BAD KIDS GONE GOOD:
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY STUDY OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION GRADUATES

A Dissertation

by

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This dissertation meets the standards for scope and quality of
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and is hereby approved.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the narrative inquiry study was to conduct an in-depth exploration of the perceptions of two students who graduated from an alternative education program (AEP). Perceptions of the students were focused on what they attributed to as contributing reasons for their graduation from the program.

This qualitative study was conducted with purposeful and criteria-based sampling selection. Participants selected belonged to a population of students who were labeled as at-risk and transitioned to an AEP from a traditional high school.

Narrative inquiry was used as a framework to understand the participants' experiences prior to being in the AEP, their experiences within the program, and their reflections about the program after graduation. Participants' narrative construction was influenced by the bildungsroman structure of storytelling to depict coming of age and character development.

Findings indicate that at-risk students may experience limited access to AEPs due to a false binary relationship between traditional and alternative education. Findings also indicate that while the students are in an AEP, they are less likely to behave in manners that contributed to their at-risk status, and demonstrate intrinsic motivation and perseverance to complete their coursework. Additionally, findings reveal that upon graduation, participants were able to utilize various skills learned in the AEP while attending community colleges. Such skills included time management, focused attention, and balancing work and academic responsibilities.

This study has implications for various stakeholders connected to alternative education. The findings suggest that alternative education teachers should gain a deeper understanding of their students' backgrounds and become more aware of the types of issues these students

experience. Additionally, alternative education administrators should seek opportunities to challenge dominant perceptions in order to best serve their students. Furthermore, traditional administrators can discuss alternative education as a viable program for students who have been successful in the traditional setting but are seeking different options. Moreover, policymakers should reform laws regarding attendance and testing schedules to better accommodate the needs of alternative education students. Finally, this study created a space for students' voices so that implications could be raised for key stakeholders to create transformative educational experiences.

DEDICATION

To my two biggest little inspirations, Mayan and Avery. Your cute little smiles kept me going when times got tough. I hope you learn to enjoy education as much as I did from my parents and I hope that one day you will be inspired to follow your dreams. To my wife, who kept me motivated throughout my journey and has shown me anything is possible. To my parents, for instilling the value of education, work ethic, and perseverance in me. To my older sisters, Dawn, Jennifer, and Michelle, for forging a path for me and for always being my biggest cheerleaders. To Margie and Abel, for watching my babies so I could get work done or decompress, whichever was needed.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

There is evidence to suggest that students who fail to graduate from high school are more prone to seek assistance from government programs such as welfare, commit crime, and experience health problems as compared to students that graduate from high school (Alise-Young & Chavez, 2002: Rumberger, 2004; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). This issue has captured the attention of various stakeholders in education in an effort to keep students in school until completion, in order to avoid such negative outcomes for the nation and the students that dropout (Hemmer, 2011). The students that have are garnered this attention are labeled as at-risk.

Students may be identified as being at-risk if they are experiencing academic failure based on specific criteria that are outlined by the state in which they attend school (Aron, 2006). Some of the reasons why students are identified as such can include, but are not limited to, students lacking appropriate credits, are recovering dropouts, truant, experiencing severe discipline issues, or students who are pregnant, or have been expelled (Aron, 2006; Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009; Raywid, 1994). Many educational scholars agree that prevention and intervention methods are key to influencing students to stay in school until graduation (Lagana-Roirdan, Aguilar, Franklin, Streeter, Kim, Tripodi, & Hopson, 2011; Mosen-Lowe, Vidovich, & Chapman, 2009). While the above-mentioned issues are common in describing a typical at-risk student and the anticipated likelihood of his or her educational failure by dropping out, such issues raise the question of addressing the issues in addition to supporting students so that their stories can become success stories, instead of tales of dropouts.

Contemporary methods encouraging students to remain in school include offering additional paths to graduate in the from alternative education programs (Lagana-Roirdan et al., 2011; Lehr et al., 2009). Many of these programs are in response to education policies crafted

over the last decade to reduce the number of students from dropping out of school. These

policies have given local education agencies greater ability to design, redevelop, or sustain

alternative programs to offer at-risk students an educational setting other than traditional schools

that they will be more likely to succeed in (Lehr et al, 2009; Raywid, 1994). Due to the authority

afforded to local education agencies to set up alternative programs, alternative schools can vary

tremendously in design and definition. However, Aron (2006) and Raywid (1999) found that

alternative programs are typically characterized as smaller schools that offer a flexible design of

schooling that focus more on individualized instructional methods compared to the focus of

traditional schools.

With increasing attention on dropout prevention from states and local educational

agencies, it is not surprising that the number of alternative education programs and their

enrollment is increasing across the county (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010; Uribe, 2010). In the

2000-2001 school year, 39% of all public school districts in the United States had an alternative

school or program for at-risk students (Beken, Williams, Combs, & Slate, 2009; Gilson, 2006).

According to the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES), during the 2007-2008 school

year, 64% of school districts reported that they had at least one alternative program that served

approximately 646,500 at-risk students (NCES, 2010). However, not all the reported alternative

programs in the United States are designed for dropout prevention and recovery purposes.

Raywid (1994) described three types of alternative schools based on the program goals of

alternative education: (a) Type I, popular innovations which include schools of choice; (b) Type

II, last-chance programs that are designed for discipline purposes; and (c) Type III, remedial

focus programs, which concentrate on remediation and rehabilitation in order for students to

return to their traditional campus (Beken et al., 2009; Raywid, 1994). This study will focus on students that attended an alternative program that consists of Type I and Type II characteristics.

Theoretical Framework

Although alternative schools are designed to offer at-risk students a different pathway to graduation, these schools may also be considered a student's last chance (Raywid, 1994). Kim (2010) argued that students who attend alternative schools seek an opportunity for success that they could not otherwise achieve in a traditional educational setting. In some cases, students recognize that they need an alternative path in order to graduate and choose to attend alternative programs. However, in most cases, students are forced to enroll in alternative programs due to their lack of success in a traditional setting (Quinn & Poinier, 2006). Whether students choose to enroll in alternative programs or are pushed out of the traditional setting, they share the same fate of being someone else's problem from the perspectives of traditional school and society. This phenomenon of increased students in alternative education has led to several alternative schools being regarded as dumping grounds (Kim & Taylor, 2008). For many, at-risk students are essentially pushed to alternative programs from their traditional schools (Lagana-Roirdan et al., 2011; McGregor & Mills, 2011). Instances of excluding students from the traditional setting exemplify how the dominant nature of the traditional schools can marginalize at-risk students (Harding, 2004; McGregor & Mills, 2011), in such a way that they may be considered unworthy, undesirable, and insignificant (Harbour & Ebie, 2011; Messiou, 2012).

According to UNDP (1996), the marginalization of students can result in inequities and lack of access to the dominant culture or mainstream power. However, it must be understood that the marginalization process is not static process. Te Riele (2006) noted that "an individual student may be marginalized by some aspects of schooling but not others, may like some

3

teachers, peers, subjects, but not others, and may behave differently in response to marginalization from other students" (p. 135). Regardless of the factor or factors that led to marginalization, students that are marginalized are viewed as outsiders that do not conform to the dominant educational norms (Dickie-Clark, 1966; Messiou, 2006). Therefore, Messiou (2006) argues that listening directly to students that have been marginalized offers an opportunity to gain valuable insight as their voices have often been neglected within the education setting. With this understanding, this study is framed through the standpoint theory (Harding, 2004) to portray the students' perceptions from their position within the culture of transitioning from traditional educational structure to graduating from an alternate educational institution.

Standpoint theory is a framework used for analyzing the knowledge of people who have developed perceptions of their daily lives upon being marginalized by the dominant group's authority and power. With this in mind, the perceptions of those in the non-dominant social groups may be more accurate compared to those of the more powerful group (Harding, 2004) who are simply constructing knowledge from the outside looking in without actually living through the experiences. According to Schwandt (2007), standpoint theory "enables us to see the world from behind, beneath, or outside the dominant group's conceptual and material practice of power" (p. 276). Within the context of this study, the dominant group is recognized as traditional education, and alternative education is considered the subordinate group.

Some scholars contend that those groups that are in between the dominant group of traditional education and the non-dominant group of alternative education may be the most appropriate group (Schwandt, 2007; Wood, 1993) for advocacy. A middle group could consist of at-risk students that attend school in a hybrid system that allows them to attend some classes in a traditional school while attending others in an alternative program simultaneously. A middle

4

group can also be administrators who work with students in alternate education and have experience working with students in a traditional setting. However, for this study a middle group is not relevant since a hybrid system did not exist between the traditional setting and the alternative educational program that the participants attended. This study focused on experiences of students who transitioned from a traditional to an alternative educational setting and were academically successful by graduating from high school.

The most salient concept of standpoint theory is that an individual's knowledge is gained through his or her experiences which shape one's perceptions within one's social positions, locations, and groups (Yonezawa, 2000). Applying this concept to at-risk students, standpoint theory created a space for highlighting the perceptions of students who had been through alternative education. Using standpoint theory, situated perceptions of students who had experiences in alternate education in terms of social positions, locations, and groupings, could reveal both overt and covert structures of marginalization (Wood, 1993).

Standpoint theory makes room for multiple forms of perceptions as experienced by a marginal population (Harding, 1993). Therefore, in this study I examined how the perceptions of students have formed who have been through alternative education and have graduated. Such an understanding of perceptions allowed a mapping of the perspectives of the participants with the structural components of policy, resource allocation, and opportunities provided, contrasting with traditional form of education. If traditional school setting is seen as the dominant setting, the center of the circle, then alternative education is the marginalized outsider, on the periphery of the circle. Standpoint theory, then, offers a lens to understand the marginalized perspectives (Harding, 2004; Wood, 1993), in this case, of those students who despite being labeled at-risk

and transferred to alternate education were able to be academically successful and graduate from high school.

Methodological Framework

This study is grounded in narrative inquiry in order to elicit the critical tales that depict the perceptions of at-risk students who attended and graduated from an alternative education program. Narrative inquiry was useful in characterizing the perceptions of the participants while framing such perceptions against the sociopolitical backdrop of the structures of traditional and alternative education. Narratives can be a way to understand human experiences and according to Fontana and Frey (2008), narrative inquiry can offer a useful format to gain an in-depth understanding of the complexities of the participants' experiences as they reflect on the role of alternative education on their high school graduation.

Narrative inquiry is a methodology that is gaining attention in the world of qualitative research (Kim, 2010). Despite the popularity of narrative inquiry, there are many definitions of what can be considered narrative inquiry (Kim, 2010; Chase, 2008; Riessman, 2002). Narrative inquiry began to take shape within the life histories method at the beginning of the 20th century by sociologists and anthropologists (Chase, 2008). However, narrative inquiry has evolved to encompass a more expansive meaning and purpose. In the broadest sense, narrative inquiry can be defined as "encompassing the interdisciplinary study of the activities involved in generating and analyzing stories of life experiences (e.g., life histories, narrative interviews, journals, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, and biographies) and reporting that kind of research" (Schwandt, 2007, pp. 203-204). Personal narratives can also be researched and examined within narrative inquiry (Schwandt, 2007).

For this study, narrative inquiry was used to gain the in-depth understanding of the unique and individual experiences, the depth, and nuances of graduates of an alternative education program (Kim, 2010; Lai, 2010; Polkinghorne, 1995). Narratives were extracted from triangulating interviews, written documentations, and conversations collected during the course of the study. Further details on data collection methods are provided in chapter three of this proposal. The end product of the study resulted in a narrative that is thick in description depicting a multi-dimensional rendering of the participants' perceptions and experiences in alternative education (Saldaña, 2009). The representation serves as medium to challenge the perceptions that persist outside of the social group of alternative education. However, it must be understood that the final representation is intentionally more open-ended and creates further questions regarding students' perceptions of alternative education rather than offering answers that are concrete (Saldaña, 2009; Barone, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1995), stable, pointing to one absolute truth.

Rationale

Alterative education has grown considerably over the last 20 years, and it appears the trend is likely to continue (Lehr et al., 2009). Many alternative schools have been created to offer a second chance opportunity for students whose academic needs are not met in the traditional educational setting (Beken et al., 2009; Kim, 2006). Many contemporary alternative schools have developed a negative connotation as they are thought of as being "places for students whose behaviors are disruptive, deviant, and dysfunctional" (Kim, 2006, p. 3). This negative connotation has left many at-risk students to feel marginalized because they are labeled as something deviant from "normal" for not performing to desired standards or for disrupting the smooth operation of traditional settings (McGregor & Mills, 2011; Quinn & Poinier, 2006). Such

negative connotations of students in alternative education miss moments of success when despite being labeled at-risk, students perform well and graduate from high school while undergoing alternative education. The narratives of at-risk students who have been academically successful are scant (De La Ossa, 2005; Kim, 2006; Lagan-Roirdan et al., 2011; Malagon & Alvarez, 2010) compared to the dominant trend in literature where these students are seen as failures, as well as social and economic liabilities (Alise-Young & Chavez, 2002). Creating a dialogic space, highlighting success stories of students who graduated from alternative education, contributes to the literature by documenting social history in its making and by offering a counter-narrative to the dominant trends in the literature about students in alternative education.

Research Purpose

The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of two graduates who credit their alternative education as playing a role in their completion of high school in South Texas. The study addressed two research questions:

1. In what ways do the participants describe their experiences in a traditional education setting prior to enrollment into an alternative education program?

2. In what ways do the participants describe their experiences in alternative education contributing to their graduation?

Operational Definitions

Alternative education program–A secondary school that may or may not be located within the mainstream school that includes grades 9-12 and gives students in the traditional educational setting another option for completing high school in a smaller setting with more individualized instruction at no additional cost [to the student?] (Beken et al., 2009; NCES, 2010).

Graduation–Successful completion of high school by earning all required credits and passing all state-mandated exams to receive a diploma (Hartman, Wilkins, Gregory, Gould, D'Souza, & Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest, 2011).

South Texas–For the purpose of this study South Texas is a region of Texas that encompasses Nueces, San Patricio, Kleberg, Jim Wells, and Aransas Counties. Corpus Christi is the largest city in the South Texas region.

Subjectivity Statement

Unlike the positivism paradigm, owning one's subjectivity is important in qualitative research (Glesne, 2011; Peshkin, 1988). Subjectivity, in the past, has been considered a negative trait in research that must be controlled for. However, in qualitative research owning one's subjectivity can lead to more passionate and personal research (Glesne, 2011). Peshkin, (1988) a foremost scholar in subjectivity, concluded that it was impossible for researchers to dismiss their subjectivities, nor should they try to. Peshkin stated that, "one's subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed" (1988, p. 17). Therefore, in the following paragraphs I state my subjectivities that inform this study.

Having worked in alternative education for eight years, I have values and beliefs that influence this study and it would be intellectually dishonest if I do not document those values and beliefs. Therefore, rather than assume that I can divorce myself from my subjectivity, I disclose my subjectivities within the context of my research. Being submersed in the alternative education field for much longer than I ever was involved in the traditional education setting, I was interested in finding ways to continue to improve alternative education to better serve students that struggle in mainstream traditional education settings.

In the beginning of my educational career, I was completely unfamiliar with alternative education. My first experience in alternative education was when I was assigned to teach at a disciplinary alternative education program (DAEP). After working in the DAEP for a short time, I realized that many of the students that had the label of "the bad kids," were actually students that just needed a different setting to thrive in. Being placed in a smaller setting, with fewer distractions, was beneficial for the students, in which case, many of the students preferred to be at the DAEP rather than at their regular campus.

After working in a DAEP for three years, I took advantage of an opportunity to design, develop, and implement an alternative school for students that were at-risk of dropping out. The program's primary mission was to assist high school students to recover credits in order to graduate within four years of initial enrollment in grade nine. Rather than students being placed in the program for discipline purposes, they apply to be in the alternative high school program. Now I serve as the administrator for both the alternative school high school program and the DAEP.

After serving as an administrator for several years, I continued to hear the same negative sentiments about alternative education programs. Frankly, I am tired of alternative education programs being seen as dumping grounds for bad students. I want to be able to highlight the merits of alternative education and the effect it can have on education, on students' academic success, and in creating responsible civic citizens. I have seen the benefits of alternative education programs firsthand as I get to shake the hands of the graduates as they cross the stage. I have heard testimonials from parents praising and thanking the alternative education program staff for helping their child graduate. I want to be able to help more students graduate and give them a foundation to move on to a successful future.

I am convinced that with the growing trend towards high stakes testing and advances in technology, more students will be looking for alternatives in their education. With high stakes testing, teachers are forced to cover more material in less time, which can be detrimental for many students, leading to failure. With advances in technology, students have the capability of completing work at a more appropriate pace.

Limits of the Study

There are several limits of this study since the aim is focused specifically on the narratives of success of students who graduated from an alternative education setting. On one hand, it is evident that over the last decade from 2000-2010 there has been tremendous growth in alternative education and that there is much to be learned to continue to improve alternative programs to serve the needs of the students that seek their education through an alternate route (Gilson, 2006). On the other hand, to better serve the students that desire or require an alternative education program, the negative stigma attached to alternative education needs to be removed (Kim, 2006). While one study cannot completely remove negative stigmas surrounding students in alternate education, it can definitely start opening up spaces for dialoguing across different perspectives of alternative education instead of the commonly held one.

The rigor of this study is also connected to the extent of the openness of the participants regarding what they chose to share. As a researcher, I took steps to collect multiple sources of data and triangulate across sources; I aligned findings with research purpose and questions, conducted member checks, participated in peer-debriefings at various points during the study (Bhattacharya, 2008) and remained vigilant of my own role in constructing meaning of the participants' experiences. These issues at once can contribute to limitations and possibilities

within this study depending on the successful execution. In Chapter 3, I outline in detail all processes completed in the dissertation study.

Another limitation of this study is the crisis of representation of the participants' voices. Regardless of how much I attempted to remove myself as a researcher, the representation of the data was still cognitively filtered through my subjectivities, thereby blurring the distance between the participants' voices and mine. While I have attempted to mitigate dominating the participants' voices with my own through narratives, where extractions from the interviews were long uninterrupted responses (Reismann, 2002), I cannot fully claim that the cognitive selection of such responses is value neutral or somehow devoid of my voice.

Additionally, time may be considered a limit of this study. Qualitative research generally requires an extended stay in the field, which is typically regarded to be at least one year if not more (Creswell, 2007) for an ethnographic study. However, since this study is retrospective in nature, and is not an ethnography, an extended time frame was not the most critical aspect of this study. Being on the inside as an administrator provided me the opportunity to gain an extensive understanding of the culture of the alternative education program from which the participants graduated. Another measure to offset the abbreviated stay in the field was to enlist the participants to evolve into co-researchers throughout the data analysis process. This process allowed further opportunities to gain in-depth insight and understanding concerning the participants.

Significance of the Study

Given that the narratives of students in alternative education are scant, and success stories of such students are also limited, this study offers a counter-narrative with the intention to shift perspectives from a marginalized standpoint. Understanding the experiences of students who are

academically successful out of alternative education offers a way to bridge between bottom-up and top-down discourses. In other words, students' perspectives allow for exploring how intended policies, resource allocations, and opportunities are perceived and utilized by students who are successful in alternative education. Gaining an understanding from the bottom up brings attention to the process of disengagement that exists given that it is possible for at-risk students to graduate from alternate high school programs. Highlighting what successful students perceive to be most helpful while attending alternative programs, rather than relying on what policy makers and educators may think are most effective practices leads to opening up conversational spaces where new perspectives on students' needs are discussed. Dialoguing against, with, and about the dominant narrative of traditional education is a key step to shifting the perceptions of alternative education programs and students.

Furthermore, drawing attention to students' perceptions sheds light on the marginalization experiences of students that occur when students transition from a traditional school to an alternative education program. Discussions of marginalization create a fertile ground to investigate issues of equity and the ways in which opportunities for successes provided to students play out in their lives while transitioning from traditional to alternative education. Educational leaders and policy makers then have an opportunity to provide visionary leadership, if they so choose, with an in-depth understanding of the experiences of successful students in alternate education. Visionary leadership can involve asking several questions while allocating resources and creating educational opportunities. What would an educational experience look like if educational leaders, policy makers took into consideration the experiences of successful students in alternative education? How would educational leaders and policy makers bridge the gap between what they deem as necessary and beneficial versus what successful students

graduating from alternative education state? In what ways would educational leaders and policy makers like to invite dialogue to vision a better future for all students regardless of the labels put on them or the educational systems in which they are enrolled?

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined the background and context of alternative education and the stigma attached to alternative education and the students who are enrolled in such programs. Given that success stories of students in alternative education are scant, I have offered a rationale for a study providing a counter-narrative that explores the experiences of graduates from an alternate education program and how they credit their academic successes to the alternative education. Using standpoint theory, I have justified how marginalized viewpoints can be represented through the perceptions of students who graduated from an alternative education program. I have discussed the methodological framework of narrative inquiry and its appropriateness for this study in addition to various data collection methods and attempts that were made to maintain academic rigor and trustworthiness. While no study is perfect, or without limitations, I have identified potential limits of the study and attempts I made to mitigate such limitations. Finally, I have discussed the significance of this study and the implication of the findings on educational leaders and policy makers.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I elaborate on standpoint theory, discuss the history and context of alternative education, and highlight key trends from empirical studies. Alternative education programs serve as an opportunity for students to continue their education despite experiencing difficulties in a traditional setting (Aron, 2006; Beken et al., 2010). Alternative education has been studied qualitatively, and to a lesser degree quantitatively, yet research surrounding alternative education remains limited (Aron, 2006; De La Ossa, 2005). On one hand, quantitative research has primarily focused on alternative student demographics, passing rates, graduation rates, and dropout rates to measure effectiveness (Aron, 2006; Beken et al, 2010; Foley & Pang, 2006; Lehr et al., 2009). On the other hand, qualitative research includes the perspectives of administrators, teachers, and students to gain a better understanding of how and why alternative schools function for the purpose of meeting student needs (De La Ossa, 2005; Kim, 2010; Malagon & Alvarez, 2010; Quinn & Poinier, 2006).

While some qualitative studies have focused on administrators' perceptions, lacking in research are students' perceptions that can be used to inform policy makers, researchers, and practitioners about the ways in which to improve alternative education for at-risk students. This chapter outlines research that has been conducted concerning alternative education while expressing the need for further research pertaining to student perspectives, in particular in South Texas, after the discussion of the theoretical framework that informs this study.

Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by standpoint theory, as its theoretical framework. Collins (1997) asserted that standpoint theory is "an interpretive framework dedicated to explicating how knowledge remains central to maintaining and changing unjust systems of power" (p. 375).

15

Standpoint theory has roots that are based on Marxist theories (Wood, 2005). Much like how Marxism naturalizes class divisions between the upper class and the working class, standpoint theory draws on the idea that groups formed can be related to each other as one being dominant and the other subordinate. Given that Marxist methods of analysis center on the conditions and experiences of the working class, as a result of subjugation from the upper class, it makes sense that standpoint theory extracts from Marxism. Standpoint theory (Harding, 2004) focuses on conditions surrounding a subordinate group. Wood (2005) draws the parallel of Marxist methods of analysis concentrating on working or lower class and standpoint theory's analysis concentrates on conditions and perspectives of the subordinate group.

While the standpoint theory's ideologies may be traced backed to Marx, the theoretical framework gained prominence in the late 1970s and early 1980s due to the work done by Dorothy Smith (1974, 1987), Patricia Hill Collins (1986, 1990), Donna Haraway (1988), Sandra Harding (1991), and Nancy Hartsock (1983). Most of the standpoint theory analyses are grounded in feminism (Harding, 2004; Rouse, 2009; Wood, 2005) to focus on various types of gender inequalities. Although standpoint theory re-emerged to examine gender inequalities (Rouse, 2009), the primary tenet of standpoint theory is to focus on conditions experienced by an under privileged group and how members of the group construct meaning of their experiences in the context of negotiating the lack of privilege in their lives (Intemann, 2010; Harding, 1993).

A key claim in standpoint theory is that the perceptions constructed by the subordinate group are methodically different from those of the dominant group, therefore producing completely different knowledges (Harding, 1995; Harding, 2004). Thus, a group's social position and location play an important role in shaping "the social, symbolic, and material conditions and insights common to a group of people" (Wood, 2005, p. 61). While this idea clarifies that a

16

subordinate's social position and location shape perceptions that are different from a dominant group, a standpoint is not achieved until an oppositional stance is constructed through reflective engaging practices (Wood, 2005). In other words, the actual "standpoint" is only constructed when the subordinate group fully engages with its social position and location and identifies the conditions of existence. This "standpoint" is not a social position or location assigned to the underprivileged by any dominant group. Instead it is one that is constructed by the subordinate group themselves, a move of empowerment, to give voice to their own conditions of existence.

Haraway (1988) asserted that standpoints are active, in that they are used to oppose or challenge the dominant perspective. Thus, according to Wood (2005), the dominant viewpoint cannot be a standpoint even though it is a social position that provides a perspective because it does not oppose or challenge itself. Wood (2005) further elaborated that a standpoint is not just a description, explanation, or increased understanding, but rather, a position that "offers a critique of existing power relations between the subordinate group and the dominant group and the inequality they produce" (p. 62). In other words, one of the functions of standpoint theory is to critique power structures. Therefore, while a dominant group can take on a social position and a location, it is not possible for the dominant group to critique the power structures within which they are complicit while enjoying privileges that are not being offered to the subordinate group. How could they even understand what it is like living the lives of a subordinate group if it is completely outside the spectrum of their experience and awareness?

Hence, standpoint is used to challenge what is known if we start from the experiences of a subordinate group using these tenets (Harding, 1993; Wood, 2005). According to Anderson (2012) the tenets of standpoint theory are:

(i) the social location of the privileged perspective, (ii) the scope of its privilege: what

questions or subject matters it can claim a privilege over, (iii) the aspect of the social

location that generates superior knowledge: for example, social role, or subjective

identity; (iv) the ground of its privilege: what it is about that aspect that justifies a claim

to privilege; (v) the type of epistemic superiority it claims: for example, greater accuracy,

or greater ability to represent fundamental truths; (vi) the other perspectives relative to

which it claims epistemic superiority and (vii) modes of access to that perspective: is

occupying the social location necessary or sufficient for getting access to the perspective?

(Standpoint Epistemology in General section, para 1)

These seven tenets were used to drive this study to investigate how students that attended an

alternative education program shaped their perceptions through their educational experiences.

The tenets outline the idea that the structure of society is based on power relations that breed

inequity. They also demonstrate how disparity in conditions shapes the experiences of the

dominant and subordinate groups (Wood, 2005). The experiences that are afforded or not

afforded to students in alternate education can shape their perceptions concerning their education.

The tenets also emphasize that members of the subordinate group have less distorted

perspectives of their own lived experiences compared to the dominant position (Harding, 1993).

Wood (2005) asserted that, "privileged groups have a vested interest in not seeing oppression

and inequality that accompany and, indeed, makes possible their privilege" (p. 62). Therefore,

members of the dominant group are not as likely to understand the positions of the subordinate

group while the subordinate group is more likely to understand both perspectives (Harding, 2005)

if they interrogate power relations, assumptions that hold the subordinate and dominant group in

their respective positions and social locations, and the resulting conditions of existence. Hence,

18

students that attended an alternative setting can share the experiences that shaped their perceptions in traditional education and in an alternative setting, while students that only attended a traditional school would only be able describe their traditional education experiences. Moreover, in voicing and documenting the experiences of students who transitioned from traditional to alternate education and successfully graduated high school, they operate in a way where their opinions have value rather than being restricted or framed from a dominant group's perspective.

Lastly, the tenets refer to the understanding that can be gained from an oppressed group's ability to implement change (Harding, 2004) and dialogue. Consequently, standpoint theory can bring about intellectual achievement to perpetuate political and social change (Wood, 2005). Thus, understanding the marginalization of alternative students and dialoguing about the experiences that shape their perceptions is an appropriate step in providing alternative students the educational opportunities and associated support structures that are more equitable and just.

The tenets that are outlined above are the key components that determine how standpoint theory was used as a theoretical lens to frame this study. Beyond shifting perspectives, standpoint theory allows for a deeper investigation of power structures, the ways in which privileges or lack thereof play in the lives of the participants, and the ways in which exposing unjust conditions can invite dialogue for more just possibilities. Just possibilities can include but not be limited to equitable resource allocations, fair opportunities, and responsive support structures leading to creating counter-narratives of alternate education.

History and Context of Alternative Schools

Although the dropout rate may be decreasing, there are still over one million students in the United States that drop out of school each year (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2013).

Thus, alternative schools have been enlisted as an innovative intervention to improve the quality

of education for at-risk students in an effort to decrease the number of students that drop out

(Hoyle & Collier, 2006). Traditionally, students in alternative programs have not had success in

traditional programs (Beken et al., 2010). Typically, these students enroll in alternative programs

because they are failing, truant, displaying disruptive behavior, pregnant, or exhibiting other

similar factors that can lead to leaving high school (Foley & Pang, 2006). However, these factors

have not always been the reason students' sought to attend alternative education programs.

The landscape of alternative education has undergone significant change over the last 50

years. Young (1990) contended that different education opportunities that were based on race,

gender, and social class set the stage for alternative education. Although a case may be made to

date alternative education back to the beginning of education in America, contemporary

alternative education came into existence in mainstream public education in the 1960's (Lange &

Sletten, 2002). In the early 1960's, alternative schools were created to challenge the

traditionalism in public education while addressing particular individual needs of students within

their local communities (Kim, 2010; Lehr et al., 2009). These alternative schools were designed

to offer flexibility to students in order to allow for additional opportunities for success as

educators realized not all students could be educated sufficiently utilizing a singular curriculum

(Conley, 2002). Unfortunately, these schools were seen as "being racist and exclusively designed

for the success of the few" (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p. 3). However, by the late 1960's the scope

of alternative education began to change in response to the Elementary and Secondary Education

Act of 1965, in which President Johnson planned to use education as a means to fight poverty

(Lange & Sletten, 2002). According to Young (1990), there was a shift in the goal of alternative

education from excellence to equity. Alternative schools then, with the help of government

funding, began to alter their scope to provide equitable opportunities to minority and students

who were otherwise disadvantaged (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Miller, 2002).

As such, two distinct types of alternative schools emerged known as Freedom Schools

and Free Schools (Young, 1990). Freedom school emerged prior to Free Schools. The Freedom

schools were developed to offer people of minority backgrounds an opportunity to a higher

quality of education compared to the substandard education they were afforded in the public

education system (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Young, 1990). According to Lange and Sletten (2002),

these Freedom schools were run outside of public education and were based on community-

school models.

The second form of alternative schools that emerged in the late 1960's were a part of the

Free School Movement (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Young, 1990). Lange and Sletten (2002) noted

that these schools were based on achievement of individuals through innovation rather than

emphasizing on community. The Free School Movement schools were developed in response to

the notion that public schools impeded students' ability to explore intellectually due to its

restrictive structure (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Therefore, within the Free School Movement,

districts began creating schools within schools, schools without walls, magnet schools, and

schools that were focused on noncompetitive approaches that were child-centered (McKee &

Conner, 2007).

By the early 1980's, in a response to school safety concerns, "pseudo-alternative" schools

began to emerge (Escobar-Chaves, Tortolero, Masse, Watson, & Fulton, 2002; Ensminger &

Juon, 1998; Kellmayer, 1998). These schools were in response to growing concerns among

educators, policy makers, and the public regarding violent behaviors, weapons, and drugs on

public school campuses. During this time, students that participated in dangerous behaviors were

sent to alternative programs because they were not being successful in the traditional setting (Beken et al., 2010), and were given the opportunity to focus on career and vocational training (Kelly, 1993; Young & Clinchy, 1992). It was also during this time period that alternative education began to expand to include recovering dropouts, teenage parents, and student that sought vocational and career training (Kelly, 1993; Young & Clinchy, 1992). Unfortunately, these alternative schools were typically unsuccessful and were noted for isolating and segregating students from the traditional schools, thus perpetuating a stigma (Loflin, 2003).

While the scope of alternative education may have changed since the 1960's, the purpose has remained much the same; to offer different options to meet student educational needs. Contemporary alternative education can generally be described as an education setting for students outside of the traditional education setting (Aaron, 2006; Foley & Pang, 2006; Kim, 2010; Raywid, 1994). More specifically, Flower, McDaniel & Jolivette (2011) and Hemmer (2011) showed that alternative education programs typically offer individualized opportunities to students who are not successful in a traditional education setting and are considered at-risk of dropping out of school.

Student enrollment in alternative education programs has risen substantially since 1990 and is projected to continually rise in the future as the number of alternative programs increase (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010; Foley & Pang, 2006; Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). In 2002, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) published the first comprehensive study of alternative programs for students at risk of educational failure. The NCES reported that in 1993-1994, 2606 schools were classified as being alternative. By the 2000-2001 school year, there were 10,900 alternative programs were in operation in the United States which served approximately 612,000 at-risk students (NCES, 2002). In a follow-up study, the NCES (2010)

reported that approximately 645,500 students attended an alternative program designed for students at-risk during the 2007-08 school year. Unfortunately, the data generated by NCES (2010) includes all alternative programs and does not delineate between discipline programs and programs designed for dropout prevention. By not differentiating between the different types of alternative programs, it is nearly impossible to discern an enrollment of students in dropout prevention or recovery programs.

At-risk Students

It is well recognized that alternative schools are relied upon to reduce, recover, and prevent students from dropping out of school (Beken et al., 2010; Hemmer, 2011). However, for a variety of reasons, alternative education programs have assumed a negative connotation (De La Ossa, 2005; Lehr et al., 2009). It may be that many alternative schools are now linked "with unsuccessful students—with those who by "virtue of being 'disadvantaged,' 'marginalized,' or 'at-risk' cannot or will not succeed in a regular program" (Raywid, 1994, p. 26). As a result of this link between alternative schools and the risk factors associated with its students, Kim (2010) found that it is not uncommon that alternative programs are viewed as a dumping grounds for bad kids.

Of all the risk factors associated with students in alternative programs, Ruiz de Valasco et al. (2008) stated that, "the single common denominator is that most [alternative] students have reached age 16 lacking sufficient academic credits to remain on track to graduate with their age cohort" (p. 2). Data show there are several risk behaviors and non-academic learning obstacles linked to students in alternative programs that perpuate their lack of academic progress, which include race and ethinicity, living and family arrangements, student mobility, living under the poverty line, alcohol and other substance use, violence and victimization (Foley and Pang, 2006;

23

Miller, 2002; Ruiz de Valasco et al., 2008). Any of these factors or combination of these factors create a tremendous amount of vulnerability in alternative students' lives which make them more susceptible to dropping out (Hemmer, 2011; Ruiz de Valasco, 2008). Thus, if students enrolled in alternative education are vulnerable to multiple risk factors, then it makes sense that alternative education programs are aware of how to work with such risk factors while ensuring students receive a quality education. See appendix A for at-risk indicators in Texas.

Types of Alternative Schools

There are several types of alternative schools with different labels that serve various purposes depending on student needs (Aron, 2006; Hemmer & Uribe, 2012). Alternative school designs have a wide range depending on scope, mission, and accreditation. Generally, alternative programs are situated in order to provide credit remediation and acceleration while incorporating job skills to increase student engagement in an effort to graduate students that persistently struggle (Aron, 2008; Hemmer, 2011; Lehr et al., 2009). Some common alternative schools include Open Schools, Magnet Schools, Dropout Centers, Schools-Within-a-Schools, Discipline Centers, Free Schools, Continuation Schools, and many others including Charter Schools (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010; De La Ossa, 2005; Kim, 2010; Raywid, 1994; Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008). This particular study utilized participants that graduated from an alternative program that is considered a School-Within-a-School designed to reduce the number of students that drop out.

In addition to program design, the scope of alternative education varies depending on the emphasis of the program. Some alternative programs emphasize creativity and innovation while others are designed for disciplinary purposes (Foley & Pang, 2006; Raywid, 1994). As mentioned in chapter one, Raywid (1994) developed a three-type typology to distinguish the

24

alternative schools based on their characteristics and goals. The three typologies are Type I-Popular Innovations, Type II-Last-Chance Programs, and Type III-Remedial Focus.

According to Raywid (1994), popular innovations are considered Type I. These alternative schools are designed to be challenging and innovative for all students that attend. Type I schools are considered a departure from traditional ideals from which many of their innovations are then implemented in traditional school settings. Typically, students must apply to Type I schools as they are designed as a school of choice or magnet school. Generally, these programs are themed with a specific emphasis in a particular subject like math, science, and art, or they are designed with an instructional approach in mind such as credit remediation, self-paced, and credit acceleration.

Raywid (1994) defined Type II as last-chance programs. Discipline is the primary characteristic of these programs and they often serve as a last chance for the students to modify their behavior prior to being expelled from school. Students do not choose to attend these schools, rather they are sent to them for disciplinary purposes. Last-chance programs are "likened to 'soft jails,' and they have nothing to do with options or choice" (Raywid, 1994, p. 27). Since placements in Type II schools are typically short and the focus is on behavior modification, curriculum is often limited to basic required courses (Aron, 2006; Raywid, 1994).

Remedial Focus is the distinguishing characteristic of Type III programs (Raywid, 1994). These programs focus on any combination of academic, social, or emotional remediation or rehabilitation with the goal for students to get back on track in order to return to a traditional education setting and be successful (Raywid, 1994). Generally, Type III programs provide counseling, access to social services, and offer academic remediation (Aron, 2006; Raywid, 1994). Although the three typologies of alternative education are commonly accepted, there is a

significant amount of overlap between the typologies causing their boundaries to blur (Aron, 2006; Raywid, 1994). The blurring of the boundaries of the three typologies adds to the complexity of understanding alternative education, thus reinforcing the need for further research.

Alternative Education in Texas

Tracking the number of alternative schools in Texas is fairly easy (Texas Education Agency, 2010). However, it is complicated to differentiate between the types of alternative programs that students attend except for the discipline alternative programs (Beken et al., 2009; TEA, 2010). While the Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2010) readily makes available the number of students that attend alternative education schools each year (which includes charter schools), their calculations do not take into consideration the Schools-Within-a-School model, or alternative programs that are part of a traditional high school campus as they don't have their own campus identification number (Beken et al., 2009).

In 2010, the TEA reported that 2,283,490 or 47 percent of the 4,847,844 Texas public school students were identified as at risk of dropping out of school (TEA, 2010). What this means, for over 2 million Texas students, is that they were at-risk due to one or more of the thirteen at-risk indicators defined by the state of Texas: academic failure, grade retention, persistent discipline referrals leading to suspension or expulsion, absenteeism, or pregnancy and/or are parents themselves, among many other factors.

Policy makers and educators in Texas have been seeking ways to reduce the number of students that drop out (Beken et al., 2009). Therefore, alternative programs have been developed to offer at-risk students an opportunity to complete their high school graduation requirements in a nontraditional setting (Beken et al., 2010). However, according to Beken et al. (2009), there is minimal research literature that outlines the success of at-risk students in alternative programs

26

and the extent to which alternative programs are able to provide opportunities to re-engage students to prevent them from dropping out.

Re-engaging Practices

There are various definitions of alternative education that include a broad range of settings from discipline centers to charter schools to schools within schools (Lange, 1998; McGee, 2001; Raywid, 1994). However, one consistent aspect of all definitions is that alternative schools generally serve students that are labeled as at-risk of failure (Lehr et al., 2009). The US Department of Education defines an alternative education school as:

> a public elementary/secondary school that addresses the needs of students which typically cannot be met in a regular school and provides nontraditional education which is not categorized solely as regular education, special education, vocational education, gifted and talented or magnet school programs. (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 55)

Although there is a national definition for alternative education, 34 states have their own definition for alternative education. Unfortunately, there is a lack of consistency among the definitions as to what constitutes an alternative education. Lehr et al. (2009) offered that there are multiple definitions of alternative education that vary across states. Some states indicate that alternative schools are non-traditional settings that are located off a traditional campus, while others include programs that are situated on traditional campuses. Further discrepancies in definitions include the circumstances and characteristics of the students to be educated, such as whether students are at-risk of failure or the students are disruptive and have discipline issues (Quinn & Poinier, 2006). The last variation in the states' definition is regarding the purpose of alternative education programs, whether they are for credit recovery, discipline, acceleration, or dropout prevention, or whether they are magnet or charter schools (Lehr et al., 2009). The

inconsistent definitions make it difficult to draw concrete conclusions concerning the effectiveness of alternative education.

Unfortunately, with the varying definitions of what comprises alternative education, measuring the success of alternative education programs over time is complicated. Without the benefit of a longitudinal data system that could track the progress of students across educational settings, it is difficult to determine the impact that alternative programs have on student success (Ruiz de Valasco et al., 2008). Lehr et al. (2009) posited that since alternative students are considered at-risk, simply measuring academic progress may not adequately describe the effect that an alternative program setting may have on student success. Only measuring academic success discounts the fact that students who attend alternative programs typically gain self-esteem, attend school more regularly, and develop stronger personal relationships (Lehr et al., 2009). Ruiz de Valasco et al. (2008) noted that currently, there is not a way to create a comparison group for students in alternative programs because typically students are in alternative programs due to various reasons such as lack of credits, disruptive behavior, or absenteeism. For an accurate comparison, a data system would need to be in place that would allow for the comparison of alternative education students with traditional students that have similar academic and behavior characteristics. By not having a comparison group, Ruiz de Valasco et al. (2008) contended comparisons between alternative programs and traditional schools could be misleading. Without a system that can concretely measure how well alternative programs do in helping students succeed, other factors must be examined that could be considered best practices to successfully re-engage students.

Re-engaging students requires an environment that is conducive to student success (Conrath, 2001; Kim, 2010). However, determining what constitutes an environment that is

conducive to success can have different meanings. Not allowing an alternative program to be a dumping ground is essential (Conrath, 2001). Instead, "alternative schools must be a part of a systematic intervention that will help students recover lost hope; self-esteem; and faith in themselves, the school and the society while developing their academic skills, knowledge, and talents" (Kim, 2010, p. 91). Structuring alternative programs with systematic intervention supports will often yield improved student behavior, attendance, and academic progress (Raywid, 1994). These improvements may be attributed to the relationship between student characteristics and school processes and how they "interact to create a cumulative effect on students' development over the course of their school career" (Beken, et al., 2010, p. 2). De La Ossa (2005) maintained that input from administrators, teachers, and students is a necessary component for implementing a systematic intervention that can lead to at-risk student success.

Creating a supportive environment does not occur by accident and meeting students' educational and social needs should be the focus of the structure, curriculum, and support services (Aron, 2006). Researchers have found that there are several characteristics that could be considered best practices that can lead to student success such as creating an empathetic environment that allows students the opportunity to receive individualized instruction in small class settings (Aron, 2006; Beken et al., 2010; Lehr et al., 2009). Generally, alternative programs that are considered successful, typically offer flexible individualized learning opportunities, hold students to high expectations, and have clearly defined rules for behavior. Further, effective alternative education programs usually have smaller enrollments, which allow for more individualized instruction to better meet a student's academic, emotional, and social needs (Foley & Pang, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002). With low student-to-teacher ratios, alternative programs are conducive for providing a supportive and nurturing environment that promotes and

strengthens relationships with peers and teachers (Atkins, Hohnstein & Roche, 2008; Foley & Pang, 2006). Perhaps this form of individual nurturing and support of students also can be one of the ways to address the various risk factors associated with the likelihood of a student failing in alternate education.

Further, De La Ossa (2005) credits low enrollment as a factor that contributes to a successful alternative education program. Typically individuals in smaller schools are more readily accepted for who they are, and often times their differences are celebrated. De La Ossa (2005) contended that "being safe and being accepted as an individual are crucial experiences" (De La Ossa, 2005, p. 35) in alternative education. According to McGregor and Mills (2011), a positive environment that focuses on individuals is less likely to cause students to disengage from school. Therefore, it is essential to gain the perspective of students attending an alternative program situated in a small environment to determine how their experiences can lead to a more effective program and be constituted as positive experiences for the students.

Small alternative schools allow for teachers to identify with students and form an empathetic bond. The lack of bond between alternative education teachers and students can stifle the necessary trust with students to build "empathetic understanding, and a special vision for their students" (Kim, 2010, p. 91). The most effective teachers in alternative education portray positive images that make an impression on students who have experienced issues in traditional settings. The effective teachers "develop and nurture compassionate perspectives about students to foster a trustworthy relationship between teacher and student" (Kim, 2010, p. 92). Additional research still needs to be conducted from the perceptions of students to gain a further understanding of the student/teacher relationships that are necessary to perpetuate enhanced student success.

Empirical Studies in Alternative Education

Although research in alternative education is on the rise, there are limited studies available, particularly concerning student perspectives (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010; De La Ossa, 2005; Kim, 2010). Of the research that has been conducted in alternative education, much of it seems to be centered on describing innovative practices (De La Ossa; 2005; Kim, 2010), organization structure (Aron, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002), and emerging alternative state policy (Lehr et al., 2009; Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008). Other recent studies examined the effectiveness of alternative schools (Beken et al., 2010) as well as explored equity issues (Hemmer, 2011; Hemmer & Shepperson, 2012). Following are brief descriptions of the different topics of research that have been investigated in regards to alternative education.

The studies pertaining to innovative practices are related to those of organizational structure. The practices that are considered innovative, such as project based learning, accelerated learning, and flexible scheduling are often embedded in the organizational structure (Aron, 2006; Raywid, 1994). However, for these practices to be successful, the organizational structure must be situated in a manner that offers a physically and emotionally supportive environment. Aron (2006) emphasized that "effective alternative learning programs are in clean and well-maintained buildings (not necessarily a traditional school house) that are attractive and inviting and that foster emotion well-being, a sense of pride, and safety" (p. 12). Beken et al. (2010) stated that programs that had a low enrollment were conducive to creating a supportive environment, which allowed students to focus on curriculum. While gaining an understanding of the innovative practices and organization structure may be significant, understanding the role that policy plays is just as important.

Lehr et al. (2009) contended that the first step of understanding the role of alternative education in America is documenting how states approach alternative programs. State policies are on the rise in an effort to combat the increase of dropouts, academic failure, drug abuse, and teen pregnancy (Lehr et al., 2009). In recent years, state legislation and policies have significantly increased. Katsiyannis and Williams (1998) reported that only 22 states had legislation pertaining to alternative education. According to Lehr et al. (2009), the number of states that have some form of legislation that addresses alternative education has risen to forty-eight. However, Lehr et al. (2009) concluded that there were no clear-cut answers as to why legislation has increased so rapidly. The increase could be due to increased interested in alternative education as evidenced by the increase in enrollment, or is a reaction to combat student failure in the midst of increased accountability. Regardless of the reason for the increase in policy concerning alternative education, the additional legislation appears to be playing a role regarding effective practices.

The increase in accountability in regards to alternative education may be part of the reason research is being conducted concerning the effectiveness of alternative programs. Beken et al. (2010) presented the bottom line of effectiveness for alternative students as dependent on the students' characteristics that make them vulnerable to being labeled as "at-risk." Therefore, looking purely at academic success rates and dropout rates may not be indicative of the effectiveness of alternative programs (Nunn & Parish, 1992). Other factors such as self-esteem and self-concept may be better indicators to gauge the effectiveness of an alternative program (Kim, 2010; Nunn & Parish, 1992; Raywid, 1994). Swanson (2005) found that factors such as curriculum and student–teacher relationships, may be the most telling when considering the graduation rates of alternative education programs. Unfortunately, the graduation rates of

alternative programs are lower compared to graduation rates in traditional education program, which may call into question the effectiveness of alternative education and rationalize the influx of accountability (Beken et al., 2010; Hemmer, 2011). Examining the accountability and the effectiveness of alternative programs has raised concerns regarding the equity of alternative education.

Although many alternative programs have innovative and flexible design attributes that are conducive to student success, many programs fail to differentiate between the needs of at-risk students and educational equity (Hemmer, 2011). According to Hemmer (2011), equity doesn't necessarily mean opportunity. In other words, just because students in alternative education have been afforded a second chance to complete the requirements to graduate high school, this completion is not an automatic indicator that they are receiving an equitable education. Since teachers in alternative programs typically employ innovative practices in their teaching methods, they may not be aware of the inequities in their practices. Hossain and Zeitlyn (2010) suggested that equity cannot merely be implied through equal opportunity. Equity according to Corson (2001) must also take into account justice and fairness. In addition to the measures of justice and fairness, equity should extend beyond individual achievement. The stringent accountability standards stress individual achievement is the vehicle to success in a global society (Groenke's, 2010; Hemmer, 2011). If academic success from alternative educational programs is seen as less meritable than academic success from traditional programs, then alternative education programs are not offered equitable opportunities. Therefore, Hemmer (2011) posited that, "the outcomes for at-risk students enrolled in alternative education must have the same meaning, the same construct for students not considered at risk to dropping out of school" (p. 7). This idea reinforces that a diploma from an alternative program should be regarded as valuable as a

diploma from a traditional setting and students should not be thought of in a lesser manner because they attended or graduated from an alternative program. Thus, equity may promote additional incentives for students to succeed in alternative education knowing that their individual needs can be met, while they work towards earning a diploma that holds the same value as students who graduate from a traditional setting.

While studies are being conducted regarding alternative education that add valuable insight concerning innovative practices, best practices, organization structure, policy, and equity, the studies are generally from the perspectives of educators and policy makers. More information on these topics is needed from the perspectives of students in alternate education for various reasons. First, using standpoint theory to create student narratives will allow for presenting perspectives of marginalization, determining ways in which power relations manifest in the participants' lives, and raising issues of justice, fairness, and equity for various stakeholders in education to consider and dialogue. Second, perspectives of students are important because those perspectives can be situated within the broader discussion of alternative education with educators' and policy makers' perspectives where ideas for a just and fair system of alternative education can be entertained. Third, systematically exploring student perspectives about alternate education and producing knowledge in that area offer the possibility of shifting perceptions about alternative education, thereby inviting discussion about effective practices and policies in the future.

Perceptions of Alternative Education

The amount of research pertaining to alternative education is minimal compared to other areas of education such as accountability, testing, and teaching methods (Foley & Pang, 2006; Kim, 2006; Lehr et al., 2009). There is even less evidence concerning perceptions of alternative

education, particularly students' perspectives (De La Ossa, 2005; Kim, 2010; Malagon & Alvarez, 2010).

Conducting an extensive literature review has uncovered a myriad of unfavorable perceptions of alternative education. Most salient of those factors is the previously mentioned perspective that alternative schools are dumping ground for bad kids. Another perception of alternative education is that their programs are easier because the curriculum is watered down (Cox, 1999; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Lehr et al., 2009). To gain an understanding of the perceptions of alternative education, the following section will identify how perceptions are constructed. Then I will describe the perceptions of students in alternative education as evidenced in the literature.

Constructing Perceptions. To have a better understanding of the perception of alternative education, one must first have an understanding of how perceptions are developed. The theory of constructionism can assist in explaining how perceptions are socially constructed through the interactions of individuals and the environment in which they live (Crotty, 1998; Stein, 2001). Constructionism is based on the idea that meaning is constructed rather than discovered and that "all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices" (Crotty, 1998, p.42). These meanings are found among the relationships of people and their social interactions, who "through language and, through the processes of socialization and interpretation, make sense of institutions, traditions, roles, and symbols" (Stein, 2001, p. 136). It is through these meanings or beliefs that people interpret and internalize to assign value and meaning.

The assigned meaning is affected by individuals' identities and experiences and by social status, race, ethnicity, and education among other things. The beliefs that are constructed can

have meanings that affect others at a personal level and/or a public, social level (Grbich, 2007). Stein (2001) explained that, "through language and communication, individuals represent their socially interpreted and constructed meanings of institutions to others" (p. 136). Therefore, how people make meaning of the events and situations in a public, social manner may have influence on how others will make meaning.

Through communication, the constructed meanings then become part of the social reality and are subject to internalization and interpretation from additional individuals. Thus, the constructed meanings become better established within society. Stein (2001) indicated that these processes are continuous and concurrent. It is through the experiences and relationships among individuals and alternative education that many of the perceptions are constructed. With this in mind, the perceptions of alternative education are used to construct meanings in reference to interaction with teachers, events in alternate education, making meaning of opportunities available, usability of resources, and situating oneself within the label of being at-risk.

Students' Perceptions. Atkins et al. (2008) found that students have a perception of themselves as doing better in an alternative education program than in a traditional setting. The perceptions of the students were based on improvement in the academic, behavioral, and social domains compared to their previously attended school. The 117 students surveyed perceived that attending an alternative school was helpful for them to make positive changes. The positive changes were pertaining to alternative education such as a small inviting environment in which they received individualized instruction. The survey results from this Atkins et al. (2008) study are a useful starting point but unfortunately do not yield data that is at the depth of which qualitative research aspires.

With a laundry list of risk factors present in their lives, many alternative students feel like they are looked down upon (De La Ossa, 2005). De La Ossa (2005) further elaborated that alternative students felt that teachers, administrators, school boards, and the public treated alternative students as second-class citizens because they chose to attend an alternative education program. The idea of being a second rate citizen has contributed to a negative image that lingers among students in alternative schools (De La Ossa, 2005).

Kim (2010) argued that a step in reversing the negative stigma of alternative education programs is to view each student as a "human being with integrity and dignity who can think for [her]/himself and stand up for [her]/himself, instead of seeing [her]/him as a mere troublemaker or a failure" (p. 91). The negative label of being a "bad kid" must be removed and each student in alternative education should be understood through empathy and thought of as being just like anyone else (Kim, 2010). Identifying how students perceive themselves, as being a significant figure in their education, is paramount in promoting a positive image of alternative education that can lead to additional student success.

While there are discussions about how students in alternative education perceive themselves, very little exist on an in-depth understanding of such perceptions. If individualized instruction, low student-to-teacher ratio, opportunities to work on one's personal and emotional issues while attending school, and having empathy are factors contributing to the success of students in alternative education, then these issues should be explored further in-depth from the perspectives of students in alternate education.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have described standpoint theory and the assumptions that will guide this study with regard to the history of the marginalization practices concerning alternative

education students. I then outlined the history and context of alternative education and illustrated the characteristics of at-risk students, which necessitate the need for alternate options to graduate. Then I discussed the different types of alternative programs and their specific purposes and the population of at-risk student they generally serve. Since this study is situated in Texas, I gave a brief description of alternative education in Texas. I then identified practices that have been established with empirical evidence as effective in re-engaging students that have been disenfranchised. With an understanding of best practices established, I presented a scant variety of perceptions of alternative education to establish the saliency of the negative stereotypes. I concluded the chapter with very limited literature on perceptions of students in alternate education to justify the argument for exploring such perspectives further and in an in-depth manner.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Recall the purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of two graduates who credit their alternative education in playing a role in their completion of high school in South Texas.

There were two research questions that this study addressed:

1. In what ways do the participants describe their experiences in a traditional education setting prior to enrollment into an alternative education program?

2. In what ways do the participants describe their experiences in alternative education contributing to their graduation?

Qualitative Inquiry

This study was conducted utilizing qualitative research, which is appropriate for developing an in-depth understanding of participants' narratives of their experiences (Merriam, 1998). The in-depth understanding in qualitative research occurs through listening, interpreting, and retelling participants' accounts in a manner that is meaningful (Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Glesne, 2011), along with using and triangulating multiple data sources, prolonged stay in the field, and performing various types of verification, which will be discussed later. Conducting qualitative research offers the flexibility needed to retell the stories of the participants in meaningful form by utilizing narratives rather than numbers, thus allowing the freedom to employ a systematic approach to gather empirical evidence (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

In this study, the participants recount their experiences of being part of an alternative education program from which they were able to graduate. Since these participants credit alternative education with their academic success, offering them a meaningful forum to narrate their perceptions allowed the researcher to re-tell the participants' stories through a shared

experience of meaning making. As such, qualitative research makes it possible to "stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 14). In other words, within qualitative research, it can be assumed that reality is not something that is separate from the human experience. Instead, reality is considered to be constructed through repeated social discourses. Additionally, qualitative research often involves a close relationship between the researcher and the researched and takes into account the role of context in shaping one's understanding of reality. Further, since qualitative research is not grounded in a positivist framework, it was not the mission of this study to seek an ultimate truth; rather, the mission was to discover meaning as described from the perspective of the participants (Crotty, 1998; Merriam, 2009). Put in another way, in qualitative research, it can be assumed that there are multiple ways of constructing truth and reality. Such ways do not have to be ascribed with labels of right or wrong. The meaning making that one does with one's reality varies with one's history, context, and negotiations of one's experiences. Therefore, instead of trying to capture a truth and attempting to predict and generalize the truth for a larger population, in qualitative inquiry, the researcher tries to understand how the participants' social reality was constructed. In what ways does the participant understand and make meaning of his/her truth? What is the context within which a participant's truth is constructed? Thus, in this study, the research purpose, questions, and methodology were aligned to promote an inquiry of context-driven meaning making, which are re-presented through a co-constructed narrative between the researcher and the researched.

Methodology

This study is grounded in narrative inquiry and will be represented in a narrative format. Thorne (2008) argued that the research purpose and questions should be the driving force for

selecting methodology, and if narrative inquiry is chosen, it is done because such analytic framework fits best to inform what one is trying to inquire. Narrative inquiry is described by Thorne (2008) as "an accommodation, an eclectic but reasoned and mindful integration of theoretical and technical devices to the understandings nurses, physicians, teachers, and other practitioners require to accomplish their respective social missions" (p. 12). Fontana and Frey (2008) explained that narratives are vehicles that can bring the words and stories of the participants alive, which makes narrative inquiry suitable for this study. The use of narrative inquiry offers the opportunity to focus the participants' perceptions of alternative education leading to the construction of a narrative from the participants' experiences to shed light on how alternative programs played a role in the lives of students who were enrolled in it.

As a methodology, narrative inquiry is flourishing in qualitative research, yet it is difficult to define because it is still considered an evolving field (Chase, 2008; Kim, 2009; Riessman, 2002). In the early part of the 20th century, narrative inquiry began to take its roots within the life history method (Chase, 2008). Sociologists and anthropologists valued the study of personal narratives and "treated oral narrative as a form of discourse worthy of study itself" (Chase, 2008, p. 58). Personal narratives became a valuable and viable way to explore the experiences of humans in an in-depth manner unlike any other data collection method (Chase, 2008).

Later, narrative researchers used narrative inquiry as a tool to gain an understanding of unique individual and human actions (Kim, 2009; Lai, 2010; Polkinghorne, 1995). To accomplish this, narrative researchers use the term narrative in a flexible manner. According to Chase (2008) "a narrative may be oral or written and may be elicited or heard during fieldwork, an interview, or a natural occurring conversation" (p. 59). Narrative is most often depicted as: (a)

41

a short story chronicling an event with characters; (b) as a comprehensive story that covers an important segment of one's life such as school, illness, war, etc.; or (c) as a narrative that covers someone's entire lifespan (Chase, 2008; Kim, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1995).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggested an approach to writing up narrative inquiry is to "find a form to represent . . . storied lives in storied ways, not to represent storied lives as exemplars of formal categories" (p. 141). Representing the participants lives in storied ways will afford the opportunity to focus on how the participants make meaning of their individual lives, particularly in the context of alternative education (Chase, 2008; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Additionally, narrative inquiry makes it possible to recount the participants' experiences in a manner that engages the reader and brings life to the stories.

To successfully represent narrative inquiry, the write-up calls for thick description that is rich and cultivates a rendering of the participant's life that is multi-dimensional (Saldaña, 2009). To accomplish this feat, it is necessary to gather the stories contained in the data and re-story them in some meaningful manner. It is during the re-storying process that an informal tie will be established among ideas (Creswell, 2007). According to Cortazzi (1993), establishing a chronological sequence in re-storying is what separates narrative from other research genres. The use of chronology helps define the beginning, middle, and end. Carter (1993) contended that like in a novel, these elements involve an issue or conflict, a main character or protagonist, and a plot that ends in resolution. The plot as described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) may be situated in a three-dimensional space of interaction, continuity, and situation. The interaction is between personal and social dynamics, and the continuity involves past, present, and future, while the situation refers to the context in which the story was experienced. It is within the context storyline that the experiences of the participants have been set, with themes or primary storylines

identified for further discussion of meanings the participants and the researcher made (Cresswell, 2007; Huber & Whelan, 1999) of experiences of graduating from an alternate education.

To assist in developing a storyline that maintained the richness and depth required by qualitative research, the participants were enlisted to evolve into co-researchers as the narrators of their own life story. Rather than taking sole control of the research process, my relationship with the participants was bilateral as we worked together as partners to design, manage, and draw conclusions from the research. Schwandt (2007) described this process as "research with people rather than on people" (p. 45). This process allowed me some additional opportunities to become more familiar with the participants during the inquiry process and gain deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

Allowing the participants to be narrators challenged the positivist view of the need to capture one absolute truth (Peshkin, 1993) in the process of meaning making. Since qualitative research is grounded in the assumption that there can be multiple ways to construct reality and truths, representations narrated by the participants cannot be judged as being the only truth, but rather a truth as represented by their experiences that can stand alone as a story by itself. It is through the narratives that the participants express how and why specific happenings began or occurred or detail more open-ended experiences that produce challenging questions instead of offering concrete answers (Barone, 2000; Saldaña, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1995).

Research Design

The research design describes the methods and procedures to guide narrative inquiry. The research design provides a framework for participant selection, data collection, data management and analysis, data representation, ethical considerations, and trustworthiness and rigor. Each

procedure is defined, and then a description of how it was applied for this study follows.

Methodologically, I chose to conduct an in-depth narrative inquiry study.

Participant Selection and Context

As an administrator for a relatively small alternative high school program, I was able to get to know the students well. The enrollment of the program generally hovered around 50 students. The students were split into two shifts, a morning shift, and an afternoon shift, with approximately 25 students attending each four-hour shift. Students who wished to attend the alternative high school program were required to apply and be accepted. The application that students filled out required the students and parents explain the students' academic needs and describe other circumstances that were preventing them from being successful at the traditional high school. During this process, the issues that students experienced were evaluated to determine if an alternative setting was appropriate for them. After reviewing the application, a consultation with each student was held prior to accepting the student into the program. It was through the application process and the informal interviews that an individual plan was loosely constructed to best meet the student's customized needs. This process also specifically highlighted issues in the student's experience that prevented the student from being academically successful.

After students began attending the alternative program, a relationship between the administrator and the student began to take shape. Within a typical day, at the very least, I would check up on and talk with each student who was enrolled in the program and in attendance. Many of the students who attended the alternative program struggled academically and required additional instructional support beyond what their classroom teacher could offer to make adequate process. Therefore, there were many students who received intensive one-on-one

instruction from me for extensive periods throughout the day as they completed their computer-based curriculum. It was during these encounters that I formed a personal relationship with the students. These relationships presented the opportunity to gain further understanding of the students' needs and issues that may have caused them to be shuttled in and out of the academic setting and offered me the opportunity to gather information that was insightful. This insight played a key role in informing the participant selection for this study.

Qualitative research does not have any concrete rules on the number of participants for a study (deMarrais, 2004). Since qualitative research tends to be more focused on depth and detail, having only a few participants is appropriate (Miles & Huberman, 1994). According to deMarrais (2004) "less is more" (p. 61). In other words, because qualitative researchers are not in the business of generalizing but in the business of developing in-depth understanding, more participants does not always imply a better study. More participants can also mean a superficial analysis. The number of participants in a study should matter less, and the depth in which a participant's experiences are understood, analyzed, and re-presented should matter more. With this in mind, I selected two participants for this study, as I was mindful of the resources and time available to develop an in-depth understanding.

It was critical to establish criteria to select participants who can add valuable input leading to a stronger understanding of alternative education and how it could be improved. Creating a framework of how specific sampling techniques were utilized makes it possible to explain why particular participants were chosen for this study (Schwandt, 2007). For this study, the following criteria were in place for selecting participants: the participants were at least 18 years of age and should have graduated from an alternative school in the 2010-2011 school year or later. Referring to Figure 1, the potential participants were also identified based on some of

45

the risk factors associated with the student's academic success. Such risk factors included struggling in the traditional school setting by not making adequate academic progress, or experiencing conflict at home causing the potential participant to move out of home, or experiencing job-related conflicts that placed a burden on the potential participant's academic success.

Participant Selection Process

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          ┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┐
          │   Enrolled in an Alternative Education Program │
          │          and Successfully Graduated          │
          └─────────────────────────────────────────────┘
               ↑                 ↑                 ↑
    ┌──────────────────┐  ┌──────────────┐  ┌────────────────────┐
    │ Not Making Adequate│◄►│   Move Out   │◄►│ Job is a High Priority│
    │ Academic Progress │  │              │  │                    │
    └──────────────────┘  └──────────────┘  └────────────────────┘
               ↑                 ↑                 ↑
  ┌──────────────────────┐ ┌──────────────┐ ┌──────────────┐
  │ Struggle in Traditional│◄►│ Issues at Home │◄►│ Job Conflicts │
  │   Education Setting    │  │              │  │              │
  └──────────────────────┘ └──────────────┘ └──────────────┘
```
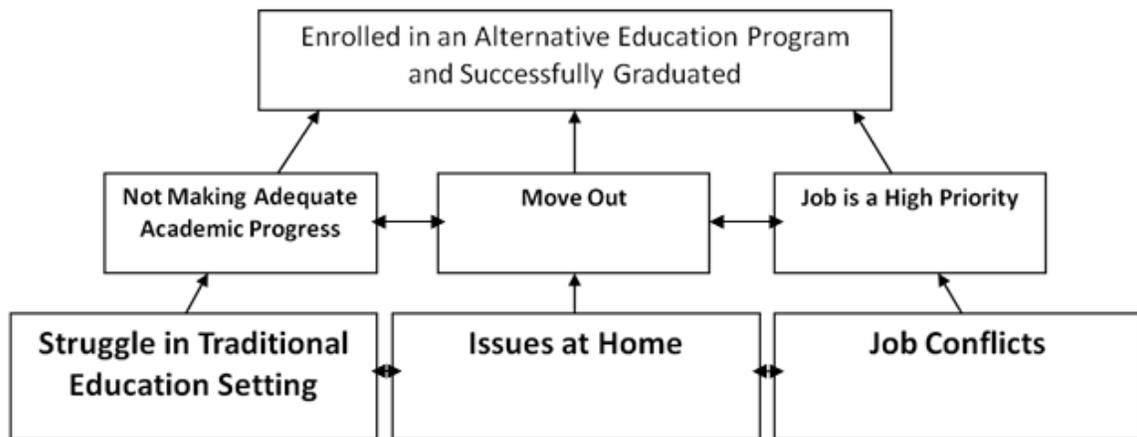
Figure 1. Participant selection process.

After identifying an initial list of participants who graduated from our alternate education program, the list was shortened by seeking participants who credited the alternative education program as having played a critical role in their academic success. Purposeful, homogeneous, and convenience sampling procedures were utilized to select two participants that met the specified criteria.

Purposeful sampling is the practice of selecting participants from a known sample that is rich with useful data for a particular study (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). Creswell (2007) explained that in qualitative research "the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because

46

they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon

in the study" (p. 125). Thorne (2008) stated that purposeful sampling should be employed to gain

an understanding from specific participants "by virtue of some angle of the experience that they

might help us better understand" (p. 90). Purposeful sampling was appropriate for this study

because it assisted in selecting participants who could detail their experiences of attending an

alternative education program, while having a job, and living outside of their family home as

they worked toward graduating from an alternative education program.

Homogenous sampling refers to selecting participants with similar characteristics so that

the researcher can understand an experience shared by these participants while comparing and

contrasting those experiences (Glesne, 2011). Homogenous sampling allowed me to look at a

particular subgroup in an in-depth manner (Patton, 2002), which in this case, was students who

have attended and graduated from an alternative high school program and credited the alternative

education program as having played a role in their graduation. The sample is considered

homogenous because all participants share the same characteristics in the sense that they were

selected based on the same risk factors (struggle in traditional classroom, conflict at home

leading to a move out, and job-related stress), and they all graduated from the alternative

education program despite being associated with those risk factors.

Finally, convenience sampling can be described as selecting participants that are close at

hand, since they may be able to provide the most insight concerning shared experiences of a

particular phenomenon (Thorne, 2008). A drawback of convenience sampling is that it may limit

credibility beyond the context of the particular study. Thorne (2008) posited that, "while

convenient samples can create a strong basis for 'description,' they tend to create proportionately

greater challenges to justifying interpretation" (p. 90). Keeping Thorne's concern in mind, I draw

on extensive literature to contextualize the findings of this study since the participants were graduates of the alternative education program where I was the administrator.

After generating the selection criteria and a list of potential participants, I contacted Riley and Adam. Both participants immediately agreed to participate after I explained the details of the study. Riley, is a tall, thin white female with flowing long brown hair. She is from a middle-class family and carries herself with a sense of confidence and pride. She is a strong young woman who is extremely well spoken and has a contagious smile that gives me the sense that she truly enjoys talking and listening to people. Adam is a thin Hispanic male who is just shy of six feet tall. He is reserved amongst his peers and is extremely articulate when speaking with his elders. Adam is from a blue-collar, middle class family and has lived in the same small community his entire life. Adam and Riley both met the selection criteria because they credited the alternative program as playing a role in allowing them to graduate as well as experienced issues in the traditional educational setting, encountered conflict at home that led to them moving out, and relied upon full-time employment while enrolled in school.

Research Sites

Since the participants had already graduated, the tangible research sites were locations where the interviews were conducted and the site of the alternate education program to collect program-related data and documents. Interview sites were determined with the participants ensuring that it was conducive to recording conversation, and it was mutually convenient for the researcher and the participant. I met Riley at a coffee shop and met with Adam at the dining room table in his house. It was imperative that the location for each interview be quiet in order to limit any potential distractions as much as possible and for ease of transcription of the interviews later on.

Gaining Access to Participants

Being the administrator of the program from which the participants graduated granted me some access to information concerning the names of and contact information for potential participants. Also, having worked with the potential participants while they were enrolled in the program allowed me to re-establish rapport easily. Building rapport is a key to success in qualitative inquiry (Fontana & Frey, 2008; Glesne, 2011). Creswell (2007) asserted that the process of building trust and rapport with the participants enables the researcher further access in the study. In this instance, further access included access to school records and other related documents. The participants were asked to request relevant documents from the school since they are adults and have graduated. The request for records included transcripts, attendance, disciplinary reports, and reflective reports that are kept on file. I then sought permission from the participants to collect archival data such as completed assignments, essays, and their AEP application from the files located in the alternative program.

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Data Collection Procedures

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The data collection began during the 2013 Spring semester from January 2013 to May 2013. As is common in qualitative research, data was analyzed as it was collected (Glesne, 2011). For an in-depth explanation of specific data collection methods and the amount of data generated, see Table 1. Upon transcribing all interviews and expanding field notes, 374 pages of raw data were generated from the following data collection procedures.

The majority of the data collected was obtained through interviews and through collecting archival documents such as student assignments and school records. Additional data sources included journal notes and memory elicitations. The memory elicitations were of memories shared between the participants and myself while they attended the alternative school.

These shared memories included times that I worked with the students individually, or conferences that I held with students, or any other memory that came to mind relevant for the research purpose. I also referred to a researcher journal that I kept, which included my reactions, hunches, and questions pertaining to the interviews and documents.

Table 1

Data Inventory

Source of data	Number of pages per event	Number of pages in total
3 interviews, (2 one hour interviews and 1 half hour interview) with each participant	29 pages per one hour of transcription	145 pages
Analysis of academic records; transcript, attendance, discipline	5 pages pre-alternative high school and 5 pages post alternative high school	20 pages
Journal notes and memory elicitations	5-7 pages per week for 12 weeks	66 pages
Participants' essay assignments (5-6)	2-3 pages per essay	26 pages
Co-constructed narratives	47 pages for participant 1 and 37 pages for participant 2	84 pages
Alternative education program application	5 pages per application	10 pages
Field notes and memos	1-3 pages per week for 12 weeks	23 pages
	Total pages	374 pages

Interviews

Interviews may be thought of "as the process of getting words to fly" (Glesne, 2011, p. 102). However, interviewing is not as simple as asking questions and getting answers. Interviews

have the potential to be ambiguous as written and spoken words can have multiple connotations (Schwandt, 2007). Nevertheless, Fontana and Frey (2008) stated that, "interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand fellow humans" (p. 118). Interviews are conducted or negotiated between two or more people in an effort to gain an understanding of the how's and what's of people's lives (Fontana & Frey, 2008; Glesne, 2011). Interviews were crucial to gain an understanding of the participants' lived experiences as they progressed towards completing high school.

In this study, interviews were conducted to ask questions of the participants to elicit responses, which could be analyzed to answer the research questions. It is in the context of these exchanges asking and answering questions that the researcher and the participant experience the "creation of collaborative effort called the interview" (Fontana & Frey, 2008, p. 116). There are three types of commonly designed interviews in qualitative research: structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, and unstructured or conversational interviews (Schwandt, 2007). Structured interviews are interviews in which the researcher prepares the interview questions before the interview begins and the questions generally remain the same throughout the interview. Semi-structured interviews are more flexible, in which the interviewer begins the interview with a set of pre-determined questions but may add to or replace questions based on the flow of the interview and information presented during the interview. Unstructured or conversational interviews occur when researchers create questions as the interview takes place, without any pre-determined set of questions, generally much like a conversation (Fontana & Frey, 2008; Glesne, 2011; Schwandt, 2007).

I used semi-structured interviews, and where appropriate, guided the interview to be as conversational as possible. The semi-structured format was utilized to ease into the interview

process and make the participant comfortable while establishing rapport. Fontana and Frey (2008) advocated building "a partnership between the researcher and respondents, who should work together to create a narrative–the interview" (p. 117). Since this is a narrative inquiry study, responses that lead to developing a story were the desired outcome of the interview process.

Initial interviews with each participant were approximately 30 minutes. The initial interviews were used as a means to re-establish rapport and gather a general sense of the participants' experiences while they attended the alternative education program. Then two additional one-hour follow-up interviews were conducted with each participant for clarification and verification. There were several questions asked as points of discussion to help guide the interview. The guiding interview questions were intentionally developed as open-ended in order to elicit thoughtful storied responses. However, as each interview unfolded, follow-up questions that were not pre-determined were asked to further probe for long uninterrupted narratives. Following are examples of interview questions used as an initial guide for the interviews with the participants:

1. Tell me about your day.

2. Describe what you are doing now that you have graduated.

3. Walk me through your education from as far back as you remember.

4. Tell me the things that were most challenging for you in school.

5. Tell me about some challenges that you faced outside of school.

6. Describe your decision making process for attending the alternative program.

7. Detail how the alternative high program allowed you to continue your education while working through your issues that made it difficult to be successful in a traditional setting.

8. Describe your perceptions of the alternative school prior to your enrollment.

9. Tell me about your perceptions of the alternative school now that you have graduated.

Each interview was transcribed upon completion and prior to conducting a follow-up interview. During the transcription process, notes of significant events were recorded to synthesize the data and to develop questions about events or issues that required further elaboration. Prior to conducting the follow-up interview, the participants were enlisted to conduct member checks (Creswell, 2007), where the researcher checks for accuracy of the transcripts and any meanings they made based on the data collected. The process of member checking leads to increased accuracy, credibility, and rigor during data collection, data analysis, and data re-presentation (Patton, 2002; Turner & Coen, 2008). Performing member checks with the participants allowed the participants to be co-narrators of their experiences so that what is reported about their experiences was not done so based on the researcher's perspective only.

Archival Documents

I collected multiple documents related to the participants' experiences in the alternate education program. The documents provided additional insight and personal information that may not otherwise have been accessed (Miller & Alvarado, 2005). Collecting documents also added a layer of rigor as they are useful for triangulation between various data sources (Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, and St. Pierre, 2007; Glesne, 2011; Patton, 2002).

In qualitative research, documents are important because they allow the researcher to see patterns consistent with another data source, which can be helpful in forming relationships with other data sources (Freeman et al., 2007; Miller & Alvarado, 2005). In particular, the participants' academic transcripts, attendance records, discipline histories from both the traditional high school and AEP, along with applications to the alternative education program, and reflective

essays kept in their AEP files were collected. Having information from both the traditional and alternative educational context allowed for comparison and triangulation with what the participants said about their experiences in both settings contributing to their experiences leading to graduation.

Figure 2. Excerpt from Adam's application to the alternative education program.

The participants' applications to the alternative education program were analyzed to seek information useful in identifying any issues that may have prevented the participants from being successful in a traditional educational setting. The alternative education program application has a section for the student and parent to fill out that allows them the opportunity to explain any

situations that prevented the student from being successful in a traditional educational setting and why an alternative education program was necessary. Using information in the documents, I began to form connections with information gained in the interview. Based on these connections, additional interview questions and member-check interviews were designed. Figure 2 is an excerpt from an application Adam filled out for the alternative education program.

While enrolled in the alternative education program, participants were expected to write reflective essays as part of their English IV requirements. These reflective essays were coded and analyzed and integrated in the narrative case study representation. Like other documents, the information in the essays and the analysis of such information also served in designing interview questions and member-check interviews allowing expansion of ideas and deep understanding of the participants' experiences in the alternative education program.

Journal Notes

I kept a running record of memos and other anecdotal notes during the research process in my researcher journal. Journaling is a technique used to jot down anything that comes to mind at virtually any time. Glesne (2011) stated that it is "important to capture these analytic thoughts when they occur" (p. 189). Further, Glesne (2011) emphasized the importance of recording hunches and thoughts that come about as data are reviewed and analyzed. Journaling can serve as a record for initial data analysis, and contain ideas for further research that needs to explored (Glesne, 2011; Primeau, 2003). Additionally, a journal was used as a space to record memories of when participants were attending the program. Thus, the participants could verify the accuracy of those recorded moments with their own memories (Bhattacharya, 2008). Such exchange of information assisted in developing further interview questions and areas to probe.

Students are acutely aware that they are being marginalized and treated as second-rate

citizens. I was completely surprised that they felt as though they were marginalized once

they began attending the alternative program. As an administrator I have long recognized

that the students that attend the alternative program have to give up a lot to attend. They can

no longer participate in sports or clubs, there is a lack of counseling services, and students

lose out on many opportunities for socialization and social activities. I figure that the

students would feel like starting at the alternative program would be like getting a fresh start

and not necessarily know that they are being marginalized yet they did. They recognized that

the district wants and or needs an alternative program but will not put the effort in to

support it the way it needs to be supported. The students understand that a lack of equity is

present and are left with the idea that the alternative program is often stuck with the

leftovers. They feel that the district thinks that mediocrity is good enough for alternative

students.

Figure 3. Research journal entry.

A further advantage of journaling is reflexivity. According to Medved and Turner (2011),

reflexivity offers the occasion to "consider how our own identity as scholars and individuals

affects how we conceptualize research problems, how we relate to our participants and what

blinders and strengths we bring to analyses" (p. 109). Medved and Turner (2011) and Primeau

(2003) suggested that maintaining a journal offers the opportunity to perform critical self-

evaluation as it pertains to the research by extending the understanding of how my position and

interests as a researcher affected the research process. Given that this study could not be devoid

of my subjectivities, nor did I intend for it to be, the process of reflective journaling allowed me

the opportunity to critically examine the role of my values, beliefs, and assumption on the ways in which I collected, analyzed, represented data and formed relationships with the participants. In the final report, I provide accounts of this critical examination to add rigor and trustworthiness to this study.

Photo Elicitations

Photo elicitation is described as using photographs during the interview process to elicit an understanding from the participant (Harper, 2002) generated from the stories and memories participants share about the photograph. Photo-elicited conversations sometimes appear the same as interviews, but they are slightly different from interviews because the conversation is driven by the ways the participant is anchoring their narratives using something tangible in front of them, in this case, a photograph. When used in qualitative research, photo elicitations can provide a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the participants, their views and beliefs, and how they define the understanding of their world (Croghan, Griffin, Hunter, & Phoenix, 2008). However, there is much more to photo elicitation than just showing a participant photos and asking them to talk about the pictures. One of the ideas behind photo elicitation is to combine oral and visual aspects to the research process for the purpose of exploring the meanings that are attached to the photographs (Croghan et al., 2008). Utilizing photo elicitation evoked different kinds of information that would not have been realized without the use of photos.

Photo elicitation is one of the most common forms of elicitation research and has been applied in studies for sociology, education, communication, and anthropology (Harper, 2002; Taylor, 2002). The photographs can represent iconic and symbolic inventories of objects, artifacts, and people in the scene of the photograph and the participants' narrative of meaning

making of such iconic and symbolic inventories (Norman, 1991). One method of using photos is to use images that may represent events of the participants past. These photos may be of "work, schools, or other institutional experiences, or images depicting events that occurred earlier in the lifetimes of the [participants]" (Harper, 2002, p. 13). Participants use these images to connect their experiences to a particular event or era of their lifetime and do not necessarily reflect their actual lives. A second method is described as being more intimate, as the photos are of the portrayal of the participant's social group, family, or of their body. The intimacy of this type of photo elicitation allows for a connection to society, culture, and history from the meaning of the participants (Harper, 2002). It was my intent in this interview to elicit photos from the participants that incorporated both methods. In this study, I showed participants pictures taken of them participating in events and interactions while they were enrolled in the alternative education program. Additionally, I asked participants to bring any personal pictures that they thought represented their educational experiences, experiences with their jobs, and family situations. Please note that I did not use any of the identifying features in the pictures in my data re-presentations. These pictures were a catalyst to stimulate a participant-driven conversation outside the scope of the researcher-driven, semi-structured interview. Where it was critical to use a picture along with a narrative, I made sure that no identifying details in the pictures were presented, and used various photo filters to blur identifying details. Participants played the role of co-researchers in analyzing the pictures and the narrative constructed with the pictures. Moreover, utilizing pictures helped chronicle the struggles the participants encountered and lent additional richness to the narrative of this study. The intention of incorporating photos was to gain access to the participants' experiences and how they saw themselves within the context of their world (Croghan et al., 2008). Photos allowed for further access because they represent the

impossible: things or people that no longer exist; or events from the past. Harper (2002) stated, "That extraordinary sense of seeming to retrieve something that has disappeared belongs alone to the photograph, and it leads to deep and interesting talk" (p. 23). Therefore, the photos were used to elicit deep thoughts that the participants may have forgotten or previously dismissed that may have contributed to the development of their perceptions of alternative education.

Figure 4. Image used for photo elicitation during interview with Riley.

Above is a photo that Riley had taken as part of her arts-based English IV project while she was enrolled in the AEP. This photo was used during the photo elicitation process during an interview with Riley to elicit her thoughts in regards to her educational experiences, experiences with her job, and her family situation. Riley stated that the photo represented her feelings of breaking through the darkness that she had been in. Once she entered the alternative program she finally could see the light breaking through at the end. She had endured so much darkness after being kicked out by her mother that sent her into a downward spiral that affected her schooling which made it necessary to enter into an alternative education program.

Data Management and Analysis

Gather Data

| Archival Documents | Interviews | Journal Notes |

Code Data

| Descriptive Coding | In-vivo Coding | Narrative Coding |

Categorize Codes

Synthesize Data
Prepare Draft in Chronological Order

Narrative Analysis

| Patterns | Significant Events | Transitions |

Construct Narratives from Participants' Standpoint to Challenge Dominant Discourses
Include Narrative Elements
Develop Plots Based on Chronological Patterns
Divide Narratives Based on Breaks/Transitions in Data
Add Photos to Represent Participants' Feelings, Thoughts, and Experiences

| **Plot Title 1:** **(Beginning of Narrative)** *Entry into Alternative Education* | **Plot Title 2:** **(Middle of Narrative)** *Experiences in Alternative Education* | **Plot Title 3:** **(End of Narrative)** *Graduating from Alternative Education* |

Figure 5. Model of the data analysis model employed to generate narratives.

Data management involves the steps that I have taken to manage all the data that I collected. To keep all my data in order, I saved it by date and stored it in an electronic file sorted by data collection method. Beyond setting up a system to store my data, to stay current with my data, I began to analyze my data in a timely manner after collecting it by writing descriptive field notes and maintaining a journal. Once the data was stored and organized, reduced and combined through coding and categorizing, narrative analysis was employed to look for overarching plots that existed within and between the categories. Figure 5 outlines the data analysis process.

Although the data analysis process is laid out in a linear format, the process was also cyclical in nature. As I coded and categorized the data, I continually analyzed and re-analyzed the data using the tenets of narrative analysis while keeping in mind the ways in which the findings could speak to a standpoint perspective challenging a dominant narrative. The first step was to code all the data that were gathered using descriptive coding, in-vivo coding, and narrative coding. Please note, I approached coding as a tentative way to manage and chunk the data. I did not code with any notion of fixed understanding or meaning captured in individual codes. However, codes provided me with some descriptive and analytical foci, so that I could interact with the data closely.

Once the codes were generated, I began condensing the codes into manageable categories in order to organize the data further. When I had a sense of the categories, I then constructed a rough draft of a narrative to essentially lay out the data into chronological order with key events identified. Next, I had a draft that was in chronological order. I then re-analyzed the data from the participants' standpoints using narrative analysis to find patterns, significant events, and transitions that could be used to challenge the dominant culture of traditional education. I returned to the literature on alternative education, standpoint theory, and journaled about my

experiences as an administrator in alternative education, and reflected on the narratives using the lens of standpoint theory to discover elements that challenge established understanding of traditional and alternative education.

Please note that I did not conduct this study with the intent to ground myself in postmodern discourses, although it is easy to do so with standpoint theory. Instead, I used standpoint theory as a lens, to see through the participants' experiences and also as a tool to open up a discursive space about alternative education by problematizing established understanding. Beyond that, my grounding for this study is methodologically informed through narrative inquiry.

Through coding, using my theoretical lens, and rounds of writing around codes, my experiences, participants' stories, I found that the participants' shared several similar experiences that led to similar personal and educational choices. The sequences of the participants' critical periods of life allowed me to identify some clear turns in their narratives, with a sense of beginning, middle, and end. Within these critical periods, both the participants experienced similar challenges within their individual contexts. As I analyzed their critical narratives, the beginning, middle, and end periods began to take shape into broad plots depicting the participants' shared experiences. The three plots then covered the participants' journey from traditional educational system to alternative education, their experiences in alternative education, and their experiences after graduating from alternative education.

Once I completed a draft for each plot, I returned to the participants to determine which photos I would incorporate in the narratives and where the participants would place those photos within their thematic narratives. The purpose of the photos is to add a level of richness to the narrative to illustrate the participants' feelings and thoughts. The meeting also turned into conversations where I checked with the participants about the accuracy of my understanding of

their life experiences. After including the photos into the narratives, I constructed a final draft of the narratives. Following is a more detailed description of each step that was taken to organize the data and convert it into a narrative.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis was used to develop an in-depth perspective of participants' experiences in relation to a particular phenomenon (Reismann, 2002). According to Reismann (2002), narrative analysis can be useful in offering additional forums for non-dominant populations or cultures to express their perceptions. Historically, narrative analysis has been used as a powerful tool to affect change for underrepresented populations. Reismann (2002) stated, "narratives provide windows into lives that confront the restraints of circumstances" (p. 707). Learning and understanding particular experiences through a narrative analysis lens allow the opportunity to mold a narrative. Polkinghorne (1995) stated that, "when happenings are configured or emplotted, they take on narrative meaning" (p. 5). Therefore, narrative analysis was conducted to focus on the participants' stories, as the focus of exploration in this study.

Narrative analysis was also used to seek distinct turning points in the participants' stories concerning their education. Reismann (2002) explained that "the meanings of life events are not fixed or constant; rather, they evolve, influenced by subsequent life events" (p. 705). Therefore, it is essential to get an in-depth understanding of the individual events that occurred in the participants' lives in order to understand their lives as a whole. Narrative analysis was utilized to connect "together diverse events, happenings, and actions of human lives into thematically unified goal-directed process" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). In this study, the participants shared diverse events in their lives, their experiences of transitioning from traditional to alternate education, challenges they faced prior to attending alternate education and during their

enrollment in alternative education, and the ways in which they overcame them to successfully graduate from high school. The goal-directed process in this case was the successful graduation from high school. The analysis of narratives demonstrates stories and paths that contributed to that goal.

One of the preliminary steps of data analysis is coding. During the coding process it is possible to identify patterns that can be used to develop participants' narratives. The coding process was used to construct a narrative that has a beginning, middle, and end, in which the uniqueness of the participants' stories determines the plot, structure and theme (Polkinghorne, 1995; Glesne, 2011). Please keep in mind that it was difficult to anticipate exactly how these narratives would take form in advance of data collection and analysis. At best, I was able to anticipate a structure given the guidelines offered in narrative analysis. I worked closely with the participants to re-story their lives using a narrative structure where there is initial introduction, exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. I could not imagine creating this structure and assigning such meanings to participants' narratives without developing a close relationship with the participants (Reismann, 2002) and inviting them to play a critical role in re-telling their stories.

Coding

While data analysis can happen at any stage of the study, the first stage of data reduction occurred after the first interview was transcribed. However, I conducted several rounds of coding after collecting different types of data and comparing and contrasting codes with other data sources. Coding is the process of reducing data into semantic units of meaning so that relationships can be formed with various data sources (Creswell, 2007). Coding reduces data by assigning a short word or phrase to capture or symbolize a portion of data (Saldaña, 2009).

64

Saldaña (2009) stated that, "just as a title represents and captures a book or film or poem's primary content and essence, so does a code represent and capture a datum's primary content and essence" (p. 3). Saldaña (2009) contended that developing codes assists in reducing data into a more manageable form that is conducive for seeking patterns.

Generally, coding is a process that goes through several cycles in order to fully identify common patterns in the data (Saldaña, 2009). In addition, the same data sources may be coded using different types of coding processes to continuously interrogate data to look for multiple possibilities, layers of meaning, and/or deeper issues for further investigation. Indeed, utilizing multiple methods of coding can perpetuate a richer understanding of the data (Saldaña, 2009). Therefore, the data in this study was coded utilizing descriptive, in vivo, and narrative coding. In the following paragraph, I describe each of these types of coding. Please recall that the data reduction and analysis process was circular and iterative. However, for the reader to gain an understanding of the various types of coding and their possibilities, I describe them below in a linear manner.

Initially, descriptive coding was executed to get a general understanding of the data. Saldaña (2009) asserted that, "descriptive coding summarizes in a word or short phrase – most often as a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (p. 70). Utilizing descriptive coding allowed the opportunity to examine the data and begin assigning codes seen as a semantic unit of meaning developed through the coding process, guided by the research purpose and questions. Using this form of coding allows the data to be reduced to manageable chunks for deeper analysis and examination. Figure 6 is an excerpt from an interview in which I employed descriptive coding.

65

After coding all the interviews and essays utilizing the descriptive coding technique, I then began to combine similar codes to develop a master list of descriptive codes that included but are not limited to: ATTITUDE TOWARD SCHOOL, ATTENDING HIGH SCHOOL, ATTENDING ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL, HIGH SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT, ALTERNATIVE ENVIRONMENT, HIGH SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT, HOME ENVIRONMENT, PARENTAL CONFLICT, GRADUATION, and JOB COMMITMENT.

I have always been the [1]second parent, whether it was when my [2]dad was away at sea or after my parents got a divorce. I was really [3]never a kid. I had to [4]feed, bathe, and watch over my four younger siblings. My [5]life wasn't bad though. I had a home, food, and clothes. I got a [6]good education and my family "loved" me. So maybe my [7]mom did yell a bit too much and my dad was a bit abusive, [8]but I was little back then and thought this was normal.	[1]RESPONSIBLITIES [2]PARENTAL CONFLICT [3]MATURITY [4]CHORES [5]COMFORT [6]FOUNDATION [7]VOLITALE PARENTS [8]SHELTERED

Figure 6. Interview excerpt utilizing descriptive coding.

I conducted both descriptive and in-vivo coding iteratively during the earlier part of data management and reduction. In-vivo coding, according to Saldaña (2009), "refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record" (p. 74). Thus, specific words or phrases used by the participants became their own semantic units of meaning without the use of any researcher-assigned descriptive labels. Conducting in-vivo coding allowed me to weave the participants' language into the descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2009). Additionally, in-vivo coding provided an opportunity to stay close to the data because the codes were words and phrases used by the participants. Figure 7 is an excerpt from an interview in which I used in-vivo coding.

Like the descriptive codes, I found that many in-vivo codes were similar. To make the

coding process more manageable, I combined similar in-vivo codes together under the most

appropriate original code. For instance, I placed "LEAVE" and "KICKED OUT" under the in-

vivo code of "MOVING OUT." Other examples of the codes that were generated include but are

not limited to: "ATTENDANCE", "GRADUATION", "WORK", and "STRUGGLE".

| I turned around and walked towards the kitchen. [1]I tried so hard to be strong and hold it in. [2]My heart felt numb and it dropped. It broke into a million pieces and [3]it hurt more than anything I ever felt before. I fell to the floor and started to [4]cry and break down. [Shane] came over and asked me what happen and tried to get me up. I told him I wanted to [5]leave. I heard my mom come into the kitchen and she told [Shane], "If she tells you that I called her a [6]mistake then she is lying." | [1]BE STRONG [2]MY HEART FELT NUMB

[3] IT HURT

[4] CRY AND BREAK DOWN

[5]LEAVE

[6]MISTAKE |

Figure 7. Interview excerpt utilizing in-vivo coding.

After a few rounds of descriptive and in-vivo coding, I employed narrative coding. The

reason for narrative coding to occur somewhat later than the initial rounds of coding was to gain

a sense of the data and the patterns I was able to identify before assigning a narrative analytic

framework to create stories. Because narrative coding incorporates literary elements and analysis

in qualitative research typically in story form (Polkinghorne, 1995), it allowed me to analyze and

code the data while applying principles of literary elements which included type of narrative,

genre, purpose, setting, plot, character, characterization, form, point of view, elements, and

spoken features (Polkinghorne, 1995; Saldaña, 2009). Generating codes while applying the

literary elements offered me various ways in which I could extract and construct stories from

multiple sources of data (Reismann, 2008; Saldaña, 2009). Following is an example of how

narrative coding was utilized in transforming the interview transcripts into a final narrative that

incorporated the language of the participants while applying the principles of literary elements. I

did not change the intent of the excerpt, but I cleaned it up to reflect a narrative structure with an

engaging introductory element, a rising climax, and an unresolved end as was common in

various narratives of the participants.

Interview Transcript	Final Narrative
I tried so hard to be strong and hold it in. My heart felt numb and it dropped. It broke into a million pieces and it hurt more than anything I ever felt before. I fell to the floor and started to cry and break down. [Shane] came over and asked me what happened and tried to get me up. I told him I wanted to leave. I heard my mom come into the kitchen and she told [Shane] "If she tells you that I called her a mistake then she is lying. I just said that she was raised wrong."	I tried so hard to hold it in, but it was like I could see my own heart dropping to the floor. It smashed into a million pieces and hurt more than anything I ever felt before. All the strength I'd been using to keep myself together just like melted away. I fell to the floor and cried. Shane bent down over me, trying to get me up, and asking what happened. "I just want to leave," I sobbed, as Allison walked into the kitchen. "If she tells you that I called her a mistake she is lying, because I just said that she was raised wrong," Allison said.

Figure 8. Comparison between interview transcript and final narrative.

All transcripts, documents and other data sources were coded and re-coded using the

techniques described earlier. For each of the techniques used, an initial list of codes was

generated and then condensed by combining similar codes. Then the condensed codes generated

from using each method were combined to create a master list of the most appropriate codes.

Then the master list of codes was re-coded to develop broader categories, which were another

broad semantic unit of meaning encompassing codes with similar meaning. Figure 9 is an outline

of the categories that were developed along with codes that support each category:

A. Attending a traditional high school

    1. LARGE SETTING

    2. ABSENTEEISM

    3. FAILING

    4. HOPELESSNESS

B. Parental Conflict

    1. ARGUING WITH PARENTS

    2. NOT FOLLOWING RULES

    3. MOVING OUT

C. Employment

    1. HIGH PRIORITY

    2. CONFLICT WITH SCHOOL

    3. INDEPENDENCE

    4. ESCAPE

D. Attending an alternative high school program

    1. FLEXIBLE

    2. CARING ENVIRONMENT

    3. MISUNDERSTOOD

    4. BARRIERS FOR GOOD KIDS

Figure 9. Outline of categories along with codes that support each category.

Saldaña (2009) described the initial process of coding as first cycle coding, while reorganizing the codes into meaningful categories as second cycle coding. In order to develop codes into categories, the second cycle method of pattern coding was utilized. Pattern codes, as defined by Miles and Huberman (1994) are "explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation. They pull together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis" (p. 69). I reduced the codes to the most salient categories that supported the purpose of this study.

Once I had a list of categories, I synthesized the data by creating a draft for each participant to put all the data in chronological order. During the synthesis of the data I began noticing several similar patterns and events, such as being a good student, encountering conflict with parents, struggling in school, meeting resistance in regards to entering an alternative education program, and experiencing success in an alternative setting. Throughout this synthesis process I recorded all the similarities between the participants to analyze further. What I began to notice is that the participants both had similar experiences for each category, and those experiences clustered together in certain phases of their lives. For example, both Adam and Riley had personal and academic challenges that occurred prior to their entry to alternative education program. They both experienced the challenge of balancing their lives and responsibilities while in the alternative education program. Thus, it seemed that the coding and categorizing pointed to the narrative elements that were included in certain phases of Adam and Riley's lives. I started to journal about these ideas while attempting to construct narrative analysis and subsequent drafts generated from the analysis.

Next, I analyzed the data for significant events, patterns, and transitions from the participants' standpoint to seek ideals that could challenge the dominant discourse of traditional education while encountering academic struggles, family issues, and in job conflict. I incorporated the following assumptions of standpoint theory according to Anderson (2012):

(i) the social location of the privileged perspective, (ii) the scope of its privilege: what questions or subject matters it can claim a privilege over, (iii) the aspect of the social location that generates superior knowledge: for example, social role, or subjective identity; (iv) the ground of its privilege: what it is about that aspect that justifies a claim to privilege; (v) the type of epistemic superiority it claims: for example, greater accuracy,

or greater ability to represent fundamental truths; (vi) the other perspectives relative to which it claims epistemic superiority and (vii) modes of access to that perspective: is occupying the social location necessary or sufficient for getting access to the perspective? (Standpoint Epistemology in General section, para 1)

Therefore, I looked for ways in which I could identify turns in the narratives, critical events, perspectives, and reflections of the participants that expanded the ways in which traditional and alternative education are related and perceived. I also looked for what the dominant discourse was amongst key stakeholders about traditional and alternative education, and ways in which the participants were becoming agents who challenged some of those dominant discourses through their shared experiences.

Adam and Riley described themselves as good students who never had considered alternative education as a possible pathway until they encountered life-changing situations. For Riley, being kicked out of her mother's house was her breaking point, while Adam struggled to deal with the bullying that occurred at the high school. Both participants looked to gain entry into an alternative education program but were initially turned away because they weren't the typical bad students that went to an alternative program. Riley and Adam also shared similar thoughts of their alternative education experiences such as, finding the program more positive, more compassionate, more caring, and more flexible than traditional high school program while allowing for full-time employment. They noticed that even though the alternative program lacked many of the luxuries that the traditional high school offered, students who had often misbehaved or were deviant at the high school thrived at the alternative program. Riley and Adam's reflections concerning graduating from an alternative education program also had many similarities. They mentioned that the alternative program offered rigor and prepared them for

educational opportunities beyond high school. They also mentioned that alternative education was a viable pathway for all types of students, not just bad students, and pointed out that there are many barriers that keep good students from entering into alternative programs.

After analyzing these similar patterns, I began looking for similar breaks and transitions that occurred in chronological order within the data. I used the chronological transitions in the data to construct plot titles which were developed into narratives for the final representation of the findings. The plots shared multiple patterns that were existent within and across the categories (Saldaña, 2009). There were three distinct transitions that were clear for each participant which were gaining entry into an alternative program, their experiences while attending an alternative program, and graduating from an alternative program.

After constructing a narrative based on the three plot titles of gaining entry into an alternative education program, experiences in an alternative education program, and graduating from an alternative education program, I went back to the participants to begin the process of determining which photos should be used in the final representation. As I discussed which photos should be used in the final narratives, the participants offered further insight concerning how each photo could be used to represent their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. As stated previously, not all the photos were initially utilized in the photo elicitation process during the interviews nor were all the photos taken or given to me by the participants. Of the photos used in the final representation, some were taken by me, and some by the participants.

Data Representation

The findings of this study are represented in a narrative form utilizing the genre referred to in literary studies as bildungsroman. These are characterized as coming-of-age narratives, literally meaning "novel of formation" (Boes, 2006, p. 230). Bildungsroman focuses on the

72

psychological, social, and moral maturation of the main character—protagonist—from youth to adulthood, thus the growth of the character is tremendously significant (Boes, 2006). Common characteristics of a bildungsroman narrative include: chronological order is followed from childhood into adulthood; the protagonist undergoes a rite-of-passage due to adversity within the plot. Throughout the course of their journey, the protagonists embrace the attributes and values of their society, prompting them to be a fully engaged member of that particular society (Knoetze & Stroud, 2012).

The participants' stories are presented in three separate narratives utilizing the bildungsroman genre to depict their coming-of-age experiences. The narratives are based on the following plot titles: entry into an alternative education program, experiences while in alternative education, and graduating from alternative education. Each plot title was used to construct a narrative from the participants' standpoint and was based on the particular events that each participant experienced. For instance, events that led to the participants' entry into an alternative education program were but not limited to; GETTING KICKED OUT, FAILING IN HIGH SCHOOL, GETTING IN TROUBLE AT SCHOOL, and TRUANCY. Events that the participants experienced while in alternative education were but not limited to; REUNITING WITH OUTCASTS, FORMING CLOSE PEER RELATIONSHIPS, DEVELOPING EMPATHY and COMPASSION, and GAINING CONFIDENCE. The last plot that was developed into a narrative describes events based on the participants graduating from an alternative education program which are but not limited to; GOING TO COLLEGE, TRANSFORMING INTO LIFELONG LEARNERS, and UNDERSTANDING ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION.

The totality of the narrative represented is broken down into a chronological structure that embodies a beginning, middle, and an end. Constructing narratives with a beginning, a middle, and an end illustrate several significant events in chronological order that occurred in the traditional setting, generated parental conflict, created employment conflicts, and made it necessary to attend an alternative program. The chronology is the key part of how someone in traditional educational system ends up in an alternative program. The chronology is just as much a part of the narrative as the narrative events within it. The chronology also offers a way to understand changes in actions, shifts in perceptions, character development, insights gained, and challenges experienced.

Moreover, chronicling issues that the participants experienced allowed for the development of a narrative that contains the elements of story to include plot, setting, character, conflict, rising action, climax, resolution, etc. (Flaherty, 2009). Within the representation of narrative, the participants' conflicts and how they negotiated their conflicts is highlighted. This is accomplished through a voice known as the researcher's supportive voice (Chase, 2008). According to Chase (2008), the researcher's supportive voice is when "narrative researchers develop a supportive voice that pushes the narrator's voice into the limelight" (p. 16). Since the participants are co-narrators, I included large chunks of their uninterrupted stories in the narrative case study representation.

To enhance the narratives, several mutually agreed upon photos were used to depict emotions, feelings, thoughts, and struggles the participants experienced during different points in their lives and how they saw themselves in the context of their world. The participants and I discussed how and what photos could be used to represent and enhance their narratives. For example, Riley's narrative includes several photos that are scenic in nature due to her

preferences to symbolize her thoughts, reactions, and feelings. Figure 10 is an example of a photo that was mutually agreed upon between Riley and me to depict the obstacles she overcame to be successful in her quest to earning a diploma.

Figure 10. Sample photo for Riley's narrative.

While Riley preferred scenic photos to accompany her narrative, Adam did not appear to have any particular specific theme of objects that he chose to identify to represent his narrative. Rather, the culmination of Adam's photos could be considered as a mosaic of images that are more random in nature to represent specific events, thoughts, and experiences. Following is a photo used to depict how Adam was forced to make a difficult decision whether to enroll in the alternative education program or to return to the high school upon the completion of his disciplinary alternative education program (DAEP) placement:

Figure 11. Sample photo for Adam's narrative.

Not all the photos in the final representation were used during the interviewing process but rather selectively chosen during the creation of the narrative. The descriptors for each photo were designed to be a short snippet to connect particular participants' experiences to the narrative.

Reciprocity and Ethical Considerations

Due to research being a stringent topic, precautions were taken to protect the participants, which require more ethical considerations compared to other human activities (Hansson, 2011). Thus, the participants were given full disclosure concerning the purpose of the study and the right to stop participating at any time. Beyond the participants' narratives being utilized as sources of data, they were involved in analyzing and interpreting data to verify accuracy (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Allowing the participants to participate in analyzing and interpreting data was one of the many ethical considerations that aided in reducing misinterpretations. Keeping ethical considerations in mind also assisted in dealing with any

surprises that might come about within the context of the research that has implications beyond research, such as legal, moral, or relational issues (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). There is no guarantee that ethical issues would not come up during the research process, but prior preparations were in place if an ethical issue did arise. The most important preparation was that the participants could opt out of the study at any time or decline to participate in a particular portion of the study that might have an adverse effect without any penalty or any jeopardized relationships.

Reciprocity was another consideration that was taken into account for this study. Giving back to participants for their time and efforts is considered reciprocity (Creswell, 2007). Reciprocity does not necessarily imply giving back some money to the participants. Specifically, in this study, the participants did not receive any monetary payments. Incentives should not be incitement for participation. Instead, incentives offered as reciprocity are token gestures of appreciation. To that end, I decided to assist the participants by providing career counseling and offering them tutoring services if they needed it, and especially if they chose to pursue college. Assisting them in navigating through the procedural structures of the college application and securing financial aid was a way to express a token gesture of appreciation. Should the participants chose to not pursue college, I was willing to offer them my support in helping them locate a job or specific job training, teaching them how to write cover letters and resumes, and preparing them for interviews.

Beyond giving back to the participants, this process has allowed me to grow professionally as an administrator and a researcher. I have gained valuable insight from the participants that has led to an evolution in my thinking process concerning alternative education. I now have a better understanding of how students in alternative education not only see the

program, but also see themselves in an alternative program. I am more aware of the many obstacles that alternative students have to overcome to be successful and how they have to accept a marginalization to begin their rebuilding process to graduate. Prior to conducting this research I rarely included students in the decision making process. However, after conducting this research I realize how important it is to gather information from the students to continue meeting their needs, particularly since it appears several students who attend alternative programs have been shut out of processes that allow them to build any type of capacity to complete their education in an environment that is responsive to their needs. It is with this knowledge that I have gained as an administrator/researcher that I can begin utilizing student input to build further capacity to challenge the dominant discourses that overshadow alternative education.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Since this study is grounded in the qualitative research, there are no attempts to claim that the findings contain one absolute truth; rather they represent a situated truth, or multiple truths (Glesne, 2011), as experienced by the participants and the researcher. Despite all the measures I have taken that can enhance merit for this study, there is no way for me to ensure readers will interpret the findings in the narrative in the specific manner that I had intended. I am presenting this narrative knowing full well that the readers will interpret the findings in their own ways. Thus, it is up to the readers to determine if the study is deemed credible or not. However, I did employ several procedures to stay in academic integrity with myself and establish a sense of trustworthiness that I value, informed by predecessors in qualitative inquiry. Trustworthiness, defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), is a set of criteria that refers to the quality of research. They state that the four criteria of trustworthiness are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Several measures were taken to ensure the findings

meet these four criteria of trustworthiness. These measures include, but were not limited to, member checks, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement, and triangulation.

Member checking is the process of verifying accuracy in transcription, data analysis, and data representation (Bhattacharya, 2008; Schwandt, 2007). The goal of member checking is to ensure that the participants and the researcher agree with what is going to be storied and told to the academic world-at-large without any huge discrepancy between the researcher's interpretation and the participants' process of meaning-making. Therefore, all my transcripts, analysis, and drafts were shared with the participants to ensure a shared meaning and agreement were established before anything was presented to the committee or to the public-at-large via presentations or publications.

Another criterion of trustworthiness is prolonged engagement in the field. Prolonged engagement is characterized as prolonged stay in the field to conduct research. Prolonged engagement is a key component to building trust, learning the culture and context within which the participants operate, and probe for any additional hunches (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The collection of data for the study lasted approximately four months, followed by another four months to analyze the data, conduct member check interviews, peer debriefings, and write up the findings. During this time I stayed in contact with the participants, checked for understanding, followed-up on their progress, and remained a support system for them, should they have needed one.

Findings from all data sources were analyzed and triangulated to ensure trustworthiness. Triangulation is the process of using multiple methods to collect data, gathering data from multiple sources, and analyzing data from different perspectives (Bhattacharya, 2008; Creswell, 1998) while comparing and contrasting findings from one source with another to identify

common patterns. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) posited that, "triangulation has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation" (p. 454). Triangulating data utilizing various methods can reduce ambiguities and assist in identifying inconsistencies in the data. Thus, implementing a process to thoroughly connect and verify data increased and strengthened the rigor of the study.

Another form of academic integrity in this work included peer review and debriefing. Peer review and debriefing is the process where one's peers review, reflect, and offer input while conducting research (Creswell, 2007). Peers in this study included qualitative doctoral students, educators, and co-workers who were familiar with alternative education. Having external sources review analytic procedures and claims made is conducive to obtaining additional perspectives (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and thereby increasing trustworthiness and rigor in the study.

Moreover, I studied and reviewed past and present practices used in qualitative research and how they were applied in various contexts in educational research. Freeman et al. (2007) stated that "examining expert researchers' practices, then, contributes to establishing agreed-on, albeit ever changing, standards of quality and rigor" (p. 26). Having an understanding of the flexibility of qualitative research and the different methods and procedures that are utilized assisted me in tailoring my research to meet my specific needs while maintaining what I considered to be rigorous (Peshkin, 1993).

Furthermore, each procedure was systematically documented, which ensured credible record keeping. This detailed record keeping was used to convey confidence in the results, which is described as an account of practice (Freeman, et al., 2007). However, no matter how hard I try, it is impossible for me to be able to make certain that the reader resonates with the study to find

it rigorous and trustworthy. The group of readers is not a homogenous set of people, nor will they be from the same walks of life. With their own epistemologies, ontologies, and subjectivities, the readers will identify their entry points to this work. I hope that this work will be dialogic and engaging to interested parties. For me, rigor, credibility, trustworthiness are terms that do not have fixed meanings. At best, I created some possibilities for my work to be seen as academically rigorous. The rest resides on those who interact with this work.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined the rationale for using qualitative inquiry for this study and provided details of narrative inquiry and analysis as frameworks within which the study is primarily grounded. I have discussed various aspects of research design including participant selection, gaining access, research sites, and the various types of data collection procedures that were used. I have provided an account of pages of raw data that were generated in this study and offered the timeline for the study. Further, I discussed in detail the process of data management and analysis and aligned such processes to create a representation for narratives. Finally, I discussed issues of ethics, reciprocity, trustworthiness, and rigor informing this study while questioning the stability of such attempts.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The two participants for this study were selected primarily because of the substantial obstacles that they had to overcome in and out of school in order to successfully graduate. Riley and Adam both struggled in traditional settings. They moved out of their family households, and held jobs while attending school. Both participants attribute the alternative program as playing a role in their successful graduation of high school. Finally, Riley and Adam were selected as participants for this study because they are critical thinkers who are capable of providing rich descriptions that can provide insight into their lived experiences in and out of school.

The premise of this research is that students can offer valuable insight concerning education as they are the foremost authorities of their own lives and have substantial information to contribute to schools to include alternative schools and society. The participants were able to describe their experiences to include the obstacles and supports they encountered throughout their education in an articulate and cohesive manner.

As previously mentioned, the participants and I adopted relationships as co-researchers. I expressed my need for their assistance to help understand their lives in and out of school, and asked them to recall the experiences that shaped their perceptions of education. The participants spoke about their lives, and the lives of their friends. They valued the opportunity to discuss issues that are significant to the lives of students that attend alternative education programs (AEP).

From the onset of this study, I have mentioned that I do not have a neutral position as a researcher, nor as an AEP administrator. I carry my convictions, passions, and experiences with me to the research. To account for this, I made extensive efforts to verify with the participants that their experiences are represented accurately to the maximum extent possible. As the

participants spoke, I was cautious to not offer value judgments concerning what they had to say. Rather, I encouraged them to speak freely about what they thought, believed, and felt while I actively listened, restating their responses to ensure I understood them correctly. During the analysis phase of the research, I interpreted the narratives and extracted the most salient points regarding each participant's perceptions of AEPs. The participants were then provided with a draft of the narrative and encouraged to offer feedback and suggest changes.

To begin, I will provide a participant description vignette for each participant, providing their background, and outlining the experiences that led them to alternative education. These will be followed by vignettes that detail each participant's experiences while in an AEP. The concluding vignettes will describe how the participants view AEPs. These vignettes encompass each participant's journey as they progressed through their education to include significant events of their lives in and out of school. Recall that the process for creating these vignettes was discussed in details in chapter three.

Path to Alternative Education: Adam

Adam is a slender Hispanic male that is just shy of six feet tall. He has dark wavy hair that would hang over his brown eyes. His hair was not long, but not clean cut either, he prefers a bed-head hair style to complement his vintage tee-shirts, dark jeans, and converse shoes. Adam has an alternative look, like someone in a rock and roll band except he does not have any piercings. Adam is never at a loss for words, particularly when talking to adults. He speaks clearly and articulately with a smooth voice while maintaining excellent eye contact. Following is Adam's path to alternative education.

I grew up in a pretty good neighborhood. My dad was old-school hard, and worked to take care of the family. We weren't rich, but we had everything we needed. My dad made sure of

83

that. He worked from 5:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. at a refinery, and then came home and worked around the house. My mom also worked, but her main focus was taking care of me and my brother, who's 10 years older. She always made sure we were taken care of, and wanted us to do good in school. She never let me skip school.

Figure 12. Path to education.

I was a normal student in elementary school. I used to like school because I could meet kids, and play with them, and stuff. I also liked learning new things. That made my parents happy. I didn't have any problem with school then.

In about the third grade, things started to change. My grades were still good, but I started having problems with other kids. The students fell into two groups. It wasn't Whites versus Hispanics, or rich versus poor kids, but there were popular kids and unpopular kids. Cool kids were popular, and everyone else was unpopular. Then the cool kids started picking on the unpopular kids, calling them *losers* and stuff. I felt like I was caught in the middle. I didn't

understand why all of a sudden kids were picking on other kids, but I didn't like what I saw. I started standing up for the *losers*. That made the cool kids mad, so then I had enemies.

I couldn't talk to my parents about school. My home life was a joke. It was like my parents didn't care, or maybe they didn't believe me about the bullying at school. It was like they didn't want to believe that the so-called awesome school that I went to had bullies. I felt like they didn't care about me, so I didn't care about what they wanted me to do either. Life at school sucked. Life at home sucked. I felt angry and lonely all the time. Every day was hard. I got depressed, and stayed depressed for the rest of my time in that school.

Then I went to junior high. I was still depressed and didn't give a shit about school. I used to get As and Bs, but in junior high my grades were mostly Cs. I just didn't see the point, so I got lazy. But I still got commended scores on my [state standardized] tests. That used to piss my teachers off. They'd get mad at me because they knew I could do the work. I just didn't. I didn't turn in homework. I figured, if I understood the lesson the first time on Monday when the teachers would teach it, why should I have to repeat the same work and over and over in these stupid assignments? I always passed the tests on Fridays on the first try. I had all the answers right. But because I didn't do the homework assignments, which were pointless anyway, I was failing my classes.

My parents didn't like it either. They were constantly on my ass about doing my homework, but I didn't care. I mean, I knew I could get my grades up real quick before grades came out. They wanted me to be more like my brother. He was an average student, not like a top student, but he did OK in school. He'd do his homework everyday, and my parents would try to help him. That's what they wanted me to do too. But it wasn't like I needed help. I understood the lessons. I just didn't see any point in the homework. Being old school, my parents were more

used to the way my brother learned. I'm not my brother, though. Yeah, I may have been failing

classes, but I learned faster than he did.

Between the bullies at school, and my parents always comparing me to my brother at

home, I hated junior high. I thought high school would be better because classes would be harder

and I'd be more challenged so maybe I'd actually have to try to be a good student. I also thought

students in high school would be more mature from the ones in junior high. At least there would

be older students. I was ready to get done will all the bullying from before.

But high school wasn't much different than junior high. The teachers there repeated the lessons

throughout the week, just like the junior high teachers did: New lesson on Monday, repeat same

lesson throughout the week, test on Friday. The only difference was that teachers in high school

gave a lot *more* homework than what I had in junior high. When I didn't do it, it piled up. I still

didn't see the point. I just did the minimum to get by. If my grades dropped below passing, I

would get them up real quick. I'd ask the teachers what assignments that I had missing, and

when they told me, I'd do them half-assed real quick to get my grade up to a 70. That was like

the only time I ever did my homework. If I tried and did my homework all the time, I could have

been an honor roll student, but the way the teachers taught didn't work for me. Instead of

working harder, I just got lazier.

High school students weren't really all that mature as I thought they'd be. The bullying

got a lot worse in high school than before. They'd pick on other students right in front of the

teacher. The students would cry, and the teacher would just ignore them. These people were way

meaner than the kids in junior high. One time in class, at the high school a girl was getting

bullied. They were calling her a slut, saying she was easy, and the teacher didn't notice until she

broke down and cried. What sucked even more is that the teacher didn't do much to stop it from

happening, after the girl started crying except tell the kids to stop saying that stuff. It was like that a lot. It was devastating to see that. I don't think the teachers or counselors ever did enough about the bullying.

Bullying was one of the reasons I hated the high school. If you tried to stand up for yourself, you were going to get in trouble. The police at the school would always tell us if we got in a fight, charges would be filed on us. I didn't want a ticket or go to court and I know others didn't either. Basically it was like we couldn't do anything and nobody was going to stop it and the bullies would just bully the kids more. If we were lucky, the bullies would eventually get sent to the DAEP.

I had a group of about 20 to 30 heads that I hung out with at the beginning of my freshman year. A bunch of them started acting like they were better than some of my other friends, and started picking on them. There it was again, the cool kids versus the *losers.* I started calling out the bullies, and lost them as friends. It wasn't that I thought I was better than anyone. I just didn't like it when some of my friends said bad things about another friend. I'd say, "He's my friend, and I'm not going to let you talk to him that way." By standing up for one friend, I created an enemy with the other. Pretty soon, I was down to about five friends until they eventually did the same thing. I ended up being pretty much by myself. I was still sociable and stuff, but I didn't have any friends that were important, or that I could trust except one.

There was a friend of mine that I hung out with sometimes who brought some weed over for me to try. This was at the end of my freshman year. He was a hipster, so I thought it would be cool to try. I didn't have anything to lose. When I tried it I thought it was fun. It wasn't like I was planning on doing it all the time. Smoking was a good way to blow off steam so I wouldn't have

to worry about anything. I used it to ignore all the crap in my life. Pretty soon, I was smoking almost every day.

I smoked all summer between freshman and sophomore year. When August came around, I wasn't looking forward to going back to school. To make things worse, when I did go back, the students were divided up more than ever. The students that were taking advanced preparatory (AP) classes became a separate group of students that I hardly ever saw except during passing periods. With all the AP students in their own classes, I was surrounded more than ever by the bullies and the ones getting bullied.

Figure 13. Dividing students up.

I was always in a bad mood going to school. I was so tired of the students and all the bullshit. I needed to find a way to forget about all the drama and bullying that I had to put up with everyday. I started hanging out with my older brother and his wife a lot, because they were mature. They didn't judge me or try to offer old-school advice like my parents. They were really

cool and understanding. But then they had a kid, and started having issues. Things got bad at their house. They fought a lot, and finally got a divorce. After that, I kind of went into a downward spiral. At home I didn't have anyone who understood me. School was just full of stupid people who liked drama. My brother's place was the only place I liked. And now, even that was different. I was lonely, sad, angry, and just didn't care. I thought about killing myself. I actually took a bunch of pills, but it didn't work. Instead, I started smoking more weed just to tune out everything. I got reckless with it, and ended up getting caught smoking in the restroom at school with another student.

After I got busted, I was sent to the district's disciplinary alternative education program (DAEP). That's where kids are sent to when they get in trouble at a separate campus away from my high school. I had to be there for 45 days. My parents were pissed when they found out I got caught smoking at school. They searched my room inside out and found my stash of weed in a bin of LEGO's. They were already worried about how lazy I was at school. When they found out I was smoking, they were just freaking out. I couldn't do anything without them breathing down the back of my neck. They treated me like a little kid.

Figure 14. Getting busted!

89

By that point, I was ready for a fresh start even though it was not under the best circumstances. Even though I was in trouble for smoking pot, I was happy to go to DAEP. For one thing, it would probably mean less drama and bullies. Also, my parents couldn't watch me every minute if I had to get out of the house to go to DAEP. But when I first got there, I was a little scared. A lot of the same bullies that I dealt with at school were at the DAEP. But they acted different compared to how they acted at the high school. Nobody really messed with anyone due to it being such a small setting. The teachers were right there, and they wouldn't let anyone get away with bullying, so I didn't really have to worry about them. I just did my work and did what the teachers told me to do.

Figure 15. DAEP, a new day, a fresh start.

At the DAEP, I did my lessons on a computer. I didn't have to do the same homework day after day, so I didn't feel like it was a waste of time. If I could just get the questions right at the end of the lessons the computer let me move on to the next lesson. I got through my work pretty fast. I was comfortable because I could learn at my pace and I could chat with teachers about anything I wanted. They understood me. I mean it wasn't like I ever got in any real trouble

at the high school besides getting caught smoking weed, which was the only referral I ever got, but it was the first time I was ever like a model student.

I noticed there were other kids in the building who were not in the DAEP program. They were in another program called Alternative Education Program (AEP), which I had heard about at the high school but didn't really that much about other than you could graduate faster. I even had asked my counselor about the AEP at the beginning of my junior year because I had a couple of friends that went there and told me about it. But my counselor blew me off and told me it was for the bad kids, so I was like, "Well I guess I am not going there." I just kind of forgot about it until I got to the DAEP and was like, "So this is where the AEP is." It was like DAEP, but kids apply to get into AEP instead of being sent there for being in trouble. They got to work with the same teachers at their own pace, with no drama, no bullying, and small classes. I started liking the idea of being in AEP because I'd get to work with the same teachers who understood me, and because I wouldn't have to go back to all the drama in the high school. Besides, I knew a lot of the kids in the AEP and I was like "Hey I know them and they aren't bad kids." It made me think about what the counselor had told me, and why she said it was for the bad kids.

After being in DAEP though, I knew I wanted to go to the AEP. I spoke to my teachers and found out that to qualify for being in AEP, I would have to be behind in credits. But I wasn't. I just smoked some weed. My teachers–especially Mrs. Cody and Mrs. Diaz–still thought that the AEP program would be good for me, and sent me to talk to Mr. Avery, the director who was in charge.

I went and talked to him. I explained that I didn't want to go back to the high school because I thought I'd end up getting in trouble again and eventually fail my classes. Mr. Avery agreed that the alternative program would probably be the best place for me. Knowing that I

didn't technically qualify, Mr. Avery had me fill out an application anyway, and told me that he would talk to the assistant principal at the high school. The assistant principal didn't have a problem with me going to the alternative program. However, I still needed to convince my parents. I knew that wasn't going to be easy. They were old school and thought AEP was where all the bad kids that were losers went. I explained that AEP wasn't the same as DAEP. Even though the AEP kids were in the same building as the DAEP kids, they weren't in the program for being bad–you had to apply and get approved. Even some straight A students went to AEP. They were still worried that I'd get in trouble and fall behind. I told them that I was more likely to get in trouble at the high school than I was at AEP, and reminded them that when I went to DAEP, I hadn't gotten in any trouble, and that I had much better grades. I also told them how the teachers at DAEP gave me help and confidence to not mess up. Finally, my parents agreed.

Path to Alternative Education: Riley

Riley is a white female with a light complexion and long brown hair that extends to the small of her back. She stands with confidence at about five foot six inches tall. She speaks in a soft, yet stern tone. She is a girl that knows what she wants and it shows. She walks with a sense of pride, a sense of purpose. If you don't know Riley, she seems to exude a sense of seriousness. However, after getting to know Riley, her broad smile and playful laugh becomes contagious. Following is Riley's is a description of Riley's path to alternative education.

I grew up in a military family. Before my parents got divorced when I was in the eighth grade, my mom struggled to keep up the house while dad was away. Sometimes he'd be gone up to six months at a time. My mom used me to help out with my brother and three little sisters. I could never do anything, like with friends, because I always had to feed them, and give them baths, and watch them while my mom worked on having parties for other military families.

My mom always wanted our family to be like the perfect little military family. She always made me dress up in little pretty dresses and told me to watch my manners–you know, sit up straight, and say yes ma'am, no ma'am. For my mom, it was all about how she looked to the other military families. She wanted to feel like a big shot. From the outside we were this perfect little family with mom, dad, and the kids looking and acting so perfectly all the time. On the inside it was completely different. I hated trying to act so perfect all the time. I couldn't just be me, it was just like I always had to put this big act on.

Figure 16. Prettying up to portray perfection.

My dad wasn't much different. He expected me to be perfect too, especially at school. It didn't matter how well I did, my dad always expected more. Like, if I got a 95 on a report card, my dad questioned why I didn't do better. There were kids' parents who were proud that their kid got an A on a report card. For me an A was just expected. It was the norm, like no big deal. But if I got a B, it was failure. My parents were always reminding me how important school was. They'd say, "You need to do good so you can get a scholarship, because we don't have that much saved up for college."

My dad was all about discipline. It didn't take much to set him off, and we used to get punished a lot. Like if I talked back, he'd whip me. My mom used to always go along with whatever he wanted when he was home, but when he was gone, she did things her way. She'd become very lenient with us, to make up for my dad being so strict. When he was gone, she let us do basically whatever we wanted as long as nobody got hurt. But when he was home, she always supported him. Then, one time my dad pushed my brother down the stairs because he broke something and my mom had enough. She started standing up to my dad, which caused a lot stress. They fought a lot, and it got out of control because my dad was so violent. Sometimes we–the kids–would try to stop them from fighting, but then my dad would hit us, so I had to try to protect my brother and sisters when he was mad.

When I got to middle school, things got worse. Both my parents took their anger out on me. My dad would hit me if I didn't do all my chores exactly the way he wanted. My mom abused me emotionally, telling me I was worthless when I didn't help with my brother and sisters enough. I had to do all the laundry, help with cooking, and make sure everyone was fed and bathed. It didn't matter how hard I worked, our family was still falling apart. In court during my parent's divorce I actually testified against my dad because his abuse got so bad.

After the divorce, I thought maybe things would get better for us. And they kind of did for a few months. Because I was the oldest, I'd be put in charge of my brother and sisters. But since my mom was being lenient again, she didn't let me discipline them. So, everyone just kind of did whatever they wanted. It was like going from one extreme to another.

My brother Jimmy needed a lot more structure. He didn't do well without limits. Jimmy's got some mental and emotional issues that made his life tough. Doctors have tried diagnosing Jimmy most of his life. They'd prescribe him all these different medications and combinations of

medications to see what worked. Seriously, he's been on like a million medications. The house was basically a pharmacy because doctors would tell him, "Try this; no, here, try this, try this medication." Finally, when he was in junior high they diagnosed with a form of Asperger's syndrome.

Jimmy was best behaved when he had to earn things by being good. It seemed simple to me, but my mom didn't see it that way. I always told her that she needed to take everything away from him and make him earn things with good behavior. If he acted bad, she needed to take things away. If she did that then he'd learn just to do the good things. I don't know why, but my mom just didn't like to discipline Jimmy, so he learned to manipulate her. When Jimmy threw a tantrum, she'd give in.

"You're letting him walk all over you," I told her. It drove me crazy. It was like I had to be the mother to her, and to my brother, and sisters. I remember fighting a lot with my mother. It wasn't a good situation, but that was basically how my life was until I was a junior in high school.

In my junior year, my life took a direction I never would have expected. It all started with my mom getting remarried. I didn't have any issues with my mom getting remarried, or so I thought. The only problem was that the guy she married was kind of weak in the relationship, like in the woman's place. My mom wore the pants. I guess my mom was making up for marrying my dad. After all those years of trying to act like the perfect military wife, my mom decided she wanted to be the one in charge. With my mom being married to a Mr. Mom, she didn't need me to help around the house and take care of the family. She had someone else to pick up her slack.

I was mature for my age and wasn't afraid to question my mom's parenting style. I felt like I'd earned it since I had helped raise my brother and sisters while my mom was trying to act perfect for everyone. But my mom just thought I was being a smart-ass. We fought a lot because I questioned her so much. I stopped calling her mom, and instead called her by her first name, Allison.

As the fights got worse, I started to look for ways to escape. I tried to avoid her as much as possible. I stayed out late with friends, and sometimes wouldn't even go home unless I knew she was at work. Avoiding my mom caused even more fights when I did have to face her. It was like this little cycle; the more I tried to avoid my mother, the more we fought. My mother got mad because I wasn't home, but then she'd also get mad at me if I was home. It sucked, because we fought no matter what I did.

Figure 17. Hiding from the pain.

I couldn't deal with it anymore, so I started messing with drugs and alcohol. I was at low point in my life, and just needed something to take the pain away. I started smoking weed with my friends at first, but I didn't really care for it because I didn't like the smoke. I felt like it suffocated me. Then I tried cocaine. I liked it a lot better. It let me forget about my insane home life when I used it. Mostly, I drank more than anything though. It was easy to get because my

older friends always had alcohol. Since I was avoiding my mom so much, I was able to hide the drinking and drug use.

Even though I was more rebellious, I was also pretty fragile. I didn't have anywhere to turn to for help besides the friends that I drank and did drugs with. The only way they knew how to help was by partying more. What was even worse was that my mom never asked me about what I was doing. I mean, she had to have been suspicious because I hung out with friends that had gotten in trouble for drinking and drugs. If she would have asked, I would have told her. I have a rule that if you ask me anything, I'll tell the truth. I felt hurt and pissed off that at her that she didn't even care enough to ask. But, I guess we would have probably just fought anyway.

One time things got so bad, she told me to leave and get out of her house. I didn't have anywhere to go, or any way to support myself, so I told her "I'll move out when I get a job." I then told her that, "If I leave, you won't see me at my graduation. You won't see me graduate college. You won't see my kids. You won't see me get married. You will not see me or hear of me or be part of my life because this is the choice you are making."

Like always, things cooled off by the next day. All I had to do was kiss Allison's ass–like literally. I knew how to manipulate her as well as Jimmy did. I hated doing it, though. So, I started looking for a job in case Allison ever told me to leave again.

In two weeks I was working at a fast-food restaurant called Chickee Dee's. I think I got hired so fast because I was nice, respectful, dependable, and presentable. Having a job was great. I was a step closer to being independent, and it gave me an excuse to avoid being at home so I wouldn't get into fights with Allison. After only working three months, my boss noticed how hard I worked, and almost me to team leader. Unfortunately, I was only 16, and the policy was you have to be 18 to be a team leader.

97

When I wasn't working at Chickee Dee's, I was focused on school. I was proud of myself because I had good grades, I was hardly ever absent, and never got in trouble. The only thing was that since I was working full-time, I had to give up some of my extra-curricular activities. I used be in swimming and choir, but I didn't have time for them anymore, which kind of sucked. Instead of having fun at school, I was focused on my grades, going to work, and avoiding Allison.

Summer finally came. I was so happy that I could finally get a break from school. At the same time, I also had a lot of extra time, which meant more time I had to spend with Allison. The more Allison and I fought the more drinking and drugs that I did. Summer is supposed to be fun but all I did work, fight, and use drugs. It was terrible.

The final straw came one evening in late July or August. I came home after work with my boyfriend Shane. Allison was in the laundry room. I wanted to talk to her about Jimmy. He was doing his manipulation with her new husband, Mr. Mom, and I was frustrated that everyone just let him get away with it. I told Shane to wait in the kitchen while I went to the laundry room to talk to Allison.

"Allison, I need to talk to you," I said.

Allison responded, "I need to talk to you too." Before I had a chance to say anything else, she accused me, "I heard you were yelling at Jimmy today."

I didn't yell at him," I shot back. "I haven't yelled at him in a long time."

This was true. I recalled the last time I yelled at one of my siblings, Allison told me that I was acting like my father. It hit a nerve because I hated him at the time. To think that I was turning out to be like him made me hate myself.

I tried to explain about what happened that day with Jimmy, but things started to get heated like usual. Although we fought regularly, this time I was caught completely off guard

98

when Allison said, "You know what Riley, I think you were raised wrong and I feel bad for you."

Then said the words that changed everything: "Riley, you're a mistake I am still paying for."

My jaw dropped. I was so shocked I had no response. Allison wasn't finished, though. She added, "You are a bad example and I don't want you to ever talk to your brother and sisters again."

I remember I felt numb as I turned around and walked back to the kitchen. I tried so hard to hold it in, but it was like I could see my own heart dropping to the floor. It smashed into a million pieces and hurt more than anything I ever felt before. All the strength I'd been using to keep myself together just like melted away. I fell to the floor and cried. Shane bent down over me, trying to get me up, and asking what happened.

"I just want to leave," I sobbed, as Allison walked into the kitchen.

"If she tells you that I called her a mistake she is lying, because I just said that she was raised wrong," Allison said.

I couldn't believe she was trying to manipulate Shane. I yelled at her to leave us alone. She sighed, and walked out of the kitchen. The expression on her face reminded me of how Jimmy looked when he knew he'd just gotten his way. After Shane helped me up, I told him I needed to be alone, and asked him to leave. Worried that Allison would return to the kitchen, I went straight to my room to think.

I called Adam to explain what had occurred. Adam was one of my best friends. We went to school and worked together. He had some issues of his own, so we understood each other. We could talk about anything because he didn't judge me. He also had a rocky relationship with his parents, but he always tried to help people out.

"Let me talk to my mom, I'll call you right back," Adam said after I told him the whole story.

I lay in bed waiting for him to call me back. I wandered if he could help me or not. The wait was excruciating, it seemed like it took forever for him to call back. I kept checking my phone to make sure it was on. After 15 minutes or so, the phone startled me when it finally rang.

"Hello, what did she say," I asked frantically as I sat up in my bed.

"You know, you can stay here," Adam replied after a short pause.

"Thank goodness," I said letting out an enormous sigh as I gripped my comforter. "What else did she say?"

"Nothing. You need me to come pick you up?"

"Yeah, yeah, that would be great, I'll wait outside. Give me about 10 minutes," I replied as I crawled out of bed to switch the lights on.

"No problem. I'll see you in a bit," Adam said as he hung up.

I tried to be as quiet as possible because I didn't want Allison to know what I was up to. I quickly stuffed some clothes into a bag and then went to my bathroom and grabbed some more stuff, like my make-up, a toothbrush, and few other things. After I got all the stuff I needed, I went back into my room one last time to make sure I had everything I needed. I took one last look around and was, like, I guess this is it, time to get out of here.

I quietly headed outside and waited for Adam to show up. It was a typical hot and humid night. I immediately began to feel sticky as I stood on the curb under a large oak tree. After a brief moment I could see lights coming down the quiet street. I clinched my bag tight as I assumed it was Adam. My heart was beating out of my chest, blocking out the noise of all the

summer bugs buzzing around. I was so excited and afraid at the same time. I was liberated yet so hurt. The car passed by, it was not Adam.

I realized that I did not want anyone to see me I decided to back up and lean against the tree trunk to get out of the light. I stood as still as possible and waited silently. I did not want Allison or any of my neighbors to see standing outside. I had to get out of there without any further confrontation. It felt like torture, that is exactly what it felt like at that moment.

After waiting for a few moments Adam pulled up in his mom's car with the music blaring. I quickly opened the door and put my index finger to my lips to indicate to him that we needed to be quiet. He turned down radio as I gently got in the car and silently closed the door. We talked about what occurred and he tried his best to encourage me, but it wasn't much help. It hurt a lot. When we got to his house it was super dark because his parents were already in bed. I was starting to think this may not be such a good idea since it was so late. I had been there a million times, but this time it felt different. I guess it was more like an awkward feeling because this time I wasn't just going over to hang out. Adam could sense that I was uneasy and said in a comforting tone "Don't worry, everything will be fine. My parents are cool with it."

I didn't say anything. I just nodded and tried to smile. "It's cool. Don't worry," Adam repeated as he flipped the light on in the living room. "C'mon, you are going to stay in the room down here," Adam said as he waved his hand motioning me to go down the hall. "You can stay in here," instructed Adam has he opened the door to the room and turned the light on.

I have never been in that room. It was decorated real formally with antique looking furniture. I was like, "Whoa, this room is nice, a lot nicer than mine at home."

"Yeah, it was some stuff my mom got from her grandparents. It's like really old stuff," Adam responded.

I put my bag in the room and then we went back to the living room where we talked more about what happened. We talked until one in the morning. When Adam couldn't keep his eyes open anymore, I finally went to bed, but I really couldn't sleep. I couldn't stop thinking about what Allison said to me. How could she tell me that I was a mistake, especially after everything I did for her? I was in bed for about an hour or so before I finally fell asleep.

The next morning I heard a slight knock on the bedroom door. Drowsily I said, "Hello."

It was Adam. "You can come in," I assured him as I completely covered myself the sheets and floral comforter on the bed.

Adam opened the door slowly and said, "My mom wants to talk to you," as he squinted his eyes so as to make sure he did not see too much of me in case I was not decent.

Unsure about exactly what she wanted I answered wearily, "okay."

"Just to make sure everything is going to be cool," responded Adam as he slowly closed the door to the bedroom.

"Yeah, yeah. Sure, no problem. I'll be right there,"

I wasn't completely awake yet, but I got up anyway and went into the kitchen to talk to her. She said, "Listen, sweetie, I know the kind of person you are. Whatever happened with your family, you've always been really respectful here in the past. I don't mind you living here." I didn't know what to say. I just smiled and got up and hugged her. It felt so good. I felt like she truly wanted me there. She hugged me back and I didn't want to let go. As I hugged her, I was like, "Thank you, thank you, thank you so much."

I called Allison, and told her I was leaving.

"Look, Riley, just come home, and we can talk about it," she said.

"You went and kicked me out, but now you're like no you're not kicking me out," I argued. "I'm not afraid to be on my own."

"But what are you going to do for a phone?" she objected.

"A phone?" I asked, not believing that of all things, this was her primary concern. "I can just go to Wal-Mart and get a prepaid phone. How hard is that? I am not a baby."

"Ha! That's what you think!" she shouted, "You're only 17!"

"I've got a job, and I saved a bit. I can figure it out," I defended myself.

"You can't live on your own."

"No, Allison, I can't live with you," I said, and hung up the phone.

I stayed at Adam's house, and continued working. When school started again, I didn't feel ready for it, but was happy that at least it was my senior year. I just wanted to get it over with so I could get on with my life. The year before, I worked really hard my junior year so that I could have an easy course load my senior year so I could work and prepare for college. I only needed 3 credits to graduate. I visited the school counselor before classes started, and she suggested I get involved with swimming and choir again to keep me busy. I decided to do it, since getting involved with extra-curriculars again could help me take my mind off of everything that happened that summer.

Filling out the paperwork for the extra-curriculars, turned into a problem. I didn't have a parent or guardian to sign for me. Obviously, I couldn't go to Allison. Adam's parents were letting me stay with them, but they weren't like my legal guardians or anything. I couldn't sign for myself, because I wasn't 18 yet. After talking it over with the counselor, she arranged it so that the assistant principal could sign for me.

I was officially ready to begin my senior year. Along with swimming and choir, I was taking Math and English dual-credit courses, where I could get college credit at the high school. I was actually looking forward to the math class. I'd gotten a 94 in pre-calculus the year before, so I thought I was up to the challenge.

Math went wrong from the start, though. I didn't know what was wrong, but I didn't understand anything we were doing. Not long after getting behind in Math, I started failing my other subjects. I just couldn't pay attention. I'd try to listen to music, because that would always help me focus before, but it didn't help. Whatever else was going on, I'd always done well in school. I was on honor roll in my junior year, but as a senior I was failing everything. I felt totally lost.

Figure 18. Overshadowed by doubt.

I also couldn't sleep at night. I'd stay up until 4:00 a.m. It's not like I was doing anything, just laying there. To make matters worse, swim practice started at 6:00 a.m. I made it work for a little bit, but eventually I wore myself out. I started oversleeping. I'd miss swim practice, and

then my first couple of periods of school. After a couple of weeks, I was called down to the assistant principal's office where they warned me that I could get in trouble, if I kept missing school. I didn't know what to do except to just try harder not to sleep in. But trying harder didn't work. After about a month, the school filed truancy on me for excessive absences. I didn't even know about it until Allison went over to Adam's house to talk to his mom. I guess, because she was the biological mother, they sent the letter to her, telling her that I needed to appear in court. It sucked when Beverly told me I had to go to court, but at least I wasn't there when Allison went to talk to Beverly because I am sure we would have ended up fighting. She would have tried to throw it in my face like she did everything else.

I felt so bad about everything. I mean, Beverly knew I was skipping school, and sometimes she'd try to bring it up, like, "I notice you didn't go to school today." But she also knew I'd been dealing with a lot, and was trying to be supportive of me. I guess, because I wasn't her actual daughter, she didn't feel comfortable prying into my business too much. But now with the truancy charge and Allison and everything, it really put her in an awkward situation. I felt guilty. I thought to myself, 'here I am, staying with these nice people, and I am not even going to school. I'm not just getting myself in trouble, but them too. What am I doing? What does this look like?' I knew that things had to change. I needed to talk to Adam.

Experiences in Alternative Education: Adam

The weekend before I was supposed to start AEP, my parents had a million questions. It was almost like they were second-guessing the idea of letting me go.

"I just don't know why you've got to be in the same building as the DAEP kids." My mom complained.

"I don't know, but they keep the DAEP and AEP students separate. When I was there, I

hardly ever saw the AEP kids," I explained. "I mean, sometimes you'd see them in the hall, or

like in the restroom or something, but like, there wasn't a lot of interaction, or anything. They

came in and left school at different times."

"Do you know anyone else who goes there?" My dad asked. The way he asked, I knew

he wasn't worried I'd be lonely. He wanted to know if there was a chance I'd end up hanging out

with people who'd get me in trouble.

"I don't know. Maybe, but it's not like I'll know until I actually get there." I was getting

annoyed with their questions, but trying to keep cool.

"What are you supposed to do the rest of the day? Do you have to have a job?"

"I don't know. That's why they've got an orientation, so they can tell us how everything

works," I said, finally getting fed up, "All these questions you're asking me, you need to ask

them." Orientation was at 1:00 in the afternoon on Monday, so I got to sleep in. That morning, I

felt happy, and anxious, and excited, and better than any other Monday on a school day that I can

remember. I was out of DAEP, and out of the high school, and finally going somewhere where

teachers were cool, and other kids didn't act like jerks and idiots all the time.

My parents and I showed up to the orientation a little early. They always wanted to be

places early. The school had one of the DAEP rooms cleared out for us to sit down and fill out a

huge stack of paperwork. It made me wonder how many trees they had to kill just to get my

information. My mom filled out the forms, while my dad and I pretty much just sat there. I

looked around the room checking everyone else out. I noticed I was the only one there with both

parents. I thought that was because my parents just had a lot of doubts.

Just as my mom finished the paperwork the director began the orientation. Mr. Avery kind of laid out how the program worked. He told us that not everyone makes it, and that the students have to be responsible for getting their work done. "If you don't want to do the work you aren't going to make progress, so if you're lazy this isn't the place for you." They really didn't focus on the state tests. They focused on kids learning and making progress, and the tests would take care of themselves. I wasn't really worried about that because I'd taken all my tests while I was in the DAEP, but that stuck out to me because it seemed like all the teachers at the high school cared about was preparing us for stupid tests.

Mr. Avery finished going over a bunch of stuff and even gave us a handbook, but my parents still had a million questions. I just kind of slumped down in my chair and thought to myself, "Here we go, we're never going to get out of here."

"Do they get a real diploma or is it like a GED?" My dad asked.

"They get the exact same diploma as they got at the high school and the students could participate in the high school graduation if they graduated by May," Mr. Avery responded. Then he said, "The only bad thing is that the student's grade point average (GPA) freeze once they start at the AEP."

That meant no matter how well I did in my classes they wouldn't improve my GPA which kind of sucked. My mom asked about homework and how much would I have to do. Mr. Avery pointed at the computers that were on the counters, which lined the wall in the room and told her "That since most of the work was done on computers there really wasn't any homework to do at home. Students could do extra work at home since the classes were online but had to take all the tests at the AEP."

As my parents continued to pepper Mr. Avery with questions I began daydreaming. One of them asked about attending both shifts to finish faster. I wasn't paying much attention by that point but I do remember the Mr. Avery saying, "Going to both shifts didn't really work that well, because kids get tired of doing work."

Figure 19. Ready to log-on and start.

I was tired of being in the orientation. My dad asked about changing shifts because he didn't want me sleeping in too much. Mr. Avery quipped "usually everyone wants the morning shift so it is always full, but when space opens up kids can change, but once kids start in the afternoon they generally just stay even if they could move."

I was, like, I can handle the afternoon shift. I just knew I couldn't wait to get out of the orientation but I guess it was good because my parents got more comfortable with me going to the AEP. They could see how the classes were set up with a lot of space. The AEP was in an old vocational building, so the classes were huge. They had the computers spread out so you could tell that it would be easy to work without getting distracted.

The orientation lasted about an hour and 45 minutes but it felt like 8 hours. It would have been quicker if my parents didn't ask so many questions. After having all their questions

answered, my parents agreed to let me go to AEP with one condition. As everyone was leaving the room my dad told me, "We don't mind letting you try this place out as long as you don't try to graduate early."

I was a little shocked. I was like, "What? What do you mean I can't graduate early, I can get my work done real quick and be done by the end of the year."

"We don't think that you are ready for the real world and plus we want to have an extra year to save for college," my mom said quietly as she looked me straight in the eyes.

There I was all happy that the orientation was finally over and I was going to start at the AEP and then my parents come out with that crap. They could tell I was mad just by looking at me. I really wanted to finish school but they softened the blow when my dad said, "We'll buy you a car if you wait until your senior year to graduate."

I thought that was kind of stupid but hey I was going to get a car.

I left the orientation to go start on my work. My parents said they would be back at 4:00 to pick me up. When I walked into the classroom, there were about 12-15 kids in there spread throughout the room which was even bigger than the room the orientation was in. It even had a kitchen. Some of the kids were working on computers. Others were just visiting. The social studies teacher, Mr. Hughes was sitting by a student helping him with his work while the other teacher was at her desk working on his computer.

As I looked around, I started recognizing some of the kids. They were heads I used to hang with at school. I was shocked. I went up to one of the guys, and was like, "Hey, Corbin, I haven't seen you in forever, man. I thought you moved."

"Oh no man," he said, "I've been here for about a year."

I just kind of went around the room catching up with all these kids that I thought fell off the face of the earth. We talked about what we were up to, and how long they had been there. They told me how many credits they had and how much longer they had to graduate. For a bunch of kids who were supposed to be so bad, everyone seemed to be doing pretty well. They started to tell me some ins and outs of the program.

"Make sure you get work done," Connor said. "If you do your work, you'll be fine. If not, you'll get all behind."

I asked where I should sit, since I didn't want to get in trouble. The English teacher, Mrs. Sager pointed to a computer that was along the wall next to her and said, "Right there, you'll be in this group first. They're working on English. When they finish that, just follow them to your next class which is in the math room."

I sat down to work, but couldn't really focus. I kept thinking about what my parents had told me about not graduating early. Most parents of the kids in AEP couldn't wait for them to graduate. So instead of busting my butt, I knew I was going to have to pace myself for the rest of the year. I spaced out for a little bit, thinking about working more hours at my job, and then they told us it was time to switch classes. I didn't really know what was going on. Everyone in my group had already logged off and was standing around. As soon as they said switch, they bolted out of the room.

"Hey, come on," Corbin said.

I followed him and noticed everyone was hanging out in the hall talking.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Mayan, one of the girls in my group answered. "We go to math next. It starts in five minutes. We just kind of chill here for a bit before we go in there."

Pretty soon the math teacher, Mrs. Cody came around the corner from the DAEP section of the building and herded us into her room. I was glad to see her, because she helped me most in DAEP. I always liked to get my work done so I could visit with her.

"Come sit over here," she said, pointing to a computer. "I know you've got work to do. I'll help you." Mrs. Cody sat between me and another student, going back and forth, and helping both of us. A couple of other students were doing their work by themselves. Not all of them were working on math, some of them had already finished their math classes, so they were doing electives instead. I was amazed at how fast Mrs. Cody could switch between all the different subjects and help everyone. She was awesome.

That class went by really quick. Next thing I noticed, the other kids were logging off and standing up. Mrs. Cody was like, "No, sit down. Wait until four o'clock."

At about 3:55, I logged off. The other kids had already worked their way out into the hall and were waiting by the exit door. Mrs. Cody walked passed them. She stood with her back against the door, looking over the students as they talked.

"Okay, it's four o'clock, have a good day," she finally said, dismissing us.

After that first day, I was energized. I actually looked forward to going to school again. I'd always get there early so I could visit with the other kids before we started. There was a picnic table outside by the doors. We'd would sit there and tell stories while we waited to go in. Some of the kids would bring their lunch. It kind of became like the cool place to hang out before school.

Once we went inside, the teachers would usually talk to us for few minutes while everyone got settled. I always went to the same computer, like it was mine. I would usually hurry up and log on real quick so I get could some work done right away while I was motivated.

At the beginning of the class, the teachers would always ask if anyone needed help. I usually tried to do everything on my own at first. If I didn't know something looked it up on the Internet. I was able to figure out a lot that way. If I couldn't find something or understand it, then I would ask a teacher. They were always ready to help. It worked out pretty good because once I completed a lesson, I just moved to the next. I didn't have to do the same thing over and over like I did at the high school.

It helped that everything was the same, and was taught the same. In the regular school, different teachers would teach the same thing a bunch of different ways which got confusing. The online program stayed the same. All the math classes had the same format, the science classes had the same format, and so on. That made it easier, especially when we had to use formulas for math and science. I think having a regular routine to learning was a big reason why a bunch of us were successful.

As I got more work done I got more confident. It was hard at times, but I knew I could do it. For the first few weeks I busted my butt, like I did in the DAEP, because I realized that AEP wasn't going to be a breeze. The teachers had high expectations for us. They wanted us to learn. Mr. Hughes, the social studies teacher, used to warn us, "Listen, I already did my work, I graduated. You need to do your work. You're not going to graduate if you don't do your work."

It was pretty cool to see other students who had given up on learning getting their work done. They'd be all proud and always telling the teachers how many lessons they got. When we finished a class they would fill out this slip for us to take to the office. Everyone always bragged when they got a class done. They knew they were one step closer to graduating.

It was cool, because even though the teachers made us work hard, they also gave us lots of help. They were always rolling around the classrooms in their chairs, checking up on students.

They were constantly working, making sure we were getting our work done. That was fine with me; I knew I could do my work. I just had to sit at my computer and go to town. I could work at home if I wanted to, but there was no need. Instead, I talked to my manager at work about getting more hours. My manager wanted to know if I was interested in doing a maintenance type position, the only catch was that I would have to go in by 5:00 a.m. I wasn't sure if I wanted to do that because it was so early, but when she told me that it paid better, I figured I'd give it a shot. They changed my shift, and I started working from five to noon. I usually left a little early so I could get to school and hang out for a few minutes before class.

After a week of working the morning shift, I started getting pretty tired. It was hard to get up so early to go to work, and then go to school after that. When I got to school, I'd usually try to do some work right away while I still had a little energy. Then I'd take it easy for a bit. I knew I wasn't going to graduate, because my parents didn't want me to, so there was no sense in rushing my work.

As we got closer to the end of the school year I was putting less and less effort into getting my work done. At first it was cool because I was making friends again. At the high school, I'd lost a lot of friends because I couldn't trust them anymore. They'd turn on me or other friends and try to start rumors about girlfriends and stuff. It always was a bunch of drama. At the AEP nobody ever did things like that. No one was trying to start stuff.

By the last month I really slowed down to the point I hardly did anything. The kids that were supposed to graduate were too busy to talk. It sucked that I was going to have to wait to graduate, but didn't want to piss off my parents any more. They were still being pretty strict with me since the pot incident, plus I wanted that car. I usually just tried to take like a quick nap. The teachers would always wake me up, though. They knew I was tired from working all morning,

113

but they still wanted me to get my school work done. I'd log on and do just a little bit. I was only

getting like one assignment done a day.

Figure 20. The wheels came off.

Even though the teachers were really busy helping the seniors, it didn't take them long to

notice that I wasn't making progress.

Mrs. Cody warned me, "You better get busy. You won't graduate at this pace."

A couple days later the director, Mr. Avery caught me in the hall. He showed me my

progress reports, saying, "Look at this. You only did 5 assignments this week. You were getting

20-30 done a week. What's up?"

"My parents didn't want me to graduate early," I told him. I felt really embarrassed.

"What? Why?" He asked, looking stunned.

"I don't know," I said. "I guess they wanted the extra time to save money for college."

"Oh," he said, kind of like he understood where they were coming from. "I see. Okay, I

guess you can graduate in the fall."

Even though I didn't like talking about my parents holding me back from graduating, I also thought it was pretty cool that the teachers and director checked up on me like that. It proved that they cared and wanted me to be successful. I wasn't the only one they kept an eye on, though. They kept track of all of us. If someone was slacking they'd find out what was up.

I liked that we could talk to the teachers about more than just school. We had real conversations about our jobs and what we wanted to do, and problems we had at home and stuff. What was great was that they told us what they really thought. It wasn't just like, teacher-talk, but like real people.

Like this one kid, Eli, kept bragging that he was going to get a job selling vacuums cleaners. Mr. Hughes told him, "I'm not sure you want to do that. They always make it seem easy, but you have to make all these appointments. The other problem is that they pay you in advance and if you don't sell anything you have to pay them back. I don't think it is a good deal."

Eli did get a job selling vacuum cleaners. He didn't work there that long, though, because he couldn't make any money. I know Mr. Hughes could have said, "Hey, you can do it," like a lot of teachers probably would have. But he didn't BS him. He told him the truth, and was just being honest.

Almost every day for the last couple of weeks of school someone would finish all their assignments. Whenever anyone finished, the kid would come in and thank the teachers. Every time, the kid would always have this big smile on their face. I couldn't wait for that to be me.

By the end of the year, things were good. I was really comfortable at the alternative program. My parents were starting to ease off on me. Plus, I had a lot of friends to hang out with. I was pretty excited for the summer break. But when summer finally came, it seemed like all I

wanted to do was get back to school, which was weird. That's not something I would've ever said before. What was wrong with me?

There was another orientation before school started in the fall. All the AEP kids from the morning and afternoon shifts had to attend the orientation. It was across the street at the regular high school in the auditorium because the AEP/DAEP building didn't have a room big enough for all of us. There were like 40 kids and a bunch of parents. A lot of the kids were new, and were looking around like they didn't have a clue about the AEP. That me feel like a veteran. I already knew what was up. Mr. Avery pretty much went over the same stuff he did at my first orientation, but there were also some things that were going to change. The biggest change was that they were starting the work program, which was a class where we could earn credit for having a job. Mr. Avery said that we'd attend a work program class during the day, and then the work program teacher would check up on us at our job. That was sweet because I already had a job, which meant I could get credit for it.

The next day, I was finally back in class. I was still in the afternoon shift, so I got to school about noon. Mr. Avery was waiting outside with some of the new kids, just making small talk, and trying to get to know them. After awhile, he instructed the new students, "Go into the big room. The teachers are going to talk to you and split you into groups. If you don't know where you're going, follow someone who does."

I sat down at the computer I always sat at, and watched as more students continued to come in. Most of them were new to the AEP. I knew most of them from the high school, but there were a few I had no idea who they were. Miss Shelly, the science teacher finally told us what group we were going to be in based on how many credits we had. Then she explained which group was going to be where, and when they were going to be there. I got to be in the

116

math room for two periods; the first with Mrs. Camacho, the work program teacher, and the fourth period Mrs. Cody who taught math. I was down with that because there was only one group in the math room at a time. The other rooms usually had more than one.

That first day I didn't do a whole lot of work. The first day, teachers were pretty busy helping new students figure out the online curriculum, how to get to their assignments, how to search for things, and submitting lessons. So the veterans from last year spent most of the time settling in and talking about the summer. I knew I only had a few classes that I needed to finish, so I wasn't really worried about wasting my time. Besides, I wouldn't be able to start college until the spring. I just needed to finish by the end of the first semester in December, and I'd be good.

The best part of the day was English class. The teacher, Mrs. Sager, wanted us to do more writing, so she gave us the option to either do all of our lessons, or we could skip some lessons and do more writing. I was, like, sign me up for the writing! I hated the English lessons, there was a shitload of questions about grammar and stuff. Each lesson took forever. She gave us some different ideas of what we could do, like write essays, do research reports, write an autobiography, or write a book. She seemed pretty open to anything, as long as it involved writing. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but she said she'd talk to us about it over the next few days to give us time to think about it. I started to think that since I had the time, I might write a book. Amber, a girl in my group thought I was crazy. She said writing a book would be too hard and take too long, but I was like, watch me.

The next day, I talked to Mrs. Sager about my plan to write a book. She was really excited, but wanted to make sure I knew what I was getting into. I was expected to write at least 50 pages. It also had to make sense. She said it was going to take a while to finish. I was okay

with that. I had some ideas for a sci-fi book that I'd been thinking about for awhile. I just never got the urge to really start writing. So, now I had a reason to try. From that day on, that damn book took up most of my time at the AEP. I'd do a lesson here and there, but I was addicted to writing. If I wasn't writing while I was at school, I was thinking about it. If a teacher would come in looking for me because I didn't show up for class, the other students would answer, "He's working on his book."

It was like therapy for me because I could express how I felt. I was having some issues going on at home again. My parents were on my back about everything. They were always accusing me of using drugs or being up to no good. They were the type of parents that expected me to just sit and listen to them, and just say "Yes ma'am, no ma'am or yes sir, no sir." Any time I didn't act like they expected, we'd start arguing. My mom would always say things like, "Quit talking back, you better watch your mouth." She'd get so angry, and you could tell she had this hopeless feeling–you could see it in her face–but I had to stand my ground. But when I did, they just thought I was disrespecting them and their rules. I mean, I guess I was kind of disrespectful to them, but only because they were disrespecting me. I wasn't a little kid anymore.

At first the teachers didn't care that I wasn't getting much work done. They knew I could catch up fast. After a month, though, the teachers told Mr. Avery that I wasn't making much progress. They didn't think I'd finish by the end of the first semester if I didn't start getting busy. Mr. Avery came and talked to me to find out was up. I told him about my English project. When he asked about the other classes, I admitted I hadn't been doing much. I told him about what was going on at home, which made me not care so much about school. I didn't even care if I graduated in December or not.

A few days after I talked to Mr. Avery, my friend Riley started the program. She was living at our house because her mom kicked her out. I told her about the program, and she was interested. They put her in my group, which was pretty cool. She knew better than anyone about what was going on with me at home, and she knew I wasn't getting much work done. She tried to motivate me to work more, because she wanted us to graduate at the same time. She'd show me her progress reports and compare them with mine. She made me look bad because she always did so much work.

Things at home continued to get worse. I was frustrated and kind of went into a shell again. My parents were making me miserable. My dad didn't think men should have feelings or care about emotions. If we tried to talk, we'd end up arguing. That made things around the house really uncomfortable. It was like I was tip-toeing everywhere to avoid him. I couldn't talk to my mom either. If I asked her something, she'd say that we had to ask my dad. I'd tell her, "I didn't want to talk to him, that's why I am telling you", but she didn't get it.

In October a friend of mine and I decided to get a two bedroom apartment. My share of the rent was $450, which wasn't bad. I was making plenty of money to afford it and my roommate had already graduated and had full-time job too. It was pretty sweet, considering I was still in high school. It overlooked the water, and had this big balcony. I thought everyone would be jealous because I had my own place. Best of all, I wouldn't have to put up with my parents' bullshit anymore. They wouldn't be asking if I was doing drugs all the time or complaining if I got home a little late. I could do whatever I wanted.

The day we moved in, we had a friend help us. I'd gone to school with him, and he was in the DAEP, but he didn't go much and quit going because he didn't think he should have to follow any rules. He thought he was all anarchy and shit like that. After he dropped out he

119

became runaway, and didn't have a place to stay. We told him he could stay on the couch if he cleaned up around the apartment. He was cool with that, but we made a list of rules for the apartment anyway. One of the things on the list was a bunch of people who weren't allowed at the apartment because they stole stuff. Even though, everyone agreed, I should've known better.

We finished moving in by around noon. I decided to take a nap in my room. When I woke up, I could hear a lot noise coming from the living room. It didn't sound good. I looked up at the ceiling, thinking what the hell is going on? I rolled out of bed, and went into the living room/kitchen area. There was a bunch of heads hanging out in there. It wasn't that big of a living room, so people were standing around everywhere. We didn't have much furniture, like only a couch, a chair, and a small round dining table with four chairs. I was pissed off because there was nowhere to sit in my own home. But what really pissed me off was that I saw a bunch of people who we just said weren't allowed in the apartment. They were passing around a bunch of drugs getting high. They totally fogged the place up with their smoke. I was like, 'this is bullshit!' And it was only the first day. People kept coming over almost every night, getting high. To make things worse, my roommate invited another guy to stay with us. Since he was gay, we let him have his own room. The two of us shared a room, but the rooms weren't that big, and they didn't fit two beds and all our stuff that well. Besides, my roommate was super messy, always leaving his clothes on the floor, and never picking anything up.

The dude on the couch was still staying there, but he didn't do squat. He just complained about shit all the time. I was like, "I thought you were all anarchy and stuff." The only thing anarchy about couch dude was him not cleaning unless we threatened him. Even then, he did a terrible job. We always had beer bottles, cans, pizza boxes, and a bunch of other trash

120

everywhere. It looked like a dump, and smelled just as bad; a mixture of rotten food, pot, and spilled beer. I felt dirty just walking in the door.

I was the only one who cleaned anything without being told to. I just couldn't stand all the filth. My roommates didn't care, because they had no idea what it meant to be clean. They wouldn't even take the trash out. I was used to my parent's house. My mom always kept it spotless and it always smelled clean. I felt like I was in a totally different world.

Things weren't going like I thought they would. Working and living on my own was kicking my ass. I was always tired because we'd stay up all night, or at least till three in the morning. Then I'd have to wake up to be to work at five. I was way too tired to ever do anything at school. I didn't care about anything, I was always falling asleep, and I looked like hell. I had these huge bags around my eyes.

Miss Shelly asked me if I was on drugs because she thought I looked stoned. I was like, "No I'm just really tired I didn't sleep because there was another party at our house last night." She even had the school police officer check me out. He asked me if I was on medication, and stuff like that. I said, "No, I'm just really tired." He'd heard about all the parties at my house because the police were called there a lot. I had to do some type of drug test where he checked my eyes to see if I was high. I wasn't. He told me I needed to be more careful because they were watching our place. I told him that I was ready to move out.

It was barely December, and I'd only been living in my place for maybe six or seven weeks. I was already sick of it. The place was always a mess, and there were always people over that I didn't trust. One time, after I went, to bed someone stole my television. Another time, these two guys started screwing around wrestling and broke one of our chairs. They were like, "Sorry bro, we'll pay for it." But of course they never did.

I was always kicking people out because I was the only one with the balls to say something. People would start bitching, telling me to calm down or chill out. One time, I started yelling at a couple of people, telling them to shut up and get the hell out. I was so pissed, if they would have tried to talk back, I think I would have punched them. I was yelling so much that people called the cops. The cops wanted to know what was going on. They knew we were partying we didn't have time to throw any trash away and it smelled like weed. I was like shit is going to hit the fan now, but they were pretty cool with us. They just made us flush all our weed down the toilet and pour the beer down the sink. I told them that a couple of dudes were disrespecting us and they wouldn't leave. They let us off with a warning. We got lucky, but that didn't stop the parties.

I couldn't take it anymore. I talked to my parents about moving back in with them. They'd already let me spend a few nights. It was the only way I could get any sleep. Besides, we never had any food to cook, so I was always eating fast food which I got tired of. I liked eating my mom's food.

It was at the table that I told my parents wanted to move back in. My mom was ready for me to move back in. She didn't want me to move out in the first place, and knew I wasn't taking care of myself very well. It was obvious, because I looked and felt like crap. I hadn't had a haircut in forever.

"What about the lease?" my dad asked, "How do you plan on getting out of that?"

"I don't really know," I said. I didn't want to have to keep paying rent for the next couple of months until my lease was up.

"I'll go down there with you, and we'll talk to the apartment manager," my dad offered. "Maybe we can work something out."

It was worth a shot. My roommates destroyed the place. The floors and carpet were trashed, and there were some holes in the wall. Who knew what else they would do to the place when I was gone? I didn't want to be responsible for paying for anything that wasn't my fault.

The next day, I started getting some of my stuff out of the apartment to take back to my parent's house. I didn't have much to move because most of my stuff had either been stolen or broken. I just had my bed, dresser, and some clothes.

Figure 21. Aftermath of a failed experiment.

My dad went with me to talk to the apartment manager. We walked into the office, but I didn't really know what to say. I was afraid that she wouldn't let me out of the lease.

"I know my lease isn't up for awhile, but I really need to move out," I started to explain.

"There's usually a pretty big fee if you break your lease early," she told me.

"Great!" I said sarcastically. "Man, this sucks! Seriously, I can't live here anymore. Isn't there anything I can do?"

"You know, there have been a lot of complaints about your apartment," she said.

"Alright," my dad said, jumping in. He talked to her for a bit, trying to explain things for me, and work something out with her. After awhile, she agreed to make an exception for me, and let me out of the lease. It was probably because she wanted us out of there, anyway.

I let out a gasp of air. "Thank you, thank you, thank you," I kept saying to her as I reached out to shake her hand.

After that, I didn't want to have anything to do with my roommates. I heard from other people that after I moved out, they ended up getting kicked out a few weeks later. I was lucky that I got out when I did.

Things got better as soon as I moved back home. It was like normal again. I got to eat homemade meals, take a shower in a clean bathroom, and not worry about cops. Even my parents were cool with me. I think they knew I had gone through a lot and they kind of just stayed off my back for a bit, I guess like a honeymoon of sorts. I had promised them when I moved in, that I would do my work at school, and in the last couple of weeks before the end of the semester lived up to that promise. I pretty much felt like I had to.

It started to sink in that I blew my first semester when Riley finished all her courses. She was graduating at the end of the semester, and I hardly did anything but waste time. The only thing I really worked on that semester was my book. I had five chapters written that semester.

Seeing Riley graduate motivated me to finish my courses too. I wanted to move to Austin to go to college when I finished high school. I'd been up there a few times, and really liked it. I was thinking about doing something with art and music. The math teacher, Mrs. Cody, helped me fill out college applications in her office. She even helped me with the financial aid application, but my parents made too much money for me to qualify. She said I could still get loans, though, and explained how they worked. I was cool with that, but my parents said they'd

pay for college as long as I picked a legit degree. My older brother went to college, and took forever to finish with a worthless degree so they wanted to be more careful with me.

I pretty much had everything set to go to college. I wanted to do something with art and music so I thought Austin would be the perfect place. I had been up there a few times and really liked it. I just needed to graduate. I made a lot of progress at the beginning of the semester. It was cool because even though I didn't do much work the first semester the teachers were still willing to work with me. I think they were happy that I was motivated again. Maybe they thought that they better take advantage of my motivation while it lasted.

I started the second semester off on fire. I figured I could get all my work done by spring break, and then chill until graduation. I made a lot of progress at the beginning of the semester. I think that made the teachers happy to see me motivated again. It was cool because even though I didn't do much work the first semester the teachers were still willing to work with me. I was glad that the teachers didn't hold a grudge or turn their backs on me.

It was their credibility that helped kids like me be successful at a time that we probably wouldn't have been successful anywhere else. There were a lot kids who never listened to the teachers at the high school, but they listened to the AEP teachers. I had classes with kids at the high school who also ended up going to the AEP. They were a-holes in class sometimes. They would get referrals for stuff like having their phone out in class and when the teacher would ask for it, they would start arguing and making a huge deal out of it. All they had to do was turn it, but no, they ended up getting in a bunch of trouble because they talked back and cursed at the teacher. It just seemed like some of the kids that were in the AEP who were quick to talk back to the high school teachers and try to put them in their place, didn't do that at the AEP. The kids at high school would say stupid things to the teacher like, "Show me respect and I will respect you."

They didn't want to earn respect and they weren't earning respect with the way they acted. At the AEP, it really never got to that point because the teachers got to know the kids really well.

If someone misbehaved or talked back, the teachers would take care of it real quick. They would just separate the students and then talk to them to see what was up. They were good a defusing situations and not trying to make a big deal out of them. They knew how to talk to the students to get them to cool off. They understood we had issues which is probably why there wasn't that many issues at school. At the AEP, the teachers paid attention. They wouldn't let kids go unnoticed. If the student stopped doing his work after awhile the teacher would start helping him again. It was like this little cycle of getting a lot of work done, then taking it easy, then getting a lot of work done. I ended up going through that cycle a lot.

I liked the attention, I mean who wouldn't? Most of the other kids did too. Once they got to the AEP they didn't want to leave. I did have one friend that wanted to go back to the high school one semester but was right back at the AEP about six weeks later. He couldn't hack it. He realized he didn't like the busy pace and having to watch out for all the kids. The AEP had a relaxed atmosphere. Everybody got along. Nobody had to watch their backs. There were a couple of people I had problems with at the high school but we were cool at the AEP.

During my last semester we got a lot of new students that needed to try and catch up to graduate. I was friends with this one dude at the high school until he started talking crap about one of my other friends. I told him, "You're not any better than him. I don't know why you talk so much shit." After that we had a falling out. It was fine though because I ended up going to DAEP and then the AEP and he stayed at the high school. Then he went to the AEP because he was behind in credits and wasn't going to graduate at the high school. I was a little nervous when he first started, but he turned out to be cool. I saw a few other kids like that too. There wasn't the

pressure for them to act badass and always try to start stuff. At the high school they would form these little groups and try to be something. Some kids would try to form these little gangs and tag up the restrooms and stuff like that to show everyone they were tough. Or some kids would always try to bully people around and make fun of them. But when those kids came to the alternative program they weren't bullies anymore and nobody tagged up anything. If they did, they knew that they would be on their own. They would be an outcast in a bunch of outcasts. It was like the opposite from the high school. The bullies and popular kids didn't run the alternative program like they did the high school. They didn't get special attention because they were athletes or cheerleaders. At the alternative program, everyone was the pretty much the same and fit in by being themselves.

Even though all the students got along for the most part, kids fell into one of two groups at the alternative program: The students who wanted to be there and the students that screwed up and weren't going to make it at the high school. Those who screwed up didn't have any other options. They'd get in trouble, have to see the principal, and then the alternative program would be their last resort. They'd come into the program and talk shit at first, how they punked someone out at the high school. It made me laugh because they were the ones that actually got punked out. But they realized real quick that it was pointless because nobody cared if they were badass or not.

This one kid, Hudson, came in saying how he did whatever he wanted at the high school, and that the teachers were afraid of him, so they didn't write him up. He told everyone that he ran the high school, and he was now going to run the AEP, too. I felt like saying, "Grow up man, nobody believes that crap. Quit putting up that front. You wouldn't be here if you ran the high school." One day, he was talking shit and trying to put me down in front of other kids to be all

tough. I said, "I'm here because I want to be. You're here because they don't want you at the high school." That shut him up, and everything was cool after that. We actually became good friends after that.

Figure 22. Bully-free zone at the AEP.

The good kids who decided that they wanted to go to the AEP were the ones who were bullied at the high school. They couldn't take it anymore. They couldn't handle the stress of social life and went to the alternative program to finish everything real quick. I was one of those kids. I just wanted to get everything done. I didn't want to deal with the crap anymore. I was tired of hearing the bullies pick on other students because somebody supposedly said something about someone else. It was all a big joke. People would talk shit and make up rumors just to instigate.

The AEP was so small that kids couldn't really make up rumors because we all knew each other and we could call them out if they started talking crap. So we all pretty much got along. The teachers put us in groups so we didn't have the choice to pick friends. It was like elementary school all over again when we had to do projects together. Everybody became friends.

You can't be like, "Well, I'm your friend and that's my enemy, you can't be friends with him." That would be stupid and immature. Since there were only five students in a class, you start talking to everyone to keep from getting bored. By getting to know each other, we were able to put our differences aside.

Once I had problem with this one kid Kelvin, who just started at the AEP. He was going out with my ex. She started this rumor that I got her pregnant and she had to give the baby up for adoption. It was all a bunch of lies. Actually, I think my ex was trying to make him jealous, but he wanted to start beef with me anyway. Mostly, I just ignored him. But one day, I was sitting in the math room and Kelvin came in there saying all this stuff about how I was calling his girlfriend a liar and that she was crazy.

"She is a liar," I said, "and you're an idiot if you believe her."

"What'd you say?" He asked.

He came over to where I was sitting, and stared down at me like he wanted to fight. I stood up real quick, pushing my chair away, and got right up in his face, our noses almost touching. The teacher got between us really fast and broke us apart. She told Kelvin he should probably leave for the rest of the day before he got in more trouble.

I don't think Kelvin really wanted to fight. He was just trying to scare me, but I wasn't scared. I just felt sorry for him because my ex was telling him all this shit, and he believed it. The next day, he was calm like nothing happened. I went up to him, and let him know that I wasn't interested in his girlfriend anymore. He could have her, and didn't have to worry about me. I had a new girlfriend of my own. After that, things were pretty much squashed.

I think at the high school, it would've caused a lot more problems. Other kids would get involved, and keep instigating things. But at the AEP, all the kids knew if they caused too much trouble, they'd get kicked out. When the teachers called us out, we listened.

Even though everything seemed chill at the alternative program, we got work done. I mean if someone walked in there who didn't know what was going on they would think that we didn't do much. Sometimes kids would be up walking around or we would be talking to each other, like taking a break. It was hard when new substitute teacher would come, because they would try to get us to be like the kids at the high school. One time, this substitute teacher came and had no idea about how our program worked. He wanted us quiet and working all the time. I don't think he really knew what to do with us. After a bit, he realized that it was okay if we took breaks. We may have looked disorganized, but if we got too loud or talked too long, the teachers would tell us to get back to work. Even though we took a lot of breaks, we still got a lot more done than we would have at the high school sitting in the classes listening to a lecture and then having to do a bunch of homework. Besides at the high school only the smart kids really did their homework. The rest of us just copied from each other if we did it at all.

In late February and early March I fell into another major slump. I realized there was no way I was going to finish by spring break, so I kind of gave up for awhile. I got lazy, and didn't feel like being at school anymore. I guess I was burned out. One afternoon, I cut out last period with a buddy of mine, Corbin. Instead of going to the math room after third period, we went down the hall toward the restroom, and dipped out the DAEP exit doors. Nothing happened that day, so we did it again the next day. We figured we could get away with it again, but no such luck. Mrs. Cody caught us.

Figure 23. Killing time.

Mrs. Cody called my mom, who over reacted and went ballistic. My mom called my dad right away, and when he got home, the shit hit the fan!

"What in the hell were you thinking," he yelled. It wasn't really a question. "You're already behind, and your idea is to cut class? How are you going to graduate if you don't stay in the class? Well, that's it. No more car privileges."

"How am I supposed to go anywhere?" I asked, "How am I supposed to get to school?" I decided it wasn't a good time to mention that the only reason I used their car was because they still hadn't bought me one.

"We'll drop you off and pick you up until we can trust you again," my mom said.

"At least that way we'll know you're not leaving school early," my dad added.

"Come on," I pleaded, "I only skipped out once. I won't cut anymore."

"Forget it, pal," my dad said. "We've made our decision."

About a week later my parents decided to call the school to check on my progress and see if I was behaving okay. I couldn't believe it. I'd never gotten in trouble at the AEP before. When they called the school, they decided they wanted to go in for a conference. At the conference, they wanted to know how I was doing, and how I was behaving because they'd been having a lot

131

of trouble at home with me again. They were surprised when Mr. Avery told them that I behaved fine at school. They asked why I wasn't making progress then, and started blaming the teachers. They said they regretted letting me go to the alternative program, and stated that I would've graduated if I went to the high school. Mr. Avery defended the program. He told my parents that I wasn't the first person to wait until the end. He was sure that I would graduate. My parents made me quit my job, so I could focus on school. After that, every time I'd run into Mr. Avery in the hall, he always blasted me with a million questions.

"How's everything going?" he'd ask.

"Good, Mr. Avery," I'd answer.

"Still on track to graduate this semester?" He and I were like the only ones that thought I was going to graduate.

"Working on it," I'd say.

"You better make progress so your mother stays off my back." He'd say it kind of sarcastically, but we both knew my mom would be calling if I didn't do my work. "Just make sure to get your work done. If you need help, don't be afraid to ask the teachers. That's what they're there for."

"I will, Mr. Avery," I'd say, and then I'd go to class, and he'd go do whatever it was he had to do.

I knew I had enough time, to get my work done. I just didn't feel like doing it. Plus, I knew it pissed my parents off that I was stalling. If they would've let me graduate in my junior year, there wouldn't have been a problem. I mean, you can't tell a kid that hates school to not graduate. Plus, I was still pissed because they never got me a car like they promised. To be

honest, though, it wasn't the school's fault that I wasn't getting work done. It was mine. I was just lazy.

The teachers were always looking for new ways to make the alternative program better. They'd ask us what we liked and didn't like. Sometimes, they'd even run their ideas by us before they made changes. Sometimes I didn't like the changes, like locking us out if we were a minute late. It was like come on, we are a minute late, at least we made the effort to come to school and you are going to lock us out? What's up with that? Miss Shelly would be like, "Well I guess you should get here on time then." It pissed me off, but it worked because I ended up getting there on time.

My biggest complaint was that the alternative program was in the same building as the DAEP. It didn't help that it was a pretty crappy building. We had one hallway with three DAEP rooms on one side and then on the other side were the AEP rooms. The only thing that really separated us was the hallway and the AEP kids came into the building from a different set of doors at the other end of the building. It was so small you could tell when a DAEP kid got in trouble and started acting up because you could hear them talking back to the teachers and getting all upset and cursing. Sometimes they would storm out of the room and you could hear them slam the doors. It didn't bother me at first, but later it started to because every time I told someone I went to the alternative program they assumed it was the DAEP.

At the end of the year, the alternative kids who didn't do much work all year went all crazy and tried to finish up in a hurry. I remembered last year thinking all these kids who were scrambling to finish their work at the last minute they were idiots for putting themselves in that position, but there I was, in the same boat. I'd seen other kids graduate, though, so I knew it was possible for me too if I just worked hard enough. That DAEP got full at the end of the year didn't

help, though. The teachers were really busy helping those kids as well as us. Everyone wanted to finish, and we worked like crazy, and the teachers were working like crazy to try and help us, but they couldn't be everywhere all the time. So we all kind of helped each other if we could. It was cool to see everyone get excited when someone finished. Teachers would make a huge deal about it, and that kind of motivated the rest of us to keep working. That wouldn't happen if our school was too big like a high school.

The only thing that slowed me down at the end was the science projects. I'd finished all my other classes, and I thought I was almost done with my science class too. Then Miss Shelly told me I had to do all these projects. Each time I finished a project, she gave me another one. I felt like she just dumped them on us at the end. I hated them because it was like I was on the road to getting done and then hit a wall. It made me want to just keep putting my work off, and do it the next day. I figured there was no sense rushing, if I was just going to get another project thrown at me. I'd try to do whatever I could to avoid them, hoping Miss Shelly would change her mind, and not make me do them.

She didn't change her mind, though. I had to do every single project. Even worse, we didn't even have the right supplies to do our projects in. I had to bring some stuff from home to do the lab. I hated them so much they put me in a bad mood. I didn't even want to look at the science Miss Shelly. Finding space to work was another problem. The building was small, and half of it was for DAEP. The science, social studies, and English teachers all shared one room. There wasn't a lab space to work in because the district just threw the AEP together and told us to figure things out. I ended up doing some of the projects in the hallway or in the math room because there weren't as many kids in there. The math teacher also helped me if I didn't

understand something instead of just telling me to read the instructions and do what they said like Miss Shelly did.

Figure 24. Make shift science lab.

Even though it got tough at the end, I finished with about a week left of school. After I finished that last project, Miss Shelly came to talk to me.

"Adam, you need to go to the office."

"What?" I couldn't believe that I was getting in trouble after working so hard to finish all these science projects.

"I said, you need to go to the office," she said again.

"Why? What did I do?" I was getting pissed off.

The she broke out with a smile, and said, "You graduated. You need to go talk to Mrs. Brown to start checking out."

It was like this big weight lifted off my chest. I had a huge smile on my face all the way to the office. When I got there, Mrs. Brown told me I needed to go check out at the high school.

She gave a list of people that I needed to get signatures from. I had to go to the library to make sure I didn't owe any books, the counselor to make sure I had all my credits, and the registrar to withdraw.

I was so excited, I flew out the door, but Mrs. Brown started yelling, "Wait! Wait! You can't go over there yet."

I stopped in my tracks and turned around. "Why not?" I asked.

"Because I have to turn in your science credit to the counselor first," she explained, "and they might not get it entered into the computer before tomorrow. But don't worry. You've got all your credits. Just go to the high school tomorrow to get cleared instead of coming here."

"Yeah, alright," I agreed. "I can wait one more day."

"Here, you'll need this, too," she said, handing me a paper with graduation information on it. It had the dress code for graduation, the time for practice, and the time for when we needed to show up for the actual graduation.

"Thanks, Mrs. Brown. See ya," I said with another big smile, and left her office.

Before I headed home, I went in to thank the teachers. When I walked into the main classroom, Mr. Hughes was playing that graduation song on his computer. A bunch of kids were clapping. It was kind of corny, but I felt amazing.

"Good job," Mr. Hughes said. "I'll see you at graduation."

"I told you that you could do it," Miss Shelly added.

No matter how much I hated her at times, I was glad she pushed me. "Yeah," I said, kind of shyly tucking my head down, "Sorry to give you so much hell." Then I turned to the rest of the room, and was like, "I'm outta here. Peace, suckers."

I left the campus pretty quick. I wanted to go tell my mom the good news, but it was like she knew something was up since I was home in the middle of the afternoon before school got out.

"Did you finish?" she asked.

"Yeah, yeah. I finished," I told her.

I think she just about hit the ceiling, she was so excited. She let out a huge scream, and hugged me.

"We need to go shopping and get clothes for graduation," she said.

"Yeah, I'm up for that," I said. "I need to get a tie too."

My mom was so proud, she was boasting when we were shopping, telling the lady at the store, "I want him to look nice. He's graduating next week." It was kind of embarrassing, but I knew what a big deal it was for her–For both my parents. I think they finally felt relieved. I felt relieved too, because no one could doubt that I'd finish anymore. My mom hadn't wanted to plan anything around my graduation until she knew that I was going to finish for sure. Over the next week, my mom just basically planned for my party. By the time graduation finally rolled around, we were set.

Graduation practice was at noon. Mayan, another girl from the AEP, rode with me. When we got there, it was wild. There were all these kids from the high school that I hadn't seen in awhile. I think I said, "What's up," to about 100 different heads in the first 15 minutes we were there. The best part was being there with the other kids from the AEP, though. It was like here we were, a bunch of *losers* no one thought would finish school, and we were getting ready to graduate just like the regular high school kids. No one could tell just by looking at us who were the AEP heads and who were the high schoolers.

Practice took forever, and by the time it was over,–I was starving. Thankfully, when I got home after practice, my mom had some food ready. I ate, took a quick nap, and then it was time to get dressed.

My mom and dad wanted to get to the coliseum early so they could take pictures. When they finished, I rushed inside. I guess I was nervous. There wasn't really any rush. When I got in there, all the seniors just had to sit in this big room for about an hour before we finally got to go into the arena itself.

When we walked in, there were a bunch of people yelling and taking pictures, like we were rock stars. Once we got to our seats, they started the ceremony. It went by pretty fast, and the next thing I know, we're standing in line to go across the stage. Then they called my name, and I remember thinking, 'it's real, now.' I could hear a bunch of whistles, but everything was like a dream. I shook hands with the principal, assistant principals, counselors and school board members, as I crossed the stage. The last person was Mr. Avery, the director of the AEP. That was awesome. The AEP helped me to the bitter end, so it just made sense that he'd be the one to give me my final send-off.

Then I was done, just like all the other seniors from the high school. It was such a great feeling to be done with high school. I was ready for college, where I wouldn't have to worry about bullies, and I could just relax and be myself. But boy did I learn some stuff. Not just about school, but about myself, too.

Experiences in Alternative Education: Riley

One night, Adam and I were hanging out, just talking about stuff. It was cool because, we didn't get to see each other much. I was always working or at school and he had a job too. This was just after I was charged with truancy. My life was a mess, I was failing in school, working

way too much, and not living at home. We never really talked about the alternative program before, but the topic came up.

"What are the kids there like?" I asked, "I mean, aren't they all just burn-outs and losers?"

"No," he said. "It's not like that. The kids who get in trouble go to DAEP, which is a different program. The kids in AEP are cool."

"So, you think the alternative program would be good for me?" I asked.

"Yeah, I think that would be good for you," he said. "I love it there. You only have to go four hours and there isn't as much drama."

"If there's anything I need less of, it's drama," I admitted. "I've been going to school for 12 years, you know. I don't want to just give up, but I don't know if I can take it anymore. I just can't concentrate at school. I guess I'm just too analytical or something. Like, I'm always asking like a million questions about everything, and focusing on the wrong things. It's a total mess."

Figure 25. Hitting a wall at school, work, and life.

"Yeah. You should really apply to the AEP," Adam insisted. "You'd love it. They're really relaxed. Most of the work is on the computer. The teachers are really helpful and they help you with what you need and it's just a few people so it's more concentrated and stuff."

"I don't know about doing all my work online," I said. "I took some online classes before and didn't do so well. They were these college classes when I was a freshman and sophomore. I

wanted to try and get ahead but couldn't pass them. It sucked, you know, because there wasn't a teacher right there and it seemed like the instructors online really didn't care."

"The alternative program is different," Adam reassured me, "There are teachers there who could help with whatever you're stuck on. I'm not gonna lie, the work is actually kind of hard, but at least you don't have to do the same thing over and over. If you complete something, you move on to the next assignment."

"That's good to know," I said. "I really need to hurry up and finish so I can move on with my life. Maybe I should apply."

I didn't know what I needed to do to apply, but Adam told me about filling out an application with the counselor. He also offered to talk to the alternative program teachers, and give them a heads-up about me, and tell them to keep an eye out for my application.

The next day at school, I went and talked to my counselor, Mrs. Flores about the alternative program. When I got into her office I told her, "I really want to go to AEP because of the schedule."

She looked over from her computer screen and nodded. She looked a little surprised that I wanted to go to the alternative program and said, "I know you are going through a lot, but."

I cut her off and said "I have to work to support myself, so quitting my job wasn't an option and I know one of the main reasons that I am failing is because I work too much. I can't take it, it is like this big snowball coming down mountain." I almost started to cry as I continued to plead my case, "It's only a half a day. I have all this going on, and I think I'm having a lot of problems because of my mom kicking me out. It's messing with me even though I'm not thinking about it."

"Calm down, I know you are stressed out, but I don't know if the AEP is the best idea. It is kind of meant to be the last resort," Mrs. Flores said.

I continued to explain my situation, and then she finally said, "Well, right now they're full. When a spot opens up, then you can go."

That wasn't exactly what I wanted to hear. I thought, "Okay, well, I'll just try harder." I didn't know what else to do.

I left the counselor's office with my head down. I felt hopeless because I couldn't go to the alternative program right away. I knew I had to try harder than ever at school. I didn't want to ruin my chances of getting accepted to the alternative program when a spot opened up. I started working my butt off as soon as I got back to class. When I got home after work I stayed up, and did my homework. I nearly killed myself because I was so tired.

A few days later, I was called out of my class to go down to the counselor's. It was a really small office, so I was shocked when I got there, and six other people were already crowded in there, four students, Mrs. Flores, and some guy. The students just stood up against the wall with this look of, 'What's going on?'

"I'm Mr. Avery," the man introduced himself. "I'm the director of the alternative education program. Several spots have opened up, so we can now accept you into the program."

I don't know if I've ever smiled so big in my life. I wanted to scream!

"There will be an orientation on Monday, October 3rd at 1:00 p.m." He informed us. "You and one of your parents need to attend this orientation."

My heart sank. I didn't have a parent that could attend. Did that mean I couldn't go to AEP after all? "What if a parent can't attend?" I asked.

He looked at me a little puzzled and started to answer my question, but the counselor interrupted and said, "She doesn't live with her parents."

"Ah," he said calmly, "Don't worry about it, we'll figure something out."

I felt so relieved, and happy, and excited. I smiled harder than ever.

Figure 26. Overcoming one obstacle at a time.

The director said that the morning shift was full because almost everyone wanted to attend the a.m. shift, so we'd to be in the afternoon shift. That was cool with me since I'd been oversleeping so much because of my job. We could maybe switch to mornings when a spot opened up, but I didn't want to switch. I was so worn out from going and going and going all the time, my body was ready for some rest.

The afternoon shift at school was from 12:15 to 4:15, which meant I couldn't be at work, until 4:30. I was a little nervous to go tell my manager that I needed to change my schedule because I really needed my job and didn't want to upset her, but she was fine with it. I was still

able to work about 40 hours a week, starting at 4:30, and finishing around midnight. Since I didn't have to be to school until after noon, I could sleep in, and get the rest I needed.

When I showed up for the orientation, I couldn't believe how big of a dump the building was. It was this old building with faded and peeling yellow paint. I expected to see grease stains, trash, and old cars getting worked on, when I went inside. It felt like a dumping place for bad kids, as if someone said, "Hey, we can use this building to put the program in. It'll work for *those* kids."

Inside, things weren't much better. It had been recently painted, but the furniture in the classrooms was all mix-matched and old, like hand-me-downs or something. There was only a single water fountain, and two washrooms, one for boys, and the other girls that the teachers also had to use. I wondered what I was getting myself into, hoping it wasn't a sign of things to come.

"Hello, sweetie. Are you here for the orientation?," a teacher asked.

"Um, yes," I replied with a slight pause. I was a little nervous. Everything seemed a little surreal. I mean, I've changed schools before, but this time was different because I going to an alternative school. I didn't know what to expect.

"Oh, okay. Well it is nice to have you here. My name is Mrs. Cody. Come with me, I'll show you where you need to go."

"Thanks," I replied as I started to follow her down the hall. "By the way, my name is Riley."

"Nice to meet you Riley," she said turning back to me extending her hand. "Here you go, go ahead and take a seat in there," instructed Mrs. Cody in a very pleasant tone as she smiled.

On the table was a handbook and a pile of paperwork that looked like it had to be filled out. I looked around, and saw other students sitting with their parents at different tables that were

lined up in rows facing the front of the room. Some of the parents were filling out the paperwork.

Mr. Avery stopped talking to one of the parents and looked over at me sitting by myself, "Go

ahead and start filling out your paperwork, or at least fill out as much as you can. We'll get

started in a bit, we are just waiting for a couple of more students."

I started filling out the paperwork, which kind of sucked because it reminded me about

my mom kicking me out. It reinforced that I was on my. I had to do everything myself. It didn't

help that while I filled out my paperwork, Mr. Avery continued chatting with the other parents,

parents that cared about their kids.

A few minutes later, Mr. Avery began orientation. You could tell that he had done it a

million times as he ran through his presentation flawlessly. It was like clockwork. He had this

slide show presentation that went over the rules to make sure we really wanted to go to school

there.

"We expect you to be responsible, so if you can't make it to school on time you need to

call and let us know. You wouldn't just show up late to work without calling," Mr. Avery said as

he pointing to the slide labeled attendance.

He told us stories of kids that came in, did their work, didn't get distracted, and finished

up. He also warned us that we'd have to do our work if we expected to finish. He told us some

kids thought that once they got into the AEP they wouldn't have to do any work to pass. I

remember him clearly saying, "This program is not for everyone, some students don't make it." I

was like yikes! I don't think he was trying to scare us. He just wanted us to know the truth before

we decided to go there. If not, I'd have to go back to the high school, which wasn't an option.

"However, if you are motivated you should be able to earn credits twice as fast as you

would at the high school," Mr. Avery said.

That grabbed my attention. I was like "hell yeah, I only need 3 credits to graduate, I'll be out of here in no time."

"The other thing is that we are only going to put you into classes that you need to graduate. You aren't going to have to extra classes just to fill up your schedule," Mr. Avery informed us as he pointed up to a slide titled *Credits*.

That was awesome. I figured I would be able to move on with my life in no time. As the orientation continued, I knew I the alternative program was where I needed to be. I just hoped it was like one of those hole-in-the wall restaurants that looked nasty from the outside, but once you got inside, the food was good.

Mr. Avery wrapped up the orientation. "I want to thank everyone for coming. Just a reminder, you have a couple days to try it out here and if you don't think this is a place for you, you need to let me know so we can get you back to the high school. If we wait more than a week you will get too far behind."

Everyone started getting up to leave. As I was walking out the door Mr. Avery called me. "Riley, wait a second. I want to talk to you."

"Uhh, okay," I replied hesitantly. I was thinking what in the world did I do. What does he want? A parent approached him to ask a question, so I just stood there waiting for him. I felt very awkward.

Thankfully, he finished answering the parent's question fast because my anxiety was building as I waited to find out what he wanted.

"Riley," he said. It appeared that he could tell that I was nervous standing there waiting for him. "Oh, don't worry it's not bad. I just wanted to let you know that everything will be fine. I know you situation and we will help you get out of here as quick as possible."

I smile, "Thanks!" What a relief. So far, the Mr. Avery had been nice to me, and the teachers seemed nice, too. I was excited to get my senior year back on track.

"C'mon, I'll show you where you need to go to get started. All your classes are already set up on the computer for you," Mr. Avery said as he walked out of the classroom where the orientation was and proceeded down the hall. He stopped at the doorway of another room, pointed and said "You're going to start in here with Mrs. Cody, it's the math room."

I was relieved when I walked in there because I saw Adam in there. I thought it was cool that they had placed me a group with him. I was able to follow him around and he showed me where to go each time we changed classes. He gave me a lot of advice on how to do things at the alternative program. I leaned on him a lot during the first few days, especially since I didn't know anything about the alternative program besides what they told us at the orientation.

The other good thing about having Adam in my group was that we could motivate each other. When we got home, we talked non-stop about the alternative program. It was like I was trying to learn a new culture. The alternative program was like this big secret at the high school; nobody ever talked about it, except as the place where all the bad kids went. Other than that, it was like it didn't exist. I actually heard rumors that I went to the alternative program because I was pregnant. I wasn't, but it was kind of funny.

Although the rumors about everyone being pregnant or a druggie weren't true, one thing I noticed was that it seemed like a place where students disappeared. When I first walked into the math classroom, I saw an old friend, Mayan. She was working with the teacher at a table in the middle of the room. She looked up at me and smiled, then got up and gave me a hug.

"I haven't seen you in forever," I said. "How's it going?"

"Great!" she replied. She looked like she was glowing. "I really like it here."

Adam had told me about seeing all these people who had just disappeared from the high school, but I guess I didn't really expect it, until it happened to me. It was great to see some of them again because I had no idea where they went. I didn't get much work done my first day because I spent the rest of the day chatting and catching up. It was nice, but it also made me a little sad. It seemed like the students that went to the alternative program were just forgotten about.

I settled into the routine of the program in no time. Most of the teachers were so nice, it was easy to build strong relationships with them. They weren't all burnt out. They laughed and smiled, and were there to help when we needed it. The math teacher, Mrs. Cody, kind of took me under her wing, and really kept up with me. She'd keep me motivated just by telling me simple things like, "Good job this week." Each week, she printed out a report to show us how much work we had done. The reports made it seem like we were running a little race. Who can do more, who's meeting the quota, who's not? It gave me something to push for. I also knew that if I didn't make progress, I might have to go back to the high school. I couldn't face sitting in a desk in a room full of students listening to lectures again.

We were in such small groups, that we got to know each other really well. I'd always chat while I did work, and help each other if the teacher was busy with someone else. They were in the same boat as me, so we all tried to support each other. It was like a little family.

Sometimes kids were having trouble outside of school, and just needed someone to talk to. Even though I had my own issues, I liked listening to other people, and tried to help them the best that I could. We knew that if your mind wasn't right, like it was in other places, you weren't going to make progress anyway. A lot of the girls talked about problems with boys, and how they got treated like shit. Sometimes the girls got taken advantage of because they didn't have

confidence. They put up with crap because they didn't think they could get better. I was like, "Oh no girl, you need to dump him!" The funny thing is, Mrs. Cody would end up telling them the same thing. But if no one talked, we probably would have been more distracted. So even if it looked like we weren't working, and just talking, we really were still making progress.

Personally, I didn't have time to slack off. I had a lot to finish. I had to complete Earth and space science, English IV, and economics. I adjusted to the online format pretty quickly, and was able to fly through economics. English IV and earth and space science were a little harder. English was hard because it was a lot of grammar and stuff like that. When I was younger, I loved to read and write, but when I got in high school, I hated it. Even the teacher, Mrs. Sager had a hard time when she helped me. She'd have to go back to her computer to check on stuff while she was helping me because she was so unsure.

"Okay, we need to change number 4, 9, 13, 15, and 22," Mrs. Sager said as she walked back to me after looking at her computer.

"I'm never going to get out of here. If you don't know this, how in the world am I supposed to learn it?" That's when it hit me, the alternative program was definitely harder than I expected.

I kept chipping away at my English class with Mrs. Sager. It got to the point I that I was so frustrated that I wanted to quit. My English was a daily struggle. Then, Mrs. Sager got really sick, and didn't come back to school. I didn't know what I was going to do. I could barely get through the lessons with her help. We ended up getting a new teacher, Mrs. Martinez. She hated the English assignments almost as much as I did.

"Stop! Just stop doing it. I am going to come up with something else for you to do. I can't stand these lessons," Mrs. Martinez said.

I was confused. Actually, I was a little scared to ask her what she was talking about. "What was that?" I quietly asked Mrs. Martinez.

"We aren't going to do all this grammar stuff. I want you guys to write more. Not do this tedious stuff over and over and over," Mrs. Martinez frantically exclaimed as she was waiving her hands all over the place.

That brought a huge smile to my face, plus I started laughing at how animated Mrs. Martinez got. "What are we going to do instead?" I asked her.

"I don't know yet. What I do know is that it is going include a lot more writing. I am going to figure something out. So in the meantime, work on a different subject," Mrs. Martinez responded.

While Mrs. Martinez was figuring out how we were supposed to do all of the compositions, I decided I'd better start my science work. I had planned on putting it off until last because I figure it would be a breeze. When I got into the alternative program, they told me I'd have to take the whole year of Earth and space science because they didn't offer aquatic science. Since the program was smaller, they couldn't offer everything they had at the high school. I'd already finished six weeks of the aquatic science, but I didn't think it would be a big problem to do Earth and space.

Some lessons took so long, I felt like I wasn't making any progress at all. It was probably due to me over analyzing everything so much. I was working on trying to keep it simple, but since we did our work on computers I'd get easily distracted, researching little things on the Internet that I wanted to know more about. It just about killed me, and I doubted if I'd ever finish.

I finally got through the lessons and thought I was just about done. I was wrong. I underestimated how many labs and projects there were for our science class. I started to butt

heads with Miss Shelly over all the projects she had us do. I didn't really care for her from the get go, but these projects really made me not like her. She was different than all the other teachers. She only helped her favorite students. I could tell right away that I wasn't going to get along with that lady. Her vibes were negative. She gave this look. It was probably natural to her but it was just a look that she gives all the students. Like, are you're stupid kind of look. Sometimes she wouldn't say anything but just roll her eyes. She had this persona, like this vibe she put out like she's better than all the kids there. I compared her to being the head of the cheerleader team who was too cool and stuck up to talk to people beneath her. That is the vibe she gave out.

Besides, she didn't explain anything very well, and if we asked a question she'd give us a smart-ass response, like we were stupid. Most of the projects she had us do were pointless. We didn't even have the right supplies most of the time. And then when I turned my projects in, she'd make me redo them like a 100 times until they were perfect. Maybe if she explained them better and gave us the right supplies I could have gotten them done right the first time. I understand the importance of doing things the right way, but that was ridiculous.

In my eyes, she had no credibility. She was phony. I think she could have been a little more flexible, especially since we were already dealing with enough problems. The other teachers knew how to be flexible. I don't know what her problem was. It's not like I got anything out of her class anyways, except getting more pissed off. I hated the way she was always sarcastic, saying "Look at your notes," or, "That's easy." I wanted to talk back to her and say, "Listen, I wouldn't ask if I knew what I was doing." But I didn't, because I didn't want to get in trouble or get kicked out.

It was like she made things hard for no reason. It got to the point that I didn't want to ask for help, even if I needed. I was usually pretty outspoken, and not afraid to speak up, but I wasn't in a position to do that now, because I really needed to graduate. I decided to just put a smile on my face and do the work. It killed me to just bite my tongue, but I didn't have a choice. Actually, I'm glad that I went through everything with Allison, because it taught me to me to deal with tough situations, like this. I knew once I was done, I would never have to deal with her again. Part of my plan was to avoid Miss Shelly as much as possible. I only talked to her when I had to. I ended up doing most of my science work in the Math room. I got a lot of help from Mrs. Cody, the math teacher, and Mr. Hughes, who taught social studies, but seemed to know like everything. I'm glad they were cool. They knew Miss Shelly pissed the students off, and had helped so many other students, that they pretty much knew exactly what Miss Shelly was looking for. Mrs. Cody told me, "Okay you need to do it like this," and explained the project to me.

"Oh, okay. I get it now. Thanks for explaining that to me. I didn't understand what it meant by the red shift of the star," I responded. Why didn't Mrs. Shelly just explain it? It is not like I am ever going to look up in the sky and think about whether a star is moving toward or away from earth. That crap was pointless, yet Mrs. Shelly made a huge deal out of it.

"No problem. I didn't get this stuff very well either the first couple of times I helped students," Mrs. Cody confided to me.

Mr. Hughes and Mrs. Cody always reminded me to stay calm when I turned in the projects to Miss Shelly, and told me they'd help with any corrections. They kept me motivated when I would get down. Mr. Hughes would even take students in and play ping pong to give them a break. I used to love just to go in and watch. Him and Mr. Avery would play each other and go at it.

"Hey, the table is over here," Mr. Hughes quipped as he pointed at the table after Mr. Avery mishit a shot.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. It's only one point. You're still losing," Mr. Avery bantered back.

"Not for long if you keep hitting shots like that," blurted John, a student watching the game.

Mr. Hughes served again and Mr. Avery swung really hard and missed it. "Darn it," shouted Mr. Avery.

"I think you messed up my hair," Mr. Hughes jokingly said referring to Mr. Avery's huge whiff.

Everyone started laughing. What made it even funnier is that Mr. Hughes is bald. They always talked mess to each other when they played. In fact, they talked mess to the kids when they played them too. There was no way they were going to take it easy on anyone. They would try to beat their moms. It made it fun because they were so competitive. I was a good break from reality and was something I looked forward to.

However, watching ping pong only offered a temporary reprieve from doing my work and allowed me to collect my thoughts. I was sick of science. I finished my last project and went to turn it into Mrs. Shelly. "Here you go. I hope this is good enough," I said. I was tired of her crap.

"We'll see. If you would have read the directions you wouldn't have had to do it over," she replied smugly with that fake cheerleader smile on her face.

"Yeah, well I didn't understand them very well."

"You should have asked me for help," she said as she shrugged her shoulders.

That grinded my gears. I couldn't even respond. I am certain my face turned a million shades of red as I was pissed more than ever. Mrs. Shelly must have know I was about to lose as she told me in a consoling voice, which I didn't know she had, "I'm sure it is fine. I'll take a look at it."

Figure 27. Blowing up.

I just turned around and walked out of her room as fast as I could and went straight to Mrs. Cody. "I need to talk to you in your office."

She looked up from working with a student, "Oh, okay, go ahead and go in there. I be right there."

I was still struggling with the fact that I'd been kicked out by Allison. The stress of everything kind of got to me, and I'd felt like my head was going to explode. I didn't want to

appear weak, so I tried put up a strong front but it wasn't working. Everyone knew I was going through a lot and would get emotional from time to time for reason. But this time was different. I just wanted to cry. It pissed me off that I was capable of doing my work, but had to put up with crap for no reason.

Mrs. Cody came into her office and closed the door. She could tell something was wrong. "What's going on?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Shelly just pisses me off. Maybe it is because I just get kind of stressed out when I think about the crap my mom put me through and then I have to do these damn projects over and over."

"I can't imagine what that feels like. But, you know what?"

"No. What?" I responded.

"I know that it doesn't seem like it now, but you are going to be a much stronger and better person. You are a bright, beautiful young lady. You have so much potential. If anyone can get through this, it is you," Mrs. Cody exclaimed.

Figure 28. AEP teachers would move mountains for the students.

154

I guess I just made me feel better that Mrs. Cody took the time to talk to me, even if it didn't solve the problem. At least she listened to me get it off my chest. It was good stress relief. It was just weird because I had never had teachers that seemed to care about me personally like the ones at the AEP. At the high school the teachers created stress rather than alleviated it. They were always talking about the state tests that we needed to pass. Thank goodness the teachers at the AEP weren't always harping on that because it was always a downer. Instead the teachers joked around a lot to keep thing light.

By keeping things light, none of the students had to put up a big shield, a big protective guard to be big and bad so people wouldn't mess with us. We didn't have act in a way that earned us a label as being a bad kid. Instead, we all got along and accepted each other's issues. The students and teachers became this little family that supported each other. It was nice. I got to see the other side of students, how they really were compared to what I saw at the high school.

I guess it helped that the AEP was so much smaller than the high. But the problem with being smaller was that we didn't have any special services for students who struggled. There wasn't a counselor or anything like that. We were supposed to be the students with the most problems in high school, but we didn't have any extra support at the alternative program. It was kind of crazy. If we really need to talk to a counselor, we had to get a special pass to go to the high school. It was so much trouble, that no one ever really went, even though a lot of kids had psychological issues.

I could have benefitted from at least a part-time counselor. Even though I did better at the alternative program than I did at the high school, I was still fragile, just like a lot of the other students. A lot of students didn't get support at home, and because there wasn't a counselor, they didn't get a lot of support at school either, so they tried to take care of their issues themselves.

155

Just like me, many students used drugs to cope with their pain or stress. We weren't like kids at the high school who did drugs to have fun and party. We used them because we had so much shit on our plate, and didn't have many other options. I think our counselors from the high school forgot about us, and just assumed we were doing fine. I guess it was out of sight out of mind. Even though we were making more progress with classes, but we still needed help. The alternative program would be a lot better if they could get someone to do psychological counseling and get kids on medication if they needed it.

Despite the lack of support, the school became a safe place for me. I didn't have to worry about additional drama like there was at the high school and it allowed me to focus on my work. I could sit at my computer and get lost in my work for hours at a time if I wanted to. I would just put my headphones on to listen to my music to get into my own world and work. If I had a question, I knew I could get help from a teacher and I did not have to worry about getting distracted by other students. If I got tired of working, I knew I could visit with my friends for a bit or visit with the teacher about life.

Mrs. Shelly walked in the room. She asked my friend Mayan, "Have you seen Riley?"

As Mayan started to respond, Mrs. Cody said, "We are in here. Come in."

I wasn't ready to see her. I was still pissed and I definitely wasn't ready for her to tell me correct my project again. As she walked into the office she reached out and hand me a slip of paper. "Turn it. You're finished with science. We just need to get you through English."

"I'm finished? You wrote up my credit? I can't believe it," I said calmly as I tried to hold in a scream of joy.

Mrs. Cody smiled and patted me on the leg, "I told you that you could do it."

"I know," I replied with hint of laughter.

"You are a bright student that is very capable. That is why I held you to a high standard. I know I made you re-do your projects a million times but I didn't want you to cut corners. Good job. Now go get that English done," Mrs. Shelly said as she walked out of the office.

I was so excited, I was done with science. Before I got up to go turn my credit slip in, I just sat there and contemplated what Mrs. Shelly said. She was hard, but she knew I could perform and she expected a lot from me. She wasn't going to let me make any compromises. I may have disliked her, but I began to appreciate that she held me accountable. After all, I went from failing at the high school to finishing courses at the alternative program so fast that I expected to graduate by the end of the first semester if I could get done with English.

I went and found Mrs. Martinez to find out what I need to earn my English credit. She said that I needed to write a series of compositions that were going to be used as part of book that the AEP was going to have published.

"Alright, I can do that," I told her.

"To make it easier, make them personal. Tell your story," instructed Mrs. Martinez.

Everybody knew I was getting close to finishing, so nobody bugged me. I didn't like writing that much, but I made my compositions personal like Mrs. Martinez said, which helped me crank them out fast. I'd sit down at my computer in the math room day after day, put my headphones on, and write about how my mom kicked me out. As I wrote, she'd look over my shoulder and give me all these pointers, "Describe the setting in more depth. You can do that by adding in descriptions that appeal to all the senses. Describe how the room sounded, tell me how it smelled. What did you see when you entered the room."

"You're killing me Mrs. Martinez! I don't know how it smelled, it was normal I guess," I quipped back.

"Just make something up. Make it more interesting for the reader. For example, you can say something like this. When I walked into the room I noticed there was a foul odor. It was like this crazy combination of mildew, mold, dust, and smelly feet. It just about made my eyes water. I had to pull my shirt up over my nose just to keep myself from vomiting. Remember, it's a story, be creative," Mrs. Martinez reminded me.

"I'm not creative like that," I replied.

"Sure you are. You just need to read a little more. Good writers don't get good by accident. You need to read and do some research," she said.

I didn't want to have to waste time reading, I just wanted to write. But I decided to do some reading which helped me get my juices flowing. Not long after that I was cranking my compositions out. It was way better than doing those stupid grammar lessons.

 As soon as I turned one composition in for editing I would start the next. It was hard, because it was like every time I turned one thing in, I'd get it back, and I had to make a million edits. "Riley, it looks really good, but remember, we need them to be perfect because we are going to publish it in a book," Mrs. Martinez reminded me.

"I know. It's just my brain is fried. I am tired of writing," I whined back.

"Your fine, you just need to add some details about what you specifically like about the AEP. Give examples, like you like four hour shift, or the self-paced work, and then describe how it benefits," Mrs. Martinez explained.

"Okay," I replied as I let out a sigh. "I can do that. I'll get it back to you tomorrow."

"Don't forget to watch your grammar."

"That's what I have you for," I replied jokingly.

Mrs. Martinez smiled and belted out a huge "Ha. Yeah right. Go get to work girl."

That's what I loved about Mrs. Martinez. She was real. She could take a joke, which made it a little easier for me to make all the corrections. I wanted to make her proud.

I busted my ass to finish up all the final edits on my last composition. I was so happy when I handed the final version into Mrs. Martinez and she wrote up my final credit. The secretary Mrs. Brown told me she needed to get the final credit check to make sure I had all the credits I needed and to make sure that I didn't owe any fines or anything. Then she asked me for my measurements for my graduation gown, and it really sank in: After everything I'd been through, I was finally graduating! I could start college in the spring. Mrs. Cody had helped me fill out applications for college and all the financial aid paperwork. I was ready to move on.

Figure 29. Graduating, a rush of emotions.

Since I finished in December I had the option to either participate in the fall AEP graduation or I could wait until May and graduate with all the seniors from the high school. I was so tired of school, I just wanted to be done. Besides, if I graduated in December, I could start college in the spring. It was an easy choice for me, December.

Graduation was held at in the high school auditorium across the street from the AEP. It was just for the AEP students that had finished in the fall, so it was really small and personal. There was only about five or six of us that were graduating. It was cool because Mr. Avery and the rest of the AEP staff made us feel very special. They gave us flowers and all the teachers complimented us on how great we looked.

Allison wasn't there. I didn't invite her. I had warned her that if she ever kicked me out, she wouldn't see me graduate. Not having her there hurt, but I felt like I had to stand my ground. Instead, Beverly and her husband Jose were there, along with Adam to support me as a family. After all, they had taken me in and did their best to support me. I also felt supported by the teachers and students from the AEP. As I was getting my diploma, I remember looking at the other kids, and thinking we all looked pretty good, dressed up in our shiny caps and gowns. Nobody could call us bad kids.

Graduating from Alternative Education: Adam

I wanted to go to college right away after I graduated. Going to the alternative program built my confidence. I liked the flexibility of the alternative program and that I didn't have to attend school all day. I'd heard that was kind of like how college was. You only took a few classes at a time, and didn't have to go to school all day. They said there can be a lot of homework, but I wasn't worried because the classes would be more challenging so I would like them. Besides, there wouldn't be all the drama or bullies like in high school. More than anything, I felt like I just need to get away from my small town, and everyone that I was getting in trouble with. But my parents kept making excuses. They said I wasn't ready to start college. They said I made too many bad choices. They said they didn't know what paperwork they needed to fill out, and stuff like that. I told them I already filled everything out with the teachers, but my parents

didn't listen. They were just stalling because they wanted me to live at home and go to a local college.

Sure enough, I got in trouble during that summer. I went with a friend of mine to a park one night. We got high and drunk, and ended up passing out in his car. The cops found us there, and arrested us for possession. I got put on probation, and after that there was no way my parents would let me move away. They made me stay home and work until they thought I was ready.

It took another year of keeping my nose clean before my parents were finally willing to let me move to Austin so I could start college. I stopped hanging out with the people I was getting in trouble with, and just worked and saved my money. My parents took me to Austin to start looking at places to live. I wanted to move into some type of school sponsored housing so I could have my own lease. After my first experience with an apartment in high school, I didn't want to have to rely on roommates. I don't know exactly where I am going to live yet, but I can't wait until the fall. I am ready to get up to Austin and move on with my life.

Going to the alternative program really helped me prepare for college. We had to be responsible for doing our work. It was at our pace so it was up to us when we finished. The teachers helped us if we needed it, but it wasn't like the high school where they held your hand. In college they don't hold our hands either. They don't care if you go to class or not. It's up to us to do the work in order to pass. Plus, in college you have to do a lot of studying on your own like we did at the alternative program. We had to learn the stuff, and figure out how to look up answers ourselves I definitely feel like I learned more at the alternative program than I would have at high school.

I am now ready to prove to everyone that I can make it. I'm ready to hit up Austin and start living my dream. I won't have to worry about people judging me if I'm different. Being weird or different is what makes Austin so cool.

Graduating From Alternative Education: Riley

After high school, I kept working full-time at the Chickee Dee's, and started going to Belarusa, a local community college. Thankfully, Adam's parents let me continue living with them. I was really comfortable living with them but I was trying to get my own place but just couldn't afford it yet. Things went pretty well for a bit, until my car broke down one day when I was at school. I was parked on campus and the police told me I had to get it out of there, or it would be towed. I didn't have enough money to get it fixed or moved, so they towed it. It wasn't worth that much, and I didn't have any money anyway, so I never got it back.

After that, I had to bum rides to school and work. It got to the point, that I had to quit going to school after the first semester. I didn't know what else to do. If I actually lived in the city where the college was, I could have taken the bus or something, but I lived in a neighboring town, where the bus didn't go. I decided to keep working, and save up for another car. Then I'd figure things out about school.

In the middle of all this, a friend of mine said that I should move to San Antonio to go to college there. I was barely getting by, and was worried about not being able to afford a place in San Antonio, but she told me I could stay with her. I didn't have anything to lose so I agreed.

When I told my boss that I was moving to San Antonio, he told me that I could transfer up there to another Chickee Dee's. It was nice of him, but I wanted to do something different. Chickee Dee's didn't pay that well, plus I was pretty tired of working in fast food. I was ready for a real job that paid better.

After I moved to San Antonio, I got a job at a bank, and started working in their call center. It sucked at first, because I had to call people, and sometimes they'd be so rude when they realized I was a telemarketer. I wanted to tell them off, but I couldn't. We were always being recorded. After awhile, they moved me to incoming calls where I helped people who had questions about banking and things. It was a lot better, but that job had weird hours. I'd work from noon to 9:00 p.m., or from 3:00 p.m. to midnight, depending on the day. With my crazy schedule, I decided to take all my classes online.

I'm glad I got used to doing my work online at the alternative program. It gave me a taste of what online college courses were like. I wasn't afraid of them anymore, like I did before I started at the alternative program. What I didn't like about the college classes, though, was that the professors still gave us deadlines for everything. It's not like they helped us with our work, so I really didn't see the point of all the deadlines. I wish they'd just give us everything we needed to do, and then have us turn it in at the end of the semester. There were some weeks that it was hard for me to get all my assignments done, because of my work schedule. At least at the alternative program, I knew how much work I had to do for each class. When I finished the work, I was done. I did it at my own pace, when I felt like it, and that let me get through the alternative program fast.

At any rate, I can look back at my time in the alternative program and know that I can be successful in whatever I want. It hurts to think about all the things that I was going through when I got into the alternative program. If there's a silver lining, even though it was hard going through all those experiences, I really benefitted from them. I feel like whatever life throws at me, I can handle it!

Discussion

It is apparent that both participants had an investment in obtaining their high school diploma. They were capable of being reflexive as they chronicled their journeys through a traditional educational setting, and then an alternative education setting. As they progressed through school, they overcame multiple familial, school, and job related issues in order to graduate. Riley and Adam seem to be smart individuals who are fully aware of their actions and consequences. They identified several factors that prevented them from being successful in a traditional education setting. According to their narrative, it was these factors drove them to an alternative education program, as their last option. Neither of them imagined, as they went through school, that they would ever end up attending an alternative program, let alone graduating from one. Both credit the alternative program for playing a role in allowing them the opportunity to graduate, and preparing them for higher education.

Riley had been a successful student throughout school. She had passing grades, good attendance, and no discipline issues. Because of this, she wasn't on the radar as a student who was at-risk of not graduating. After her parents divorced, her relationship with her mother changed. Rather than receiving guidance from her mother, Riley often had to take on the parental role herself. She cared for her other siblings, bathing and feeding them, making sure they did their homework, and keeping the house in order. Once Riley's mother remarried, her role changed again. Many of the duties Riley was responsible for were placed on her stepfather. Although Riley had had disagreements with her mother prior to her junior year in high school, the confrontations began to escalate rapidly that year as Riley experienced more instability than she was able to handle.

As the arguments escalated, they began to take an emotional toll on Riley. She began taking measures to deal with the polarizing position that she found herself in at home. These self-directed measures included getting a job, avoiding her mother, and turning to drugs. Though these measures were intended to alleviate Riley's stress, the path that she chose to deal with her issues ultimately led to being kicked out of her house. Although Riley seemed mature for her age, she was still a vulnerable child who was unequipped for the real world, let alone being out on her own. She, like other teenagers, needed mature adult guidance but she didn't have anyone to turn for suitable direction. The troubled relationship with her mother seems to indicate that Riley could not trust her mother's judgment.

Riley began her senior year trying to create normalcy by distracting herself from her issues. She participated in several extra-curricular activities, and signed up for a full load of classes. However, her plan backfired. The demands of school, work, extra-curricular activities, and home life were overwhelming. She was tired, stressed out, could not focus in class, and quickly fell behind.

Unfortunately, classes in traditional education settings are not configured in such a way to assist students who are struggling. Teachers have to maintain a brisk pace to ensure they cover all the necessary objectives that are critical for high-stakes testing. One might think tutoring could be the answer, but Riley did not have time, nor could she afford to miss work, while being on her own and having to manage her expenses.

What Riley needed most was good advice, adult guidance, and an educational setting that could be flexible enough to meet Riley's needs. Riley didn't consider herself to be a bad kid, or a kid whose hopes of experiencing academic success were forever doomed. Riley's experiences taught her to be harshly judgmental towards herself. She repeated things in her head that her

mother said to her. This led her to experience problems in focusing. She engaged in self-destructive behavior to deal with her anger and frustration. She felt rejected by her family, as though she was a failure, and her struggles in school reflected the consequences of Riley's emotional turmoil.

Failure weighed heavily on Riley. After completing 12 years of school, she was on the verge of throwing it all away in her last year, due to extraordinary circumstances. Riley was so preoccupied with trying to fix her life that she could not sleep at night, which further perpetuated her problems at school. She was overloaded and overwhelmed, and lacked knowledge of the support structures she could count on for assistance. She was so far behind and lost in her classes, that she could not just go back in the curriculum and make up the work. Riley experienced a continuous shuttling from being resigned to failure to fighting to get out of her situations. These struggles were reflected in Riley's grades, absences, and her emotional state of mind.

Riley searched for adult guidance while experiencing the pain of not receiving that guidance from the most obvious source; her mother. Adam's parents were reluctant to offer much advice due to the sensitivity, and complexity of Riley's issues. They did not want to destabilize Riley while she was in a fragile state. When Riley got in trouble at school, it was difficult for Riley to discuss her problems with Adam's parents. She also felt guilty for letting them down since they had been kind enough to provide her with shelter when she needed it the most.

Riley's life was falling apart before her own eyes and she felt unable to do anything to stop the downward spiral. Trying harder was next to impossible in her state of mind. Riley was already extremely harsh on herself for what she perceived as failing herself. She continued to

miss school. As required by the state laws, school officials filed truancy charges on Riley. As a last resort to correct the course of her life, she talked to Adam about the alternative program.

Riley's effort to get out of her situation, was met with another barrier from her counselor. The counselor's incorrect perceptions about the AEP led her to discourage Riley from applying. It seems that when Riley, a generally good kid, struggled in a traditional learning environment, she was punished or threatened with more punishment. When Riley tried to identify a viable option for her, the resistance she met made her struggle even more arduous. It was as if the cards were continuously stacked higher and higher against her. Riley's story challenges how traditional education and alterative education serve the needs of struggling students. It also begins to expose barriers that are in place for good students who wish or need to transition to alternative education settings.

Adam, much like Riley, may also be regarded as a good and bright kid. He was able to understand content quickly, pass exams with flying colors, and perform exceedingly well on state assessments. Unfortunately, Adam found homework to be a monotonous and mundane ritual of repetition that he despised. Yet, to be successful in a traditional educational setting, Adam had to learn through practice and repetition like the other students in his class. By the time Adam reached junior high, his views towards school had soured. He was no longer intrinsically motivated, nor did he care about grades. The teaching styles, performance expectations, and discipline did not motivate Adam as they had used to in his earlier years in education. The practices of the traditional educational setting failed to engage him, yet it was Adam who was deemed deviant.

Adam expected his high school experiences would be different from the format of repeating homework for five days before taking an assessment test. He looked forward to new

challenges, and having his needs met by a learning environment that was responsive to his intellectual aptitude and curiosity. However, Adam found that teaching in high school was similar to middle school. For Adam, the reason for his poor grades had little to do with his inability to master the content. Rather, it was his reluctance to engage in repeated homework assignments throughout the week. Furthermore, Adam had also expected that his peers in high school would be more mature. However, as a high school student experienced an increase in social problems such as bullying, fighting, gossiping, grouping of students, and being in a constant state of conflict for one reason or another. These social issues, coupled with the ineffective instructional delivery, gradually led Adam to feel a lack of belongingness in his educational environment. Despite Adam's disillusionment and alienation, he managed to pass all of his classes, and did not cause any trouble. He did not appear to be at-risk of not graduating, and thus 'flew under the radar.'

Like Riley, Adam had a hard time expressing his feelings and frustrations to adults. Adam's parents did not understand Adam's way of learning. They underestimated his aptitude for mastering content faster than his brother. Adam was also socialized to follow a normative gender role. Masculinity was equated with not expressing 'feminine' feelings, such as pain, fear, anxiety, sadness, depression, etc. Adam felt stifled by this perspective, and found his escape in drugs as a way to rebel against the boundaries drawn by his parents.

Adam's marijuana use eventually led to his referral to the discipline alternative education program (DAEP). Even then after this incident, Adam was not considered 'at-risk.' He was passing, attending schools regularly, and had only one discipline related referral. For Adam, however, it was time to panic. He felt like he was sinking, and no one was noticing.

168

Being sent to the DAEP was a relief to Adam. While there, he realized that he preferred the culture of alternative education, with its individualized attention from the teachers. It was almost impossible to create a learning environment that catered to the individual student at the high school because of the sheer number of students. Instead, Adam's high school employed a model of efficiency that sought to satisfy the greater good of the group, but marginalized outlying students. Alternative programs can offer more flexibility in meeting an individual student's needs due to low student to teacher ratios. Teachers get to know students in order to best suit their learning styles which is a typical characteristic of AEPs.

The instructional methods at the DAEP and AEP were more aligned with Adam's learning style. He was able to learn at his own pace, which boosted his confidence and allowed him to regain his intrinsic motivation about who he was as a learner. Adam relished the idea of being able to move on, once he completed a lesson, instead of having to wait for the rest of the class to catch up to him. What Adam liked most was the absence of homework. Even though Adam had been assigned to the DAEP as a disciplinary measure, he became intrigued with the notion of transitioning into the AEP as an alternative to traditional school.

When Adam approached his counselor at the beginning of his junior year about applying to the AEP, he was discouraged, and told that AEP was only for bad kids, and kids who were behind in credits. In other words, the AEP was clearly set up as a reactive, rather than a proactive intervention measure. Despite Adam's trouble in the traditional school setting, he was not behind in classes. Apart from the single incident of being caught with marijuana, he had no disciplinary issues. Though Adam clearly benefitted from the alternative education structure, he did not raise the appropriate red flags to trigger a referral. It seemed that the only way for a 'good kid' to get into the AEP was to go through some type of misfortune or extenuating circumstance.

Adam's parents were also hesitant to allow him to attend the AEP. They concluded that since the high school teachers worked with good kids, they must be the good teachers. Conversely, they believed that AEP teachers were inferior since they worked with the troubled kids. The idea of individualized instruction seemed strange to them. They expressed concerns that Adam would fall behind academically. They also worried about their son getting into trouble because he'd be mixed in with the losers if he attended the AEP.

That Adam's parents and the education service staff at the high school share a similar perspective on AEP, demonstrates a pervasive misunderstanding of alternate education that exists within and outside education. It might be expected that parents, whose only entry point to the education system is through their children, may not be familiar with the features and potential benefits of the AEP. However, it is more surprising that counselors remain ignorant about a referral service with which they regularly engaged.

Limited Access for Good Students

School officials wanted Riley and Adam to carefully consider the consequences of attending the AEP. Students who attend the AEP do not have access to the full array of courses in the course catalog. They are not allowed to participate in extra-curricular activities, nor are they allowed on the high school campus during the day. Attending the AEP meant sacrificing many of the perks of traditional education. Yet, Adam and Riley did not believe they were sacrificing as much as one would think. They felt that they had exhausted their options at the high school. There were no programs embedded within its structure to support Adam and Riley while they struggled through their respective issues. Despite being good kids, they knew that in order to save themselves, they would have to break away from the prevailing culture of the high school and enter into the AEP program.

Stability for Instability

It was not until Riley and Adam began attending the alternative program that they found a sense of stability. Both discovered that the small self-paced environment was conducive to their learning styles. They only had to attend school for four hours a day, which gave them flexibility to work full-time without having to be concerned about falling behind in their classes. They received one-on-one support when necessary. Adam and Riley formed meaningful relationships with the teachers. These relationships allowed them to get adult guidance without fear of reproach. Riley entered the program highly motivated. She worked hard with the goal of completing high school as quickly as possible, so that she could move on to the next phase of her life. Working at her own pace allowed her to accomplish this goal. Adam took advantage of the self-pacing differently. He knew he could finish his work quickly, but chose to take his time completing his assignments. The AEP became safe and comfortable to him. He took advantage of the safety of the AEP to retaliate against his parents for not letting him graduate early by dragging his coursework out to the very end.

Stigmatizing Process

Adam and Riley's narratives challenge dominant discourses about traditional and alternative education. Their narratives are from their unique perspectives, providing insights from a marginalized position–those who are not adequately served by the traditional school environment. The similarity in their experiences demonstrates how much remains undocumented and misunderstood about alternative education. Their counter-narratives display the ways in which power and dominant discourse influence the marginalization of students in AEP.

Both participants had to be labeled as troubled kids before they could use the support of an alternative education program. Because alternative education is only employed reactively

171

instead of proactively, it not only promotes the existing narrative about alternative education being the place for bad kids, but also neglects the ways in which alternative education supports the needs of good kids.

False Binary Relationship

These counter-narratives also demonstrate a false binary relationship between traditional and alternative education. Alternative education serves a larger purpose than punishment and correction of bad kids. It offers a chance for these students to regroup, and deal with their academic workload. It provides a supportive learning environment where individual students are not lost amongst the crowd, but attended to, listened to, and cared for as a human being with their own challenges.

Challenging Discourses

Adam and Riley challenge the discourses that privilege high school by asking, "If the kids sent to alternative education were so deviant that there were no more solutions left for them in high school, then what really caused these kids to stop being deviant once they reached the alternative education building? Surely it could not have been the dilapidated status of the building, or the lack of resources, or a learning environment that consisted of two large rooms for classes and hallways for science experiments." How is it possible that the labels of loser, failure, reject, and bad kid which were Adam, Riley and the other kids referred to AEP, dissolved when they were put in a less attractive learning environment, with less perks, and more accountability to complete their work? One would think that "bad kids" would be more likely to behave just as badly or even worse for being called out and transferred to a less attractive space as a punitive/intervention measure. However, it seems that the labels with which these kids were identified reflect the need to hold the false-binaried relationship stable. An alternative might be

172

to conceptualize a collaborative relationship between traditional and alternative educational environments. Another possible conclusion is that the need for bad kids to be "bad" was not as urgent as the need to be heard, understood, and accepted. The culture promoted in alternative education is more responsive to individual students who feel listened to and supported.

Adam and Riley state that they felt as if they belonged amongst other kids. Bullying was a non-issue, and incidents that could get aggressive were resolved quickly due to responsive teachers and small student groups. Small class sizes contributed to a family feeling. Students received help and support not only from teachers, but also from each other. A culture that fostered empathy, tolerance, and understanding between students was developed. This culture allowed students to put aside their differences and let their guards down, with an increased sense of appreciation between one another. The bullying activities which may have served a protective or shielding function in the traditional high school, were neither needed nor desired in the AEP due to the cultivation of personal relationships.

When disciplinary measures were taken by the teachers in alternative education, students were able to see the merit of those measures and usually agreed with them once teachers helped them to understand the rationale behind them. Even in instances when students felt slighted, annoyed, or angry with a teacher, they chose to find alternate solutions so they could meet their goal of completing high school, rather than acting out. This is not a profile of a bad, unruly student, beyond hope, and who cannot be helped with the myriad of resources available to a traditional high school. Instead, the failure to help these students may demonstrate structural inequity issues which continuously fail many good students who could otherwise have strong educational futures.

The culture of alternative education supported students like Adam and Riley. However, the motivation to complete high school was intrinsic without any specific incentive from educators or administrators from alternative education. Many other options were available to them. These options included to not finish high school, continue working, do drugs, or stay with friends, or even more self-destructive choices. Yet, these participants continuously opted for better possibilities for themselves, despite their struggles. In order to access these possibilities, though, the participants had to be labeled as deviant kids who went to alternative education, because they were a burden on the traditional system. For students who are experiencing emotional issues of belongingness, this could be perceived as a clear message that they simply do not belong in high school.

Riley and Adam gained strength from their experiences in alternative education. They were not judged for trying and failing and trying again several times, but found unconditional support from students and teachers. The feeling of being supported, and not having to face one's troubles alone is one that anyone can appreciate. Teenagers in particular are in need of strong, caring guidance.

The narratives presented in this chapter demonstrate the structural inability of traditional high school systems to balance the state-mandated high-stakes tests with the needs of its students. The consequence of this imbalance is an impersonal formal and informal learning environment that fails to meet the needs of some students. It creates tension-filled environments outside the classroom, with teachers and administrators too busy to notice or care. For Riley and Adam, the traditional setting was focused on teaching students to take the state-mandated tests, instead of approaching learning as an inspired process of acquiring new knowledge through intrinsic motivation. Traditional schools often have little time to develop student learning. Instead, they

must use drill and recall in order for students to be prepared to apply the information they learn to pass the tests. Students on the fray, who may benefit from individualized instruction, can become easily stressed and anxious, leading them to fully disengage. Riley and Adam noted that the delivery of instruction at AEP did not focus on teaching students to take the state-mandated tests. Rather, the AEP focused on individual student learning, which allowed students to be successful on the exams.

Using the support of alternative education, Riley and Adam finished high school, and acquired skills that prepared them for college. The non-traditional hours of the school allowed them to learn to balance school and work. They became adept to completing coursework online, and learned how to utilize intrinsic motivation to their advantage. Adam and Riley were held accountable for their learning, and were not allowed to move onto another lesson unless they completed the requirements of the current lesson, no matter how difficult or displeasing that experience might have been for them. This may be in contrast to the perception that AEP's curriculum is academically light and easy for students to pass.

Narratives such as the ones presented in this study demonstrate that social and political structures informing the discourse of what educational environments should look like, privilege traditional schools over AEP. Yet assumptions driving these dominant discourses are thoroughly dismantled by Adam and Riley's narratives. Traditional environments for learning drain creativity, work against individualized processing of material, and promote what should be labeled as undesirable in such an environment. High school students, like any other group of human beings, are heterogeneous. They experience various social and psychological issues, which sometimes can be so overwhelming that they feel paralyzed and lost.

The narratives in this study reflect that learning is not separate from personal, emotional, and social wellbeing. Furthermore, addressing wellness in one aspect of someone's life often affects other areas of wellbeing as well. Adam and Riley both faced overwhelming stressors. However, in receiving educational support through the AEP, they were also able to address other conflict in their lives, sometimes successfully and at other times without much success. The intrinsic motivation and ability to reflect on their experiences, that Adam and Riley developed in AEP assisted them to navigate more complex learning environments after they graduated.

These experiences of Riley and Adam disrupt the hegemonic understanding of alternative education as a site to dump bad kids and educational rejects. Instead of furthering the discursive binary in which traditional schools is viewed as viable and opulent, and AEP is perceived as invisible and impoverished, these narratives provide perspectives needed to open up discursive spaces where alternative and traditional educational environments can be engaged as collaborative partners.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have detailed the participants' experiences through paired narrative vignettes. The first vignettes offered in-depth participant descriptions, and described Adam and Riley's path to alternative education. The second vignettes portrayed the experiences of Adam and Riley while they attended the alternative education program. In these narratives, both participants shared insights on the culture of the alternative education program, student/teacher relationships, student/student relationships, and how relationships fostered empathy, tolerance, and understanding among teachers and students. Adam and Riley noted details on the structure of alternative education that allowed them to be successful. These structural features included a low student-to-teacher ratio, self-paced individualized instruction, and four-hour school days that

offered flexibility for students to hold full or part-time jobs while attending school. In the last vignettes, the participants' share their experiences as graduates from an alternative education program. Riley and Adam explore their thoughts on how attending and graduating from an alternative education program prepared them to be successful learners in their current situations. Finally, they offered suggestions for ways to improve alternative education programs for future students. They call for the removal of the barriers that traditional schools have in place. These barriers prevent good students from attending alternative education programs. I concluded the chapter with a reflective discussion of the insights gained from the vignettes. The discussion focused on the various ways Adam and Riley's experiences serve as counter-narratives that challenge the dominant discourses which marginalize alternative education.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

As an alternative education administrator for nearly ten years, I have become exceedingly aware of that students that seek to enroll into alternative education programs (AEP) face a myriad of challenges, some of which have contributed to negative stigmas regarding alternative education. It is this awareness that has guided me into a relationship with students to begin challenging some of the issues that plague alternative education and the students that attend AEPs. In chapter four, I presented the experiences and perceptions of Adam and Riley regarding alternative education. These AEP students were purposefully selected based on a set of predetermined criteria in order to provide an in-depth perspective of the experiences of students who transition into AEPs and successfully earn a high school diploma. Grounded in narrative inquiry in order to elicit the critical tales that depict the perceptions of at-risk students, the following research questions guided this study:

1. In what ways do the participants describe their experiences in a traditional education setting prior to enrollment into an alternative education program?

2. In what ways do the participants describe their experiences in alternative education contributing to their graduation?

The theoretical framework informing this study is standpoint theory. As previously discussed in chapter two, standpoint theory seeks to illuminate how knowledge is the key aspect in challenging and changing unwarranted systems of power (Collins, 1997) by focusing on the conditions and perspectives of the subordinate group (Harding, 2004). The conditions that underprivileged or oppressed groups negotiate and how they make meaning of their experiences in a context absent of privilege is the milieu of standpoint theory. The perceptions of the subordinate group are in stark contrast to those of the dominant group, thus the knowledge that is

178

constructed is grossly different (Harding, 2004). Standpoint theory contends that the social

position and location of a social group affects several aspects that are common amongst a group,

including their symbolic and material conditions (Wood, 2005).

However, a group's social standpoint is not realized until an oppositional stance is

created through reflective engagement practices that challenge the dominant group (Wood, 2005).

Thus, a standpoint cannot be assigned to an oppressed group. Rather, it is initiated by the

subordinate group to give voice to their conditions of existence in an empowering movement.

Wood (2005) states that the dominant viewpoint cannot be a standpoint because it does not

contest itself. Using and working through the lens of standpoint theory allowed ways to gain

access to the marginalized alternative education setting through the participants' perceptions.

The participants' discussion highlights their social position, location, and group and the

participants' challenges within those spaces. It is through the participants' negotiations of

gaining access, experiences in, and graduating from an alternative educational system that the

standpoint perspective of alternative education becomes evident. Thus, I used the following

broad tenets of standpoint theory for analytic insights. A standpoint theory must state:

> (i) the social location of the privileged perspective, (ii) the scope of its privilege: what
>
> questions or subject matters it can claim a privilege over, (iii) the aspect of the social
>
> location that generates superior knowledge: for example, social role, or subjective
>
> identity; (iv) the ground of its privilege: what it is about that aspect that justifies a claim
>
> to privilege; (v) the type of epistemic superiority it claims: for example, greater accuracy,
>
> or greater ability to represent fundamental truths; (vi) the other perspectives relative to
>
> which it claims epistemic superiority and (vii) modes of access to that perspective: is

occupying the social location necessary or sufficient for getting access to the perspective?

(Anderson, 2012)

The social location and the scope of the privilege became evident in the narratives of Adam and Riley. The overall sense of the privilege and knowledge construction seemed to place a traditional high school and an AEP in opposition to each other. The privilege experienced by the material and social location of the high school compared to the space allocation for an alternative education system became quite explicit. The traditional high school system is has substantially more human and material resources, options for various courses, and multiple recreational opportunities. Contrastingly, in this study, the alternative education program is housed in a building across the road from the traditional high school, thereby creating a difference in place, triggering a here versus there discourse, where the *here* refers to the traditional high school and the *there* refers to the alternate education system. The alternative education program has less human capital in the way of support staff, less material resource allocation as evidenced by lack of science labs, less options for courses, particularly electives, and no recreational opportunities when compared to the traditional high school.

This difference in social and physical locations and privileges became the ground for knowledge constructed from the dominant perspective. Knowledge constructed by stakeholders in traditional high school education is aimed at marginalizing alternative education and assigning the choice of an alternative education as a disagreeable one, since "bad kids" go to alternative education. Or more accurately, only "bad kids" are sent to alternative education since all other options are exhausted for them, so much so, that the resource-heavy traditional high school cannot identify any possible options for assisting the "bad kids" to steer them in the right direction.

Yet, both Adam and Riley note that they were good students more consistently instead of being bad students. The traditional structure of education in high school became a misfit for them because their academic and social needs were not being met within the structure of the traditional high school. These unmet needs remained unaddressed. When the participants wanted to explore the option of alternative education, they were warned by their school counselor that they should not consider the alternative program because it was for the "bad kids." Instead the participants were labeled as "bad kids." This is an example of how the social location of traditional high school and alternative education are fixed through an oppressive form of knowledge construction. On one hand there is knowledge about the socially desirable high school, and then on the other hand, since high school students rarely encounter students from alternative education in an education setting, any knowledge constructed about alternative education is spread through information gained from administrative authoritative figures and discursively dispersed through the school. Either way, the information dispersed about alternative education is not only inaccurate, but it is also aimed to discourage students' interest in alternative education by creating multiple bureaucratic and logistical barriers that are difficult to navigate.

Despite the structure of traditional high school being a mismatch, the path to alternative education for Adam and Riley was made difficult through the use of barriers. However, Adam and Riley found their experience of alternative education to be remarkably different compared to what they were told from people in the socially privileged location of the traditional high school. The kids in alternative education were not all "bad kids", and it was not a socially undesirable location for Adam and Riley. They escaped the bullies from the high school, gained the teacher's attention to stay on track with their work, felt a sense of belongingness as they worked through other difficult issues in their lives, and got the academic help they needed while they helped

181

other students when able. Actually, Adam and Riley reported that the students in alternative education program appeared to be more caring, compassionate, and tolerant than what they experienced in high school. They recalled that students who had previously been known to misbehave and perform poorly were now behaving appropriately and making academic progress. This knowledge from the underprivileged and undesirable social position directly challenges the discourses about alternative education circulating in the halls of the traditional high school from where Adam and Riley were exiled.

Additionally, a discourse privileging traditional high school expands the scope of privilege in terms of who gets to stay and who is banished to an undesirable location. The scope of the privilege also expands to the more desirable physical location of the traditional high school versus the run down AEP with the underlying discourse hinting at investing on the "good kids" and not on the "bad kids" who are unworthy of such consideration. The generation of such a distorted binary discourse also claims an epistemic superiority about traditional high school in relation to alternative education. In addition to the knowledge provided to the students about alternative education that is generated from a privileged superior position, the modes of access to gaining the perspective of stakeholders in alternative education remain limited. This limitation is due to the lack of exposure to alternative education and by barriers presented by administrators in traditional high school, thus leaving students to access information about alternative education from administrators in high school.

The disparities discussed above became visible in the findings, and I was able to identify four transient concepts: (a) at-risk students that are viewed as good students have their access to alternative education limited; (b) a false binary relationship between traditional and alternative education exists; (c) transition into an alternative program is accompanied by stigmatization; and

(d) alternative education offers an opportunity for stability for those that are experiencing instability. These concepts may be regarded as transient because their meanings are not fixed like themes tend to be. Instead, the transient concepts exist as opposing challenges to the dominant discourses and serve only as a means for organizational shifts. I presented a discussion for each of these concepts concerning the participants' experiences, negotiations, and struggles as they journeyed through the educational process. While each of these discussions present themselves as possibilities for challenging the dominant discourse about traditional and alternative education, I reflect below on the ways in which standpoint theory allowed for a deeper understanding of the findings in relation to the dominant discourses.

Despite the privileged social location of the traditional high school and its expanded scope of the privilege in terms of knowledge constructed about alternative education and social stigma attached to alternative education, students in this study who enrolled in and graduated from an alternative education program claim the opposite. Their claims challenge the superiority of the discursive divide privileging the traditional high school, especially when the "bad kids" seem to turn into intrinsically motivated kids committed to completing their educational obligations, despite being punished, banished, and denied entry into the traditional, privileged high school space. The students in the AEP did not even have proper resources for science experiments. Educational experiences were limited to two classrooms, hallways, and the outside spaces. Students were not allowed to enter the high school to have lunch at the cafeteria. They could go to the junior high school cafeteria, an option to further humiliate to the students. Students in alternative education also had limited options of what courses they could take due to the limited amount of staff available, unlike the traditional high school which has the luxury of having a substantially larger and diverse staff to offer significantly more courses.

Yet students in this program–the bullies, the "bad kids," the kids who performed poorly academically, the kids who had social issues–somehow stopped their bad behavior relatively quickly upon entry into alternative education. It could not just be because the teacher in alternative education instructed the students to be "good," and the students just listened. Nor could it be that the students somehow became different people once they crossed the road to their resource-depleted learning environment. A punishment such as that to a "bad kid" could lead to the kid misbehaving more, if being "bad" is so consistent that all the superior resources of a traditional high school could not help these types of kids. This finding in the data directly challenges the epistemic superiority of traditional high school and its role versus alternative programs and their role in educating kids. Such a challenge raises the question about what our education system should provide for the students and why, if a program is responsive to the needs of a good student who is struggling, should that program be stigmatized as the less desirable other? Moreover, the fact that Adam and Riley were both motivated to finish high school and did so, in addition to other students in alternative education, underscores the need to break apart the social structures that privilege one educational system over another. Surely, not all students will benefit from alternative education, just like not all students will benefit from traditional education. However, if discourses of education are not divided in a binary relationship between desirable and undesirable social locations with and without privileges, then multiple spaces can be created for educational systems and programs that are responsive to the needs of the kids. It is as though students who struggle within a traditional system of education where their needs are not being met are then exiled to alternative education where they are not expected to succeed. They are expected to disappear and not reappear to tell tales of success that challenge the knowledge construction against alternative education.

But students from alternative education programs are in the ripe position to tell tales of success when they graduate with their peers from the traditional high school. When Riley and Adam completed their educational obligations, they were allowed entry into the high school for graduation. They wore the same robes as the students who did not attend an alternate education program. There was nothing in any robe that distinguished between the student who took a traditional path to graduation and the student who came through the alternative education path. The superiority of discourses and privileges favoring traditional education system was erased in the moment when students walked across the stage in identical robes while collecting their diplomas. There was no way to identify which social location generated superior knowledge, and therefore no justification could be created to privilege that superior knowledge or resource allocation arising from that moment of graduation. The diplomas were identical for all graduates, regardless of their paths taken to graduation, thereby erasing yet another aspect of epistemic superiority of one educational system over another. And in that moment, the students who graduated from an alternative education program opened up the possibility of access to anyone who was interested in knowing their experiences and their journeys, in spite of their struggles. Unfortunately, the only people around to acknowledge the students from alternative education were administrators and their peers from traditional high school, apart from family and friends in the audience. The administrators then have an option to shift their framing of alternate education, instead of making such an option a deviant, undesirable one. The peers who were graduating together might not be in a position to influence those who are still in high school, unless they chose to become active agents of change by offering counter narratives.

This is why Adam and Riley's narratives are important. Not only do they offer the counter narratives challenging the dominant structure, location of privilege, and superiority

185

claims, but they also demonstrate a possibility of solidarity and collaboration between two educational systems, which might end up being in the best interest of students. If the graduation ritual did not separate the students based on their educational paths, then why should the journey to that path be created with divisive discourses and inequitable allocation of resources?

In the following sections of this chapter, I discuss the contributions to the literature, and I address the research questions given the findings discussed in chapter four. In addition, I discuss the conclusions, implications, and considerations for future research.

Contributions to Literature

The contributions to current literature, given the findings discussed in the previous chapter, are divided into three parts: Access to Alternative Education, Bad Kids Turn Good, and Relationship Between and Within Traditional Education and Alternative Education.

Access to Alternative Education

Alternative schools have been enlisted as an innovative means of intervention to decrease the staggering number of over one million students that drop out annually in the United States (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2013). The task of alternative schools is to offer an improved quality of education for at-risk students who have not had success in a traditional education setting (Beken et al., 2010). With an increased emphasis on reducing the number of students who drop out annually, student enrollment in alternative education programs has risen substantially since 1990 and is expected to continue rising in the future (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010; Foley & Pang, 2006; Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Recall a report published by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) in 2002 noted that 2,606 schools were classified as alternative schools or programs for students at risk of educational failure. In 2000-2001, over 10,900 alternative programs were in operation to serve at-risk students (NCES, 2002). In 2010,

the NCES conducted a follow-up study reporting that approximately 645,500 students attended alternative programs during the 2007-08 school year.

Unfortunately, alternative education programs have been synonymous with programs for "bad kids," thus producing a negative connotation (De La Ossa, 2005; Lehr et al., 2009). The pessimistic outlook could be attributed to the link between alternative schools and students who have been characterized as being unsuccessful, disadvantaged, marginalized, or at-risk, thus making it virtually impossible for them to succeed in a traditional education setting (Raywid, 1994). Hence, Kim and Taylor (2008) argued that alternative programs are often referred to as dumping grounds for bad kids. Since students who are considered at-risk are sent to alternative education programs, students who are not at-risk but still find the traditional educational structure to be a mismatch cannot easily enroll in alternate education.

Recall, Riley and Adam were not necessarily the type of students that would typically enroll into an alternative program, and in fact, they met resistance when they initially inquired about the alternative program. Current literature describes alternative students as failing, truant, disruptive, pregnant, or experiencing other similar factors that can lead to them leaving high school (De La Ossa, 2005; Foley & Pang, 2006; Lehr et al., 2009). I would argue that Adam and Riley were good kids who encountered issues in their lives that made continuing their education in a traditional setting detrimental. Neither participant had failed a class, experienced chronic discipline issues, been truant from school, or exhibited any other at-risk characteristics (Beken et al., 2010) when they first inquired about entering into the alternative program. Yet, when they spoke to a counselor about the possibility of enrolling into an alternative program, they were told to reconsider their choices because the alternative program is where the "bad kids" go. Where,

then, are the "good kids" supposed to go who fly under the radar asthe signs of their personal issues do not register when it comes to grades, attendance, and discipline?

Literature indicates that alternative schools are designed for at-risk students who are unsuccessful in the traditional setting (Aron, 2006; De La Ossa, 2005; Kim, 2006; Lehr et al., 2009), and alternative schools are not necessarily meant for kids who are passing in their traditional classrooms. Generally, alternative programs are small in size, allow for one-on-one interactions, provide a curriculum that is student-centered, have a flexible structure, and offer students the opportunity to participate in the decision making process (Aron, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002). Having all of the aforementioned characteristics that help to create a supportive environment for student learning to take place, alternative programs, it seems, could benefit both at-risk and non-at-risk students alike.

What would one do with a student like Adam who is intelligent enough to pass but does not maximize his learning potential due to the instructional methods used in traditional schools? The current literature is littered with push and pull factors that cause at-risk students to drop out (Beken et al., 2010; Kelly, 1993; Lange & Sletten, 2002). The push factors, which cause students to leave the traditional setting include grade retention, poor academic achievement, and a low level of concern from school personnel. Meanwhile, the factors outside of the school setting that contribute to drop out are pregnancy, work, and family issues (Beken et al., 2010; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002). Yet, these factors that often lead to student enrollment, by choice or force, into an alternative program as an intervention to dropping out do not accurately describe the issues experienced by Adam in the traditional setting.

Adam's issues began at a very early age when his learning style did not match the instructional methods in the traditional setting. The work was very easy for him, yet monotonous.

188

He did not find value learning the traditional way, so he was dismissed as being lazy because he did just enough to get by. However, since alternative programs were designed in part to offer innovative learning environments that meet the unique needs of individual students (Quinn & Poirier, 2006), it seems counterproductive to deny access to students who do not fail but are struggling to stay motivated and have lost purpose in education. Although Adam experienced issues in the traditional setting, his problems did not generate a level of concern that warranted an at-risk label according to the indicators outlined by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Please see appendix B for the list of TEA at-risk indicators. Therefore, Adam did not necessarily qualify as a student for the alternative program. It was not until Adam was placed in discipline alternative education program (DAEP) that he became labeled as at-risk and met the qualification requirements.

Meanwhile, Riley performed well in school up until her junior year when her issues with her mother exploded, and she was kicked out of her house. She went into a downward spiral fast, as expected. Since she was known to be a good student, it might have been expected that she was capable of working through her issues while she finished up her last year of high school. It was not until she started to fail her classes and was charged with truancy that the alternative program became an option for her. Even with her issues, she was met with a level of resistance when she inquired about the alternative program.

While current literature lays out several reasons, such as failure, truancy, chronic discipline, and issues within the family as to why students enroll into alternative programs (Aron, 2006; Hemmer, 2011; Ruiz de Valasco et al., 2008; Quinn & Poinier, 2006), there is minimal information about the barriers in place that prevent "good students" from enrolling into alternative education, even though these students might benefit from the structure of the learning

189

environment in alternative education. Although Riley and Adam were eventually successful in getting into an alternative program, they had to qualify by being defiant and labeled as at-risk, with which came stigmatization and marginalization. Adam was so fed up with the traditional setting that he became careless and smoked marijuana in the restroom at school and was sent to a DAEP. Being sent to the DAEP is what finally opened up the possibility of him having a chance to attend an alternative education program. But he still had to plead his case to get in the AEP because he was thought of as being a "good kid" who just made a mistake and was not considered to be a troublemaker. Riley was also at the point of giving up and dropping out before she got an opportunity to enroll at the AEP. She had missed so much school in the first six weeks of her senior year that she was failing her classes and facing truancy charges. Yet, her previous education history indicated that she might have been a strong enough student to dig herself out of the hole she was in, and she was not taken seriously when she initially inquired about attending the AEP. However, Riley knew she was destined to fail if she did not find an alternate route to graduation.

Current literature states that alternative schools were designed as an innovative intervention to improve the quality of education for at-risk students in an effort to decrease the number of students that drop out (Foley & Pang, 2006; Hoyle & Collier, 2006; Swanson, 2005). While having intervention practices in place is necessary, an alternative school is generally designed to be a reactive measure rather than a proactive one (Quinn and Poirier, 2006). Riley and Adam both tried to be proactive and sought enrollment into an alternative program but were initially redirected because they did not qualify for not being "bad" or at-risk enough. It was not until they began displaying behaviors that were more typical of alternative students, such as being truant, failing, and abusing drugs at school (Lehr et al., 2010), that they gained access to an

190

AEP. This raises the question of how many more students are potentially seeking alternatives to the traditional setting and are being denied because they do not display criteria that deem them to be at-risk? What barriers are presented to these students by traditional educational settings that prevent them from opting for alternative education?

Thus, while there is enough evidence of why a student is sent to alternative education and when a student qualifies for entry into alternative education, (Aaron, 2006; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Lange, 1998; Raywid, 1994), this study offers evidence of how social structures that privilege the dominant perspective, dominant social location, and dominant ways of knowledge making engender superior versus inferior claims that create barriers to the marginalized space, marginalized ways of knowing, and marginalized pathway to graduation. The idea that the marginalized option of alternative education is a bad and last resort option is disrupted in this study, while drawing attention to the ways in which the barriers are created in the privileged, dominant, social space of traditional secondary education. Students who could benefit from alternate education programs are not just the at-risk students, but students whose learning styles and personal life issues are addressed by responsive, well-matched learning environments. The fact that the "bad kids" do not remain "bad kids" in the alternative education programs allows for a compelling argument of how the kids were not "bad" to begin with, and perhaps the label of "bad" needs to be attributed elsewhere, if at all. The findings in this study create the space for dialoguing about how students who do not meet the labeling requirements to be at-risk can be helped when they are struggling and when traditional high school structures are being unresponsive. Additionally, the findings in this study also raise the question of how labels and associated discourses are created, sustained, and replicated through a dominant knowledge production system. Challenging these forms of dominant knowledge production and barrier

191

creation, this study creates a space in the literature to further investigate structural inequities created by these knowledge production systems that materialize students' educational experiences.

Bad Kids Turning Good

Alternative education programs have changed tremendously throughout time, particularly since the 1960's (Beken et al., 2010; Lehr et al., 2009; Quinn & Poinier, 2006; Young, 1990). However, the concept of alternative education has stayed relatively similar since its onset in the sense that it is designed to provide and meet the needs for students (Lange & Sletten, 1990). Initially, alternative schools were developed to meet the students' needs based on race, gender, and social class in an attempt to challenge the traditionalism in public schools (Lehr et al., 2009; Young 1990). These early alternative schools were designed to offer flexibility to students in order to allow for additional opportunities for success as educators realized that not all students could be educated sufficiently utilizing a singular curriculum (Conley, 2002).

Thus by the late 1960's two distinct types of alternative schools emerged known as Freedom Schools and Free Schools (Young, 1990). Freedom schools were designed in an effort to fight poverty by providing higher quality community-based educations to minorities and other disadvantaged students outside of public education (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Miller, 2002). Meanwhile, Free Schools were designed to challenge students through innovation and were based on offering students a rigorous curriculum to boost individual achievement. The Free Schools were developed in response to the notion that traditional education impeded students' ability to explore intellectually due to the traditional schools' restrictive structure (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

By the 1980's alternative schools began to shift in response to safety concerns. Alternative schools began to be known as pseudo-alternative programs (Escobar-Chaves, Tortolero, Masse, Watson, & Fulton, 2002; Ensminger & Juon, 1998; Kellmayer, 1998). There was tremendous concern among educators, policy makers, and the public about violent behavior, weapons, and drugs on school campuses, and as a response, students who displayed these behaviors were sent to alternative schools (Beken et al., 2010). It was also during this period that alternative schools began focusing on recovering and preventing dropouts by offering vocational and career training (Kelly, 1993; Young & Clinchy, 1992). However, these alternative schools did not experience much success because they were known for perpetuating a negative stigma by isolating and segregating students from the traditional schools (Loflin, 2003).

Although there is still no concrete definition of alternative schools due to the broad range of educational options, it is clearly noted that alternative schools are designed and implemented to serve students that are at-risk of dropping out of school or in some cases being afforded access or the opportunity to higher education (Hemmer & Uribe, 2012; Lehr et al., 2010). The differences in scope, mission, and accreditation have contributed to a wide range of options for alternative education. However, many alterative programs typically share the same characteristics of providing credit remediation while incorporating job skills in an effort to increase student engagement (Aron, 2008; Hemmer, 2011; Lehr et al., 2009). Besides program design, alternative schools also differ depending on their particular emphasis. Some emphasize creativity and innovation while others are implemented for disciplinary purposes (Foley & Pang, 2006; Raywid, 1994). Recall, that alternative schools can generally be distinguished by type. Raywid (1994) describe three types of alternative schools: Type I-Popular Innovations, Type II-Last-Chance Programs, and Type III-Remedial Focus.

Type I-Popular Innovations schools are considered a departure from traditional ideals and focus on challenging students through innovation. They are generally noted for requiring students' application to gain acceptance and are typically themed with a special emphasis in subjects such as math, science, or art. Type I programs also typically include instructional approaches that stress credit remediation and acceleration through self-paced instruction. Credit remediation allows students to quickly recover credits for any previous courses they may have failed by focusing on the gaps present in their learning rather than the student completely retaking a course. Credit acceleration allows students to complete courses at a faster rate than they would be able to in a traditional setting. Type I programs are typically called Schools of Choice, Schools Within Schools, and Magnet Schools. Type II-Last-Chance programs are designed with an emphasis on discipline. Students generally do not choose to attend these types of programs, but rather are sent to these programs for disciplinary purposes. Type II programs are generally characterized as having short-term placements that are generally less than a semester, and focus on behavior modification rather educational experiences. Type III-Remedial Focus alternative schools are designed to focus on any combination of academic, social, or emotional remediation or rehabilitation. The purpose for Type III schools is for students to get back on track in order to return to a traditional education setting and be successful (Raywid, 1994). It should be noted that even though the three typologies of alternative education are commonly accepted, there is a significant amount of overlap between the typologies (Aron, 2006; Raywid, 1994). Although the boundaries of the different types of alternative schools may be blurred, the participants in this study attended an alternative program that would be considered a Type-II program, as it focuses on credit remediation and acceleration.

Even though a significant amount of literature exists concerning the evolution of alternative education and types of alternative education programs, there is still a tremendous amount of ambiguity that exists in regards to specifying the necessary components of an effective alternative education program (Aron, 2006; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Lehr et al., 2010; Quinn & Poirier, 2006). Consistent with the literature, Adam and Riley's experience align with the specific characteristics of effective alternative programs such as small size, one-on-one individualized instruction, student-centered curriculum, and a caring atmosphere (Aron, 2006; Kim, 2009; Lehr et al., 2010). However, there is still a need for more empirical evidence that explains how students who were struggling in traditional settings end up being so successful in alternative settings. What specifically makes students change their attitudes and behavior, particularly after all the perks and luxuries afforded to them in the traditional school setting have been removed in the alternative setting?

It is not reasonable to think that small class sizes, self-paced instruction, and one-on-one interaction between students and teachers alone can explain the phenomena of success as indicated by students' academic performance if the students were indeed committed to being deviant beyond any help that the traditional school setting could provide or if they truly demonstrated a lack of interest in school and education. Riley and Adam described their AEP experiences where they found that many students were being successful, even when they were labeled as at-risk kids from the traditional high school. Some students were known to be bullies. Some students were known to be disruptive. Some students were known to have several personal issues, leading to intense moody behavior. When these students are sent to alternative education, the message they receive is that they are no longer suitable for high school, they are being so bad that they need to be punished through an exile, and they can no longer enjoy everything high

195

school has to offer. They can, however, walk over to the poorly maintained building across the road, finish their course work without any of the perks they had in high school, and then, and only then, can they return to the high school and graduate with their former peers. This is not an encouraging message to motivate students who have lost interest in school. It is reasonable to assume that these students could very well choose to drop out since they were already labeled as at-risk. Yet, Adam and Riley did not. And neither did their peers assigned with the same label who were enrolled in the alternate education program.

Along with their peers, Adam and Riley remained motivated while on exile. They faced personal barriers and continued to carry on with their education. This behavior was not unique to Adam and Riley. Instead, they reported that most kids in alternative education were like them in the sense that they worked hard, stopped being disruptive, and remained committed to finishing their high school requirements. Yet, these positive outcomes happened when incentives to being in high school were removed, and the "bad kids" still remained motivated to complete their education, as if they had no other choice, when they could have chosen to just end their education. The students were held accountable before they could graduate, and they were not offered an easy alternative path.

Adam mentioned that when he first entered into the AEP, he noticed there were several students who he had experienced issues with at the high school that were attending the AEP. However, they did not cause any problems with him, and he actually became friends with many of them. Riley noticed that many of the students who acted out in the high school were much more relaxed at the AEP. The positive caring nature of the teachers at the AEP allowed them to become unguarded eventually. Riley described this shift in students' attitudes as, "bad kids did not have to put up a shield and try and act cool."

Some literature exists that describe the students' success in alternative programs, although it is very limited (De La Ossa, 2005; Kim, 2010; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Quinn & Poinier, 2006). However, such literature tends to focus on the characteristics of alternative programs and how they are structured. Although these studies detail how student success is defined, either by test scores or graduation rates (Aaron, 2006; Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Flower et al., 2011; Quinn & Poirier, 2006), they lack the insight as to how and why students who have previously experienced failure succeed just with a change in the location of educational setting, with options for educational incentives removed. Studies have detailed several characteristics that contribute to an effective alternative program such as respect for and among teachers, respect for and between students (Shepperson, Reynolds, & Hemmer, 2013), administrative support, behavior support and supervision, classroom management, school and work-based learning, and processes for screening and referral (Quinn & Poinier, 2006). The researchers found that the students performed well in alternative learning environments and that the teachers, staff, and administrators care about students, value their opinions, establish fair rules, are flexible, and take a non-authoritarian approach. However, these findings still do not fully explain how students who had done so poorly in a traditional setting become motivated after being marginalized and do well almost instantaneously upon entry to an alternative program.

I would describe Riley and Adam as "good" kids who desperately needed to find another option to successfully graduate. Unfortunately, with all the barriers in place that prevent "good kids" from gaining entry in an alternative program Riley and Adam had to become "bad kids" before they could enter alternative education or at least be labeled as such. After all, alternative programs are known dumping grounds or warehouses for "bad kids" (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Luckily for Riley and Adam, they were well aware of their positions within the traditional setting

and knew that if they had any chance at successfully graduating they had to enter into an alternative program and thus be marginalized. Harding (2004) describes marginalization as an instance when exclusion from the dominant culture occurs. In Riley and Adam's cases, choosing to enroll into an AEP indicates that they made conscious efforts to marginalize themselves by removing themselves from the dominant setting. They knew that in order to graduate they were going to have to make concessions and go through a stigmatic process in order to get their education and lives back on track. But what about the students that resisted going to the alternative program because they did not want the stigma of the alternative education even if they struggled in traditional educational settings?

Adam stated that several of the bullies were basically forced to attend the alternative program if they wanted to continue their education. However, he never had any issues with them once they entered the AEP like he did on a regular basis at the traditional high school. Riley mentioned that, unlike in the traditional setting, the students at the AEP understood each other and knew that everyone had issues that they were dealing with, and thus nobody messed with anyone. Instead, the students showed compassion and empathy towards each other. They cared for each other and wanted everyone to succeed. The students motivated each other to do well. The students did not have to worry about putting up a front to protect themselves, which allowed them to focus on making academic progress. Adam and Riley were aware of students who graduated and students who completed their education by earning GEDs. Both participants indicated that the nature of the program, the relationship between the teacher and the student, the support structure built in the program, the stability provided, and the space for flexibility allowed them to feel unguarded and to focus on what was necessary to complete their academic

requirements. It seemed that the group of students who selected to stay in the alternative education program did so with a motivation to complete their education.

Adam and Riley were going through personal challenges. Both of them felt a lack of belongingness in their home environment, which contributed to a core of instability. This instability was compounded by the expectations of a traditional high school. For Adam, these expectations did not match how well he learned. For Riley, these expectations were burdensome with other personal issues with which she was struggling. Both of them needed some reassurance, a grounding spot, a place where they could sort through their issues and regain their sense of self as successful students. Adam and Riley were quite introspective and had a sense of self from where they made choices to continue their education. They understood the labels that were assigned to them as they transitioned to a learning environment that was responsive to their needs. However, they also knew that they had two options. They could either quit school with a poor GPA or they could finish high school, with their current GPAs (which was already poor leading to the at-risk status), by finishing coursework through an alternate education program. They would lose all privileges offered to students in the high school, but if they could finish the rest of the coursework in alternate education, then they could graduate with their peers in the high school graduation receiving the identical diploma with the GPAs that they earned prior to enrolling in alternate education program.

Adam and Riley knew that their chances of completing the course requirements in high school without a supportive learning environment were next to nothing. So despite being warned about what they would have to sacrifice, both participants elected for the alternative education program. It seems, then, the students who enter alternate education program are a self-selected group of students who are motivated to succeed. If they were not motivated to succeed, once

labeled at-risk, students could drop out of high school as many students do. Thus, the successful students at alternate education are incentivized by the idea of completing their education.

In this instance, the alternative education program is a program of the high school with minimal resource allocation. The success of the students in the alternate education program then could be directly attributed to the various components of the program that allowed the students to feel stable, draw strength to deal with their personal issues, feel understood and cared for, and feel like a part of a community that is not infiltrated with social outcasting, bullying, or other negativities. Instead, due to the self-selected nature of the students, the environment in the alternative education program is one where the students thrived by coming together instead of selecting to isolate themselves, or being isolated. For Riley, this kind of learning environment and adult guidance was helpful because she did not receive this from her mother and did not seek this guidance from Adam's parents. She had made adult decisions from a young age, yet she was still a young woman who was in her own developmental stages. Knowing that there were adults who would guide her, discipline her, hold her accountable, and still understand and care about her was critical for Riley's success. For Adam, the self-paced learning, the positive social environment, the teachers who offered care and individualized attention, and the solidarity with other students gave him the strength and stability he needed. It seemed as though for both participants alternative education program became a respite, an escape from the more toxic parts of their lives, making alternative education a part of their lives that was nurturing them and teaching them skills beyond how to finish coursework.

The knowledge construction emerging from these narratives is critical because Adam and Riley challenge how "bad kids" are written about in the alternative education literature and perceived in the practice of sending students to alternative education. Their positive experiences

also contribute to the existing literature by illuminating the ways in which alternative education programs are about more than completing coursework and graduating. Alternative education is also about creating a nurturing environment that offers students stability so that they can find their own strength in dealing with other issues in their lives. Moreover, another disruption of the dominant narrative is that the alternative education settings do not nurture "bad kids," but they nurture motivated students who are incentivized by completion of their education and who possess tremendous perseverance to remain focused on graduating despite all the challenges in their lives. The perseverance towards this focus is not something the students cultivate by themselves. Rather, with the help of the teachers, administrative staff, and other students in alternative education, Adam and Riley were able to find what was necessary to continuously return to their alternate education program to accomplish their goals.

Binary Relationship Between Traditional and Alternative Education

"It is our school and its way of teaching that is alternative, not our students" (as cited in Raywid, 1994, p. 26). One of the philosophies that is guiding alternative education is idea that traditional schools are failing to effectively educate the diverse and changing needs of students in today's society because the traditional system is broken (Quinn & Poinier, 2006). Others would contend that it is not the system that is broken, but rather the students are perceived as being broken (De La Ossa, 2005; Kim & Taylor, 2008). The idea of broken students has been made worse due to the fact that educators in the traditional setting have not been able to identify the reasons why students fail to be successful in traditional settings (Beken et al., 2009; Quinn & Poinier, 2006).

Regardless of one's viewpoint of whether traditional schools are broken or the students themselves are broken, it does not remit the fact that there is an increasing amount of students

who are not being successful in the traditional setting and are being referred to alternative education settings (Foley & Pang, 2006; Quinn & Poinier). Many students who attend alternative programs are characterized as being deviant, experiencing academic failure, demonstrating antisocial behaviors, lacking goals regarding their education and/or career, and experiencing troubled relationships with family and/or peers (Fuller & Sabatino, 1996). Though this description might begin to explain why some students may be viewed as broken, it does not explain the root cause as to why the students are broken, nor does it explain how to fix the problem (Quinn & Poinier, 2006), thus cultivating a relationship that is often perceived as binary between traditional and alternative education.

As demonstrated by Riley and Adam, the traditional setting is not superior to the alternative setting and vice versa. The two settings serve different purposes and different populations of students (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Young, 1990). In fact, it can be argued that traditional programs may actually be failing students in many cases, which results in a labeling of "good students" being "bad students," thus creating the need to exile them to alternative programs due to not being able to address the issues that many students possess (De La Ossa, 2005). Consequently, alternative schools are enlisted to serve as a systematic intervention for students who have lost hope (Kim, 2010; Raywid, 1994). However, Quinn and Poinier (2006) argued that it is important that students are directed in the correct type of alternative program in order to have the best possible chance for success. Being directed to an alternative program that is a mismatch could lead to the same detrimental failing results that students encountered in traditional settings.

Fortunately, for Adam and Riley the AEP they attended was a match for their individual needs. They were in need of a program that was self-paced, offered flexibility, and had a

202

supportive and caring environment that was upbeat and positive. However, both students had to undergo marginalization processes in order to be labeled as "bad kids" in order to gain access to the AEP, a finding consistent with existing literature (Raywid, 1994). This marginalization sets up a binary of what is deemed to be superior, in terms of education, resources, opportunities, and training, relegating students in alternative education as being the less worthy ones, who have been sent to a less worthy learning environment. This is a damaging and demeaning act that is felt by the participants and spoken of in the literature (Foley & Pang, 2006; Kim & Taylor 2008; Lehr et al., 2010).

Riley and Adam's narratives demonstrate the strength of alternative education in their learning experiences. Their narratives open up dialogic spaces for exploring ways in which student learning experiences are given the focus in education, instead of test scores, repetitive homework, or a demanding academic schedule when a student is experiencing personal challenges. Additionally, Riley and Adam point out the various ways in which motivated students can become unmotivated, lack creativity, and simply surrender to failure in a learning environment where they do not feel supported. Conversely, their narratives also open up spaces to explore how a learning environment can be conceptualized to meet the diverse needs of the current generation of students, who might not be able to cope with the expectations of a traditional educational setting while experiencing personal challenges.

It is evident that traditional education has not fully accepted the challenge of educating all students to become productive future citizens for a myriad of reasons (Beken et al., 2009; Lehr et al, 2010). Yet, traditional education is still seen as the superior and desirable pathway, while alternative education is perceived as the inferior, undesirable pathway that is merely regarded as a second chance (Foley & Pang, 2005; Lange & Sletten, 2002). Riley and Adam's narratives

have added to the literature, particularly to the research conducted by Kim (2010), De La Ossa (2005), and Quinn and Poinier (2006), that such false dichotomy is neither accurate, nor necessary. Discourses disseminated by dominant social structures privilege the location from where they have been generated. In other words, it is not the stakeholders in alternative education who are promoting the *Us* versus *Them* binary rendering one group to be superior than the other. Instead, as standpoint theory states, identifying the social location of the privileged perspective that renders the traditional educational setting to be better than the alternative education setting only exposes the scope of the privilege. In this case, if a student who is sent to an alternative education program graduate and such a program is an intervention program of the high school, then the student's graduation still benefits the traditional high school's profile. Thus, the traditional setting gains credibility, and knowledge generated from such a setting is legitimized. This could explain the difference in allocation of resources, the seemingly stable nature of the binary of superiority versus inferiority, and the need to limit access to alternative perspectives. If traditional and alternative education could be seen as partners, perhaps a different kind of discourse about learning could be created, and students of various needs could be supported well without structural barriers and inequities.

Researchers have raised questions concerning the equity between alternative and traditional education (Hemmer, 2011; Hemmer, Madsen & Torres, 2013). These inequities are evident in alternative programs with facilities that are considered less than desirable, lack supplies and materials, and lack support staff and services (Aron, 2006). Yet, students in such limited alternative settings are required to achieve the same outcomes as students who attend school in traditional settings. Regardless of equity or fairness, Riley and Adam were both well aware of the rules of the game prior to enrolling into the AEP and knew what they were

sacrificing to earn their education in an alternative program. Not only that, both of them reported that they had a better learning experience in the AEP even though it was poorly supported in terms of resources. This finding is consistent with existing literature (Kim 2010; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Quinn & Poinier, 2006) that students who attend alternative programs like them much better than traditional settings and rarely want to return to the traditional settings.

In Riley and Adam's case, they received the same diploma, needed to earn the same amount of credits to graduate, and passed the same state mandated exams as the students who attended the traditional high school. Adam even participated in the graduation ceremony along with students from the traditional high school along with several other AEP students. There was no distinction between the students who graduated from the AEP and the traditional high school. They were all intermingled based on alphabetical order, wore the same cap and gowns, and received the same diploma. However, students that attended the AEP were generally at the bottom or near the bottom of their class grade ranking because their GPAs were frozen once they enrolled at the AEP. Meaning, no matter how well they did at the AEP, they had no shot of improving their GPA or class rank.

The need to lock students' grade point averages, regardless of any efforts made by the students in collaboration with the alternate education teachers and administrators, prevents the acknowledgment of the strength and perseverance required for a person in their teens to turn their lives around, make better choices, and remain focused enough to complete something they started despite severe personal challenges, including homelessness while being in school. Additionally, this is an act of erasure of the efforts made by the students and educators in the alternative education program, where the role of such programs is marginalized to completing

coursework, instead of celebrating the success of doing so with students who seemed to be at-risk as labeled by the traditional school system. Thus, even though the students from AEP could graduate with their former peers, their GPAs still would render them to a label of the past, instead of honoring their accomplishments in the present. These students would remain the "bad kids" as their GPAs suggest who just got through, somehow, thereby legitimizing the binary discourse of "good kids" and "bad kids" in traditional and alternate educational settings, respectively.

The binary relationship between the traditional and alternative education directly reflects the power difference between the two learning environments. It is especially challenging when alternative education is an intervention program within a high school, where despite inequitable resource allocation, students complete their educational requirements more frequently than expected. Such successes of an alternative education program disrupt the established knowledge generated from a social position of privilege. Also, such knowledge generation problematizes any notion of superiority and inferiority between traditional and alternative setting and casts a shadow on the ways in which students are labeled at-risk, who turn out to be highly capable of being intrinsically motivated to complete their high school education. Additionally, given that the "bad" and at-risk students are expected to drop out of school and not succeed, every time such a student succeeds, a fertile ground is created to break apart the assumptions that inform these labels and associated justification. It is difficult to justify how at-risk kids all of a sudden become intrinsically motivated instead of acting out, creating problems, or even dropping out, given the assumed characteristics of people who are assigned the label. Either alternative education is a magical place for converting "bad kids" into "good kids," or perhaps the labeling is not accurately reflecting what is going on with the students. Either way, Adam and Riley's

206

counter narratives challenge the justification of holding one educational setting as superior to another. A superior educational setting should not inaccurately label students; instead, it should create educational environments that are responsive to a diverse group of learners. Reversing the binary, if all "good kids" were sent to alternative education programs, would those that fail be labeled as "bad kids" because they could not succeed? Surely not, since it would be easy to argue that with such minimal resources present in alternative education programs it would be difficult to meet the learning needs of a large group of students. Similarly, there are some students who find traditional educational settings unresponsive to their learning needs, and the longer the setting remains unresponsive, the closer these students get to being labeled with enough deviancy to qualify for alternative education programs.

The perspectives presented in this study are those to which the modes of access are controlled. In other words, not many people know what is going on in an alternative education program, the daily struggles of educators, administrators, and students in a poorly resourced environment, all working together towards one goal. That they succeed in meeting this goal is laudable. That these stories are barely told demonstrates how modes of access to these stories are limited and how little resources are allocated to offer a different perspective on alternative education. Surely, the dominant structure would not invest in telling stories that disrupt its own privileging discourses. Therefore, it falls on the marginalized group to vocalize counter narratives. And through this vocalization of Adam and Riley's stories, the false dichotomy between traditional and alternative educational settings are exposed. Also the counter narratives point at possible reasons why such binary relationships are preserved and what can be privileged and justified further through such preservation. The counter narratives also offer ways in which access to these narratives are limited and controlled. Further, these narratives raise the question

of who benefits or what gains are made by various dominant discourses if success stories from alternative education are silenced, marginalized, or told inaccurately. Finally, narratives in this study also challenge the profiling of students and the binary division of students based on the ways in which those labels dissolve when the students are in alternative education.

Conclusions

In this study I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of alternative education. The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of two graduates who credit their alternative education as playing a role in their completion of high school in South Texas.

Riley and Adam's experiences in the traditional high school setting prior to enrolling in alternative education reflected what happens to students who seem to be both a mismatch for traditional education and alternative education initially. They became a match for alternative education only when they were a complete mismatch for traditional education. This process involved long logistical and bureaucratic maneuvering that these "bad kids" persistently engaged in because they were intrinsically motivated to complete their education. Such acts of intrinsic motivation challenge the notion of the deviant labeling of "bad kids" especially when they demonstrate that any labels put on them were context-driven by their educational environment.

Prior to enrollment in alternative education, Riley and Adam experienced personal struggles that contributed to their struggles in high school. However, with a large volume of students in high school, often the best way to handle students who are struggling is through some intervention, and that is where alternative education came in. But this late intervention jeopardized the students' GPAs and limited them to forever being labeled as the kids who did not make it in a traditional educational environment as they had no choice but to graduate with the

GPAs that they had at the traditional high school no matter how well they did in the alternate educational environment and how hard they worked to turn their lives around and make better choices than before. Thus, a sense of permanent stigmatization is perpetuated if students who complete their high school from alternative education choose to go into higher education, like Riley and Adam did. Due to such low GPAs, these students could be forced to go to a community college prior to enrolling into a university, much like Riley and Adam had to do.

Here are two students who proved that with resiliency and persistence they could work through extremely challenging circumstances and accomplish their educational goals as teenagers. Instead of rewarding such accomplishments, they are labeled as those who are unable to make it through traditional educational settings and are subjected to further tests of their will should they have a desire for higher education.

Participants' experiences in alternative education support what exists in the literature about how alternative education could be a good option for many students. However, in this study, participants specifically discuss the culture of alternative education being key to their academic success. Where traditional education labeled them as deviant, and therefore unworthy of remaining in its highly resourceful system, alternative education did not label them with any deviant labels. Instead, because the students were self-selected, alternative education created an environment that was goal-driven while supporting the students to meet their goals. This support was offered in many forms including a small setting that offered one-on-one individualized instruction that was self-paced, flexible four-hour shifts that allowed them to work more hours at their jobs, and opportunities for credit acceleration and remediation. These support structures created a positive learning environment and became a stabilizing force in the lives of the participants.

Both participants were struggling in forming stable relationships with their families. The alternative education setting offered a stabilizing experience where teachers had unconditional positive regard, even if the students were not always performing their best. Seeing such faith and belief in their abilities, the participants were able to draw strength from such conviction and discover their persistence to complete their education. This is in contrast to their experiences in the traditional setting where the participants were labeled at-risk and were unable to complete their work within the well-resourced high school. Thus, it was up to the poorly resourced alternative education program to work with the students. Riley and Adam's experiences show that while resources are important, what is most important in successful educational experiences is the creation of a supportive culture that cultivates positive relationships between teachers and students and between students.

The role alternative education played in assisting the participants' graduation is a multipronged role. While the culture of alternative education offered strength and stability to the students, the program was responsive to the students' needs in ways that traditional education was not. Moreover, cumulating success in alternate education instead of failure as they did in high school created ways in which the participants began to change their perceptions of self as students and people. This involved gaining confidence, letting down their guards, making better choices, and gaining skills that were beyond completing assignments for grades. For the first time the participants became collaborative partners with other students, with a shared investment in mutual academic success. They also understood alternative education to be a safe space for them and thus got a respite from the more volatile spaces in their personal lives. Additionally, when participants were able to form a sense of self that was completely in contrast to the labels

assigned to them, they were able to challenge the discourse presented to them about who goes to alternative education, why they go there, and the role of alternative education for the "bad kids."

<h2 style="text-align:center">Implications</h2>

The focus of these implications is placed on creating additional dialogue between and among those who are in any form or manner involved with alterative education. The critical dialogue is a forum in which the status quo can be challenged and an opportunity to propose and set forth visionary practices to improve alternative education. As such, these implications are presented in terms of various stakeholders connected to alternative education: alternative education teachers, alternative and traditional education administrators, policy makers, and students.

Alternative education teachers can gain a deeper understanding of their students' backgrounds and become more aware of the types of issues these students experience at home and in traditional educational settings. Having a clearer understanding and appreciation for the diversity of alternative students can be a catalyst for alternative teachers to build a strong supportive culture. This study can also serve as inspiration for alternative teachers to advocate more for alternative education with their teacher counterparts in the traditional system to challenge the dominant discourse about alternative education, since alternative education teachers are also marginalized for being part of a negatively characterized educational option.

In addition to teachers challenging the negative stereotyping of alternative education, this study has implications for administrators in alternative education. Findings from this study could offer administrators in alternative education the confidence to implement programs beyond the scope of regular education that can benefit students. Since there is such a broad range of types, mission, and scopes of alternative education programs, administrators could seek opportunities to

expand in new ways and challenge dominant perceptions in order to best serve their students. Alternative education administrators could also benefit from gathering significant input from their students to gain a better understanding of how to best serve the students. For instance, administrators could gather input from students to determine which types of additional supports are necessary to meet the students' needs. Riley spoke extensively about the lack of presence of extra support services, which would have been helpful for those students who needed counseling services. However, implementing additional support services may require additional funding, thus alternative administrators must be willing to seek out opportunities for additional funding in order to provide an atmosphere that is more equitable to that of traditional education settings.

This study also lends value to alternative administrators as it can serve as a guideline for effective hiring practices for alternative educators. Caring and compassionate teachers that are flexible is a staple in alternative education as evidenced by the participants' narratives. Adam pointed out that the alternative teachers were responsible for giving him the confidence to succeed. Hiring the right individuals who understand the intricacies of alternative education or being willing to adapt to them easily can go a long ways in meeting the needs of at-risk students.

This study offers an invitation to administrators in traditional educational settings to re-evaluate policies and procedures of enrollment practices for gaining entry into alternative education programs. Riley and Adam stated that they knew of several students who sought the opportunity to enroll into the alternative program but were denied because they did not display a need that was going to keep them from being successful in the traditional setting. Rather, traditional administrators can start discussing alternative education as a viable program for students who have been successful in the traditional setting but are seeking different options. However, some of the practices that are detrimental to students that transition to the alternative

212

program must be addressed, such as freezing students' grade point averages, restricting course options, and preventing alternative students from being on the traditional campus. Administrators are invited to begin a dialogue about offering students a more blended option for education of attending traditional and alternative classes if particular classes or programs are not offered at the alternative setting rather than limiting the students' options. Perhaps, administrators could use elective courses and programs as incentives for students who consistently perform and make progress in the alternative setting. Administrators are also invited to consider allowing alternative students to participate in recreational activities and clubs on the traditional campus. Making a conscious effort to allow alternative students the opportunity to participate in the traditional high school activities could neutralize the stigma that is attached to alternative education. However, such invitations inevitably raise the question of motivation of administrators in the traditional educational setting. Given that these administrators' roles or scopes are not marginalized, regardless of the performance of students in alternative setting, unless administrators are genuinely interested in working towards the shared goal of what is in the best interest of all students, such implications might only be suitable for a select group of administrators. Yet, these points need to be made, and these implications need to be raised, so that at least the key stakeholders are presented with information that can generate a collaborative dialog.

In the spirit of collaborative dialoguing, this study presents implications for policy makers. First, policy makers are invited to initiate a discussion on how attendance is accounted for in alternative education. In many cases, alternative programs offer flexible scheduling that only includes a half-day instructional schedule. However, since students who attend alternative programs attend for only a half-day, they are ineligible to participate in state-sanctioned extra-

curricular activities. This practice limits the benefits of alternative education and could potentially keep several students who could benefit from an education in an alternative setting from seeking an opportunity to attend an AEP. Second, state policy makers could discuss how schools are funded based on attendance. Rather than funding schools based on a weighted average daily attendance, which is the same formula used for traditional settings, policy makers could develop a separate funding formula for alternative programs that is more in line with alternative practices. Maybe, rather than funding students by daily attendance, schools can receive funding based on students completing courses. This would allow more flexibility for students who are experiencing hardships outside of the academic setting and also provide alternative programs funding that they may potentially lose if students graduate early, which seems like a penalization for job well done. Lastly, state policy makers could discuss about the end-of-course state examination schedules. Since many students in alternative education are self-paced, they finish courses throughout the year rather than at the end of the year like traditional students. Offering flexible scheduling for end-of-course exams would greatly benefit students and fall more in-line with the individualized learning pace of alternative education.

While the stakeholders for whom this study is relevant are identified, one of the key stakeholders, the students, are not consulted when discussing the fate of alternative education, and yet their experiences are directly affected by decisions made about alternative education. Thus, this study created a space for the students' voices so that implications could be raised for key stakeholders to create transformative educational experiences. Drawing input from students is critical and should be seen as critical by educators, administrators, and policy makers. Gaining student input to systematically improve alternative education will not only have a positive effect

214

on alternative education programs, but it will also translate into better state and federal ratings for traditional high schools and school districts.

Future Directions of Research

While there could be several options for future directions in research, I will highlight three key options. First, a similar study could be conducted using alternative education teachers and administrators as participants. Gaining the teachers' and administrators' perspectives may offer insights on asset allocation that could lead to additional opportunities for alternative students. A study of this magnitude may also lead to changes in how students are identified to attend alternative programs and make alternative programs an option for more students. Research questions informing such a study could include:

- How do teachers and administrators negotiate their understanding of alternative education?

- How do teachers and administrators view the role that alternative education plays in successfully educating students?

- What do teachers and administrators identify as challenges and possibilities in alternative education?

This study could be conducted using qualitative methods or using a multi-method approach where qualitative and quantitative data are used to triangulate teachers' and administrators' perspectives in addition to numerical information about resource allocation in their respective schools.

Secondly, quantitative studies involving all stakeholders could be conducted across the state of Texas and then across the nation. Although there have been studies that have been conducted to determine the effectiveness of alternative education and the best practices in alternative education, there is still a lack of data from the students who attend alternative

215

education programs statewide. A study that would include students along with administrators, teachers, and parents involved in alternative education would provide numerous pieces of data offering broad patterns and trends that are stable on a larger scale.

Finally, given that the students should have a key voice in alternate education, perhaps programs should conduct exit surveys with students who graduate or drop out of alternate education programs. Then this information could be collected as part of an exploratory study to understand trends from students' perspectives.

Alternative education should not be seen as a negative option. People who are unfamiliar with alternative education should not be making restrictive policies while somehow holding staff and programs in alternative education accountable to the same standards as traditional high schools, which are provided with better resources. Perhaps the biggest heroes of alternative education are not the teachers or staff in alternative education. The heroes are the students who work persistently to challenge the stereotypical assumptions made about their ability to be successful and who regularly break free from those assumptions as teenagers, something even adults would struggle to accomplish. Creating knowledge from the location of the students' experiences demonstrates that not only are these students "good kids," but they can work with very little provided to them when they are incentivized by a bigger transformative goal in their lives. Our educational systems should not only invest in understanding what students view as transformative goals in their lives, but they should also find ways to trigger those goals by utilizing a collaborative partnership between traditional and alternative education instead of making superior claims about one in comparison to the other.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I recounted my position in this study and reminded the reader about the purpose of the study. I offered the ways in which I connected tenets of the standpoint theory with the findings of this study. Additionally, I discussed how the findings contributed to the existing literature and reflected on those findings using the lens of standpoint theory. I offered concluding thoughts reflecting on the research questions. Next, I offered implications from this study for key stakeholders and future directions for research in the field of alternative education. Throughout the chapter I maintained a key emphasis on the role of students' narratives and perspectives about alternative education.

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Appendix A

AT-RISK-INDICATOR-CODE indicates whether a student is currently identified as at-risk of dropping out of school using state-defined criteria only (TEC §29.081, Compensatory and Accelerated Instruction).

A student at-risk of dropping out of school includes each student who is under 21 years of age and who:

1. is in prekindergarten, kindergarten or grade 1, 2, or 3 and did not perform satisfactorily on a readiness test or assessment instrument administered during the current school year;

2. is in grade 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, or 12 and did not maintain an average equivalent to 70 on a scale of 100 in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum during a semester in the preceding or current school year or is not maintaining such an average in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum in the current semester;

3. was not advanced from one grade level to the next for one or more school years; (Note: From 2010-2011 forward, TEC 29.081 (d-1) excludes from this criteria prekindergarten or kindergarten students who were not advanced to the next grade level as a result of a documented request by the student's parent.)

4. did not perform satisfactorily on an assessment instrument administered to the student under TEC Subchapter B, Chapter 39, and who has not in the previous or current school year subsequently performed on that instrument or another appropriate instrument at a level equal to at least 110 percent of the level of satisfactory performance on that instrument;

5. is pregnant or is a parent;

6. has been placed in an alternative education program in accordance with TEC §37.006 during the preceding or current school year;

7. has been expelled in accordance with TEC §37.007 during the preceding or current school year;

8. is currently on parole, probation, deferred prosecution, or other conditional release;

9. was previously reported through the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) to have dropped out of school;

10. is a student of limited English proficiency, as defined by TEC §29.052;

11. is in the custody or care of the Department of Protective and Regulatory Services or has, during the current school year, been referred to the department by a school official, officer of the juvenile court, or law enforcement official;

12. is homeless, as defined NCLB, Title X, Part C, Section 725(2), the term "homeless children and youths", and its subsequent amendments; or

13. resided in the preceding school year or resides in the current school year in a residential placement facility in the district, including a detention facility, substance abuse treatment facility, emergency shelter, psychiatric hospital, halfway house, or foster group home.

Appendix B

ERIN L. SHERMAN, MAcc, CRA, CIP
Research Compliance Officer
Division of Research, Commercialization and Outreach

6300 OCEAN DRIVE, UNIT 5844
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November 20, 2012

Mr. Michael Watson
13614 River Forest Drive
Corpus Christi, TX 78410

Dear Mr. Watson,

The research project entitled "Student's Perspectives on Alternative Education" (IRB# 121-12) has been granted approval through an expedited review under category 7.2.1(9) by the Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi Institutional Review Board (IRB). You are authorized to conduct the project as outlined in the IRB protocol application.

IRB approval is granted for one year from the date approval is granted. You must submit an IRB Continuing Review Application for IRB committee review and approval should the project continue beyond November 20, 2013. Please submit the IRB Continuing Review Application at least one month prior to the approval expiration date to allow time for IRB review.

Please submit an IRB Amendment Application for ANY modifications to the approved study protocol. Changes to the study may not be initiated before the amendment is approved. Please submit an IRB Completion Report to the Compliance Office upon the conclusion of the project. Both report formats can be downloaded from IRB website.

All study records must be maintained by the researcher for three years after the completion of the study. Please contact me if you will no longer be affiliated with Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi before the conclusion of the records retention timeframe to discuss retention requirements.

We wish you the best on the project. Please contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

Erin L. Sherman

Erin L. Sherman

THE ISLAND UNIVERSITY