

Faculty definitions of success in alternative schools and their influences on alternative education

by

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B.S., Kansas State University, 2001  
M.S., Kansas State University, 2013

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Department of Curriculum and Science  
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

2022

## Abstract

Alternative education in Kansas is defined as “Alternative education serves students who require or thrive in an environment other than a traditional educational setting” (*Alternative School Information for Students and Parents*, n.d.). Often, students who are enrolled in alternative education settings are students are defined as “at risk” or students who are simply not successful in a traditional setting. At risk students are deemed at-risk in the opinion of faculty if they fall into the following categories.

- Is not working on academic grade level.
- Is not meeting the requirements necessary for promotion to the next grade; is failing subjects or courses of study
- Is not meeting the requirements necessary for graduation from high school. (e.g., potential dropout)
- Has insufficient mastery of skills or is not meeting state standards
- Has been retained
- Has a high rate of absenteeism
- Has repeated suspensions or expulsions from school
- Is homeless and/or migrant
- Is identified as an English Language Learner
- Has social emotional needs that cause a student to be unsuccessful in school (*Success / Definition of Success by Oxford Dictionary on Lexico.Com Also Meaning of Success*, n.d.)

Given the large amount of criteria that can be met within the standards of the definition of at risk, there is a large amount of variety within the population in alternative schools. This

variety can lead to wildly different student outcomes when it comes to the curriculum that is presented. Given the fact that the students are placed there to in order to help them become successful (whatever that definition may be to them)

The definition of success according to Oxford Languages is simply “the accomplishment of an aim or purpose” (*Success / Definition of Success by Oxford Dictionary on Lexico.Com Also Meaning of Success*, n.d.). However, different people interpret that definition in vastly different ways. Accomplishment of an aim or purpose can serve many different needs and many different perspectives according to the person whose definition is being used. A success for one person may be a failure for another. The same can be stated for education and the students who make up the populations of high schools across the state. Some students simply view success and education from different perspectives. Many students at a traditional high school setting may only view reaching a post-secondary school as successful. Other students may see graduating high school the culmination of success in their academic career. Other students may simply see passing a class as being a successful endeavor.

Definitions of success often drive curriculum and standards that teachers are required to use or standards that they place on their students in their classrooms. Given the wide variety of opinions in how success should or is defined, this can greatly impact the students and their academic futures. Often, curriculum is geared towards students who have a different degree of expectations (and a different definition of success). Other issues that may occur revolve around the students themselves. Simply put, the students’ definition of success can drive what they do in the classroom.

Since the definition of success can be wildly individualized in both student and faculty, there isn’t a lot of consistency between the two. Often times students feel successful within the

context of a class or a school year, when in fact that faculty isn't supporting that idea. Ideally, the student would feel that the meeting of each goal would constitute a "success" and want to continue to meet these goals until he or she has achieved their ultimate goal. This continued desire to strive and achieve would allow the student to be able to full fill their potential (whatever that definition is for that student). Another issue is that given the wide variety of students in alternative education, how do their definitions of success, as well as their individual view of potential impact their academic careers? Furthermore, how does the faculty's definition of success influence the students' academic expectations and the curriculum they use to teach alternative education students? This study looks to gather an understanding of how faculty define success for alternative education students and how those definitions can influence alternative education and the curriculum that is used for alternative education students.

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## Acknowledgements

As I reflect on the eventual end of this academic journey, I think about the people that have helped me along the way. I cannot begin to express my gratitude for those who have believed in me and helped me complete this journey. Without this support, I would not have been able to successful finish this work. My apologies if I have left anyone out, as that was completely unintentional. First and foremost, I want to thank the participants who were willing to take time out of an extremely busy school day during a pandemic to give their honest thoughts on this subject. Time is often limited for a teacher/principal, and so I appreciate the fact that everyone was so willing to help me out have a chat with me, so to speak. Without their honest opinions and answers, none of this would have been possible. Weso, thanks for everything over the years. It's a been an interesting ride over the years and I'm very grateful to have been working under your leadership. Great leaders are always taken for granted... Until they are gone. So, thanks. Chris, I was sorry to see you go and I'm glad that I got to work with you as long as I did. I wish you and your family all the best in your endeavors

