that you make. If you feel uncomfortable responding to any of the questions, you are not required to answer those items. There are no direct benefits to participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The researcher will do everything possible to make sure the information you provide is kept confidential. No identifying information will be unveiled in the researcher's findings. The research records will include some information such as your name, age, ethnicity, former alternative program name, and current employment status. As the researcher, I will limit individual access to the research data and keep it in a secure location (protected by a password), at my residence. All study data will be kept for three years and then all documents with identifying information will be shredded and any audiotapes will be erased the researcher.