I also want to thank my cohort for their support and help over the years. It was extremely beneficial to know that there were others who were walking along this journey with me, and it really was a privilege to have been in classes with you all. When I think about all the negativity that often surrounds education, I can look to my peers and see the very best that the field of education has to offer. I was surrounded by some of the best and the brightest and it truly was an honor. Alex, thank you for listening to me complain and be a kindred spirit in our quantitative research struggles.

Cari, my editor. Thank you for your diligent work and the immense amount of time going over this script and fixing all my typos. I'm especially grateful for your expertise and your help in getting this accomplished.

I also want to thank the faculty and staff at KSU. There are some of the most supportive, kind, and frankly intelligent people I've had the privilege to be around. Thanks to Dr. Red Corn who first taught me what qualitative research was and guided a very naïve first year through that initial class. I also want to thank my committee as well. Dr. Vontz, you gave me some advice in my first year has always stuck with me and would subsequently change the way I write and think for the rest of my career. It may have been such a simple statement, but in fact you changed the way I view academic writing. Dr. Duncan, you have always given such profound feedback that would lead me to really reflect on what I was doing and give me a completely new perspective on my work. I thank you for that and challenging me to continue to look at things from a different perspective. Dr. Johnson, I was always amazed at the direction and advice you were always able to give me when it came to my dissertation and your class, as it was always so thoughtful and forthright. Your guidance was always appreciated because I always knew it would be such wonderful and insightful advice.

Dr. Clark, thank you. You have been such a patient and tolerant guide and I thank you for answering all of my seemingly silly questions with such patience and I could not have done this without you. Your calm demeanor and vast knowledge of academia and education make you a perfect leader of the Ed.D program at KSU. . You truly are an asset to the KSU Education program. I'm extremely lucky to have the committee that I have, and even more so to have you as an advisor. Thank you.

To my dad and mom, who always had high expectations of me and just assumed and expected that I would accomplish my goals. These expectations have been a reflection in the expectations that I have for myself when it comes to academia and life in general. I'm grateful to have had these expectations instilled in me, for myself. I think that everyone wants their parents to be proud of them and this is no different. Heather, thank you for being the best sister around, and a great example of what a mom and sister should be. You are one of the best people I know and thank you for that. I truly am lucky to have you for a sister.

To Aryn, thank you for being so supportive and providing that stability in my life. I know there were many times when you were trying to wrangle dogs and your job and everything else while I was in class and I appreciate it. Even more, I thank you for being an example of kindness and being my partner in life. I'm fortunate to have you in my life and constant support in all that I do. You have supported me throughout this journey and have listened to my frustrations and you have also celebrated the victories with me as well. Thank you for your love, help, support and guidance. I love you. Words > Numbers, right?

Randy and Jolene, thank you for your support and raising such a wonderful daughter.

Doc Hortin – you are right. I should have started this much earlier, but better late than never!

I'd be remiss if I left out Grady, Chance, Sis, Abby, Penny and Sam... The dogs who were always there for a pet and tail wag to lift my spirits at any time... And were generally quiet during Zoom classes. One really can't underestimate the importance of unconditional love from their dogs, right?

Finally, thank you to those unnamed that just assumed and expected that I would accomplish this. Expectations such as that would go on to prove to be the greatest motivator and for that, I thank you



## **Dedication**

Dedicated to those who fight the good fight and teach the students that no one else wants to.

## **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

It can be argued that alternative education has been in existence since the beginning of formal education. (Timothy Young, 1990). It simply depends on the definition that one uses to define alternative education and the interpretation of it. Broadly defined, alternative education can be simply “educational activities that fall outside of the traditional K-12 curriculum” (Porowski et al., 2014). Interpretation of that definition can align dramatically with however the person chooses to do so. Special education, gifted programs, GED programs, and everything in between can all be considered alternative education.

A large portion of the history of education lends itself closely to the civil rights movement of the 1950s. Prior to this movement, students could be excluded from the education process based on race, religion, sex or even ability. As time progressed the education system found itself to be a vital part of the civil rights movement. The civil rights movement would spark the movement for inclusion and education for all students regardless of race or ability. In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. This landmark act would go on to provide funding and emphasize education for all students and included funding for schools who have a “high percentage of students who are from lower income families” (Paul, 2016). The students largely affected could easily be deemed as “at-risk.”. In 1968, an amendment would be added that “provided the basis for The Bilingual Education Act and the Education of the Handicapped Act” (Paul, 2016). The Bilingual Education Act would emphasize and aid Limited English Speaking Ability (LESA) students. LESA or English-Language Learner (ELL) students also fell into the at-risk category, and thus this legislation was beneficial to them.

Another act that had a profound impact on the at-risk population was the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This act ensured that individuals would be protected from discrimination in federally funded programs, including schools. The Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1975 was a piece of legislation that would impact the at-risk population as well. This would ensure that students with special needs would receive free appropriate education and it would require services to meet individual needs. In 1983, the landmark report *A Nation at Risk* was released, pointing to deficiencies that the American education system had in producing capable members of society in the American workforce. With this report, a focus was placed on standards and the quality of teaching and learning. The downside to this focus was that schools often were constrained in their ability to implement practices that may further student learning in place of emphasis on standardized testing (Tierney, 2016). However, clear recognition of the need for alternative schools became evident and society became increasingly aware and inclusive of different populations. As this awareness and inclusion evolved, so did our educational system.

## **Rationale**

In today's education system, we have made allowances to educate all or as many students as possible. Prior to the passage of the above acts, students who were deemed at-risk were oftentimes not educated or left to become educated by their parents. Our education system has tried to find alternatives that were "equal and meaningful" for at-risk students. As time has passed and our education system has evolved, inclusion is a concept now that schools use to help educate all students, regardless of ability.

Alternative education can be defined in many ways, but it frequently indicates students who are in one way or another at-risk of school failure (Porowski, 2014). However, a deeper

look at the definition of at-risk is very broad and leaves a lot of room for interpretation. The Glossary of Education Reform defines at-risk students as “students or groups of students who are considered to have a higher probability of failing academically or dropping out of school” (*At-Risk Definition*, 2013). This definition is so broad that any number of students can fall into this category. It could include, but not specifically limit, students with health issues, incarceration, special education, transiency, or even family history. It can also include students with learning disabilities, behavior disabilities or students with attendance issues. The term can be directed at populations of students or narrowly specified to individual students. There are simply so many different means of characterizing at-risk students that programs are often ever evolving to meet the needs of the students. “Numerous characteristics are used to classify students as at risk, including background characteristics (such as age, socioeconomic status, race, gender, cultural barriers, language barriers, and technology proficiency), internal characteristics (weak self-concept, misaligned goals, low interest), and environmental factors (learning environment, academic support, guidance counseling, travel time) (McCabe, 2003; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999).

Specifically speaking, the state of Kansas defines an at-risk student as one who meets one or more of the following criteria:

- Is not working on academic grade level
- Is not meeting the requirements necessary for promotion to the next grade; is failing subjects or courses of study
- Is not meeting the requirements necessary for graduation from high school. (e.g., potential dropout)
- Has insufficient mastery of skills or is not meeting state standards

- Has been retained
- Has a high rate of absenteeism
- Has repeated suspensions or expulsions from school
- Is homeless and/or migrant
- Is identified as an English Language Learner
- Has social emotional needs that cause a student to be unsuccessful in school (*Statute / Kansas State Legislature, 2019*).

Again, this definition is extremely broad and gives a lot of flexibility in the development of alternative schools in Kansas. The state of Kansas also gives a tremendous amount of leniency in how alternative schools are established and what sort of format/curriculum that they teach.

This is evident in statute 72-4241, which states:

The board of education of any school district may establish an alternative school or schools at any of the levels of grade seven or above to provide an educational alternative for students determined by such board of education to be unable to benefit from other schools of the school district. Courses of instruction and other requirements of statutes and rules and regulations shall apply to any such schools to the extent that the same are not obstructive to programs of learning and instruction in such schools. (*Statute / Kansas State Legislature, 2019*).

Since there is such leniency in parameters in which alternative schools in Kansas can be established, there is a wide variety of formats that alternative schools can be designed. There are four primary types of alternative schools, although they can vary specifically in design and execution. Often, the various schools will incorporate different aspects of each to be used in a

manner to help the student population that they serve. Primarily though they will incorporate the various “types” as listed below.

- Type I alternatives are schools of choice, sometimes resembling magnet schools, with themes that have an emphasis on innovative programs or strategies to attract students.
- Type II alternatives are “last chance” schools where students are sent as a last step before expulsion. These are not schools of choice, and their emphasis is typically on behavior modification or remediation.
- Type III alternatives are designed with a remedial focus on academic and/or social emotional issues (Lange & Sletten, 12, 2002).

A fourth type of alternative school could also be a “hybrid that combines school choice, remediation, and innovation to form a second chance program that provides another opportunity for success within the educational system following some problem or failure” (Lange & Sletten 12, 2002). Given the above factors, alternative schools can look very different from school district to school district and still be supported by the state. There are often different types of the above schools within one district or even one building. The state allows a tremendous amount of flexibility in the innovation of alternative schools.

One of the questions that we must ask is, “What is the purpose of education? More specifically, what is the purpose of alternative education?” There have been many philosophies on what the purpose of education is. John Dewey states that “the ultimate aim of education is nothing other than the creation of human beings in the fullness of their capacities.” Alfred Adler suggests that “there are three objectives of children’s schooling: the development of citizenship, personal growth or self-improvement, and occupational preparation.” Another perspective of the purpose of education during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was Americanization and citizenship

education. Zevi Gutfruend states, “Americanization and citizenship education dominated the national conversation about public schools in the years between the two world wars.” Do we prepare our students for their own civic responsibilities as well? “A common civic education designed to forge and maintain a common civic culture amid extraordinary cultural diversity is essential to the continuity of our constitutional heritage, the formidable foundation of our American nation and its democratic republic” (Patrick, 2007). It can be argued that the purpose of American education is to make students productive citizens and further the government process.

Another purpose of education and educating our youth is also directly tied to job and career preparation. Simply put, a philosophy of education is to prepare the student for the workforce or a postsecondary education. Society and the workforce are placing a higher emphasis on education and even a postsecondary education. “Thirty-five percent of the job openings will require at least a bachelor’s degree, 30 percent of the job openings will require some college or an associate degree and 36 percent of the job openings will not require education beyond high school” (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). The question remains, though, what is the purpose of education in today’s age, and more pointedly, what is the purpose of education in the alternative school setting?

The state of Kansas supplements at-risk students with additional funding to help those students become successful. Under Kansas law, districts receive a base amount (\$4,165 in 2019) for actual students enrolled. For each student eligible for free meals, they receive the at-risk weighting factor of 0.484, which is multiplied by the base amount. In other words, for each free lunch student, districts received an additional \$2,016.

Given this increase of funding per student, there has been an increasing amount of attention on which students are deemed at risk and how those particular students are being educated. As with any other monetary situation, the increase in attention and money can often create additional pressure for the alternative schools to show results. A qualitative study can define if schools are successful, even if numbers don't reflect that.

### **Research Purpose**

Webster's Dictionary defines success as "favorable or desired outcome or the attainment of wealth, favor, or eminence" (*Dictionary by Merriam-Webster: America's Most-Trusted Online Dictionary*, 2020). Cambridge defines success as "the achieving of the results wanted or hoped for" (*SUCCESS / Definition in the Cambridge English Dictionary*, n.d.). Clearly, given these two definitions, the result or definition of success can be as diverse as the students themselves. With this in mind, each student has different expectations and standards when it comes to success and what it means to be successful. Couple that with the wide range of student ability and expectations in an alternative school, instruction and curriculum can be very difficult in an alternative setting. The question must be asked, "How can we tell if alternative schools are being successful?" Or more importantly, "How do students and staff define success?" Furthermore, how have stories of successful students of the past influence alternative schools and their design? Do these questions influence the alternative staff expectations when it comes to being successful in an alternative school setting? If we can understand the definition of success, and how alternative school faculty view success for their students, we can garner a deeper understanding of whether or not an alternative school is successful. Further, if we can gather a



better understanding of what success looks like in an alternative school setting, we can understand how to better help students become successful.

Educators and administrators often view success differently than students. Some of this is heavily dependent on their past experiences in education, and it has impacted how their curriculum is developed. It can also be influential in how alternative schools are designed. The importance of understanding how faculty define and view success cannot be overstated. Since they often dictate curriculum and expectations, their opinions are imperative to this study. Furthermore, a deeper inquiry into success must also hinge on the expectations held for these students. Does the student's perceived potential (and expectations) impact how faculty view whether that student is deemed successful? Is the definition of success influenced by the student's potential? Do these definitions influence the expectations held for these students? Since there is such a wide variety of types and consistency in alternative schools in Kansas, there is a need for a study to help understand if alternative schools and, more importantly, alternative school students are successful. While a simple look at graduation rates could determine success (if that is how alternative schools are deemed successful), a deeper qualitative look into alternative education is necessary. The very foundation of alternative education is looking beyond the numbers and trying to help the students that populate alternative schools. The purpose of this study described herein is to examine alternative school students and faculty definitions of success and how they impact the success of the alternative schools themselves.

### **Operationalization of Terms**

For the basis of this study, the researcher has chosen to use the following definitions for the terminology in use.

1. Alternative Education - Alternative education serves students who require or thrive in an environment other than a traditional educational setting. This population of learners may face challenges in school, home, and/or community. Their ability to receive services in a traditional academic setting may increase vulnerability to school failure. Alternative education strives to deliver equitable access to innovative approaches to teaching and learning which provide students the opportunity to meet graduation requirements, prepare for post-secondary experiences, and participate as productive members of their communities (*Statute / Kansas State Legislature, 2019*).
2. At-risk student - An at-risk student (as defined by the Kansas state board) is one who meets one or more of the following criteria:
  - a. Is not working on academic grade level
  - b. Is not meeting the requirements necessary for promotion to the next grade; is failing subjects or courses of study
  - c. Is not meeting the requirements necessary for graduation from high school (e.g., potential dropout)
  - d. Has insufficient mastery of skills or is not meeting state standards
  - e. Has been retained
  - f. Has a high rate of absenteeism
  - g. Has repeated suspensions or expulsions from school
  - h. Is homeless and/or migrant
  - i. Is identified as an English Language Learner
  - j. Has social emotional needs that cause a student to be unsuccessful in school(*Statute / Kansas State Legislature, 2019*).

3. Bracketing interview – He or she is interviewed by another researcher often using the same question he or she plans to use in the same study (Pollio, et al., 1997, p. 47).
4. Comprehensive selection – All cases that fall into a particular category are included in the study (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 72).
5. Constructivism – Describes individuals’ perspectives, experiences, and meaning making processes (Koro-Ljungberg, et al., 2009).
6. Curriculum - Lessons and academic content taught in a school or in a specific course or program (Glossary of Education Reform, 2013).
7. Hermeneutics - A method or principle of interpretation (*Definition of HERMENEUTIC*, n.d.).
8. Inductive analysis - The process through which a qualitative researcher might look at all the raw data, then group into small analytical units meaning for further analysis (usually called codes) (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 150).
9. Interview - A process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study (DeMarrais, 2008, p. 53).
10. JAG – Jobs for America’s Graduates - Jobs for America’s Graduates (JAG) is a state-based national non-profit organization dedicated to supporting young people of great promise. JAG serves youth who face significant challenges, to help them reach economic and academic success. In the context of this study, it is a class that is taught as a course to alternative education students to help prepare them for success in the classroom and success after graduation.
11. Open-ended interview – Focus on digging deep into one’s experiences with a few key questions prepared in advance. The researcher focuses on using the key questions to

probe and peel away a superficial understanding of one's experiences to reveal a deeper understanding. (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 127).

## 12. SPED – Special Education.

### **Methodological Framework**

This study was designed with the purpose of understanding how different definitions of success impact expectations and curriculum development at alternative schools. A constructivist interview study was developed to gather data. In a manner of speaking, constructivism is a relatively new epistemology in qualitative research. “Constructivist hermeneutics encompasses a range of research frame works that are fairly new to the qualitative toolbox” (Horn, 1998).

The interview candidates were 9 staff members of the Prairie Building for Innovative Studies, which is the alternative high school in a larger school district in north central Kansas. While the number of staff at the Prairie Building is relatively low, the candidates are all highly qualified educators and administrators who have varying years of experience in the alternative school program, and all will be interviewed for this study.

Comprehension selection was the qualifying selection process to choose the faculty interview candidates. Quite simply, “comprehensive selection can occur when all cases that fall into a particular category are included in the study” (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p.72). . The student interview candidate selection will be based on typical-case selection: “the researcher sets out criteria that are typical of a person within a group” (DeMarrais, 2008, p. 60). In doing this, selection of the candidates was based on criteria that best fulfills a broad demographic of the students who attend. Edmund Husserl also suggested bracketing, which would impact how data was organized and studied.

A bracketing interview is done to “get at the assumptions and beliefs the researcher brings to the study” (DeMarrais, 2008, p. 58). Essentially, the interviewer is asked the same questions that he/she will ask in the study to understand the researcher’s assumptions and beliefs. In doing this, we can set aside our prior influences in the hopes of seeing the data from new and different perspectives. As the longest tenured alternative school educator at the Prairie Building for Innovative Studies, the interviewer’s biases will inevitably play a part in the data collection process. Bracketing will be an essential part of the research process to understand how the data will be impacted.

An open-ended interview process was used with the participants involved. The advantage of having a strong relationship with the faculty is extremely beneficial, as the importance of this relationship in the interview process cannot be overstated. The goal is to understand the participants’ perspectives and why and how they define success. While there is a broad range of possibilities from there, we can use these definitions for future analysis. To analyze this data, inductive analysis will be used. By definition, “inductive analysis is the process through which a qualitative researcher might look at all the raw data, chunk them into small analytical units meaning for further analysis (usually called codes)” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 150). The advantage of this is to be able to analyze the data and categorically look at the data in different groupings. This examination will then allow the researcher to “cluster similar analytical units and label them as categories and identify salient patterns after looking within and across categories called themes” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 150). By using this method, the researcher can easily organize the data into different groups and themes. Organization of the data will be essential to properly understand how to use the data moving forward in curricular development and organization of

alternative schools. Using a thorough interview process and data organization, we were able to use this data to understand how and why success is defined in academic terms.

### **Limitations and Possibilities of the Study**

In every study there are limitations that will present themselves and this study is no different. There was a limited pool of administrators and teachers to be interviewed. While a majority of the teachers and staff have been in a traditional school setting, there is a percentage of faculty who have only had experience with alternative schools and at-risk students. This may have an impact on how faculty measure success for their students. This study is also limited in that it is specifically tied to alternative education faculty and the perceptions that they present. Since this study is limited in that aspect, definitions of success will also be limited to only those that alternative education faculty express. Furthermore, within the realms of this study there isn't any way to prove that the participants weren't influenced by their peers, current academic/personal situations, or were simply having a bad day. Which in turn, would alter the data from the participants at that particular time.

There are a number of possibilities that have emerged from this study. Since we are dealing with alternative education students and their perceptions, this is a tremendous advantage to have. The interaction and the opinions garnered from this study will allow the researcher a deeper understanding of the alternative teacher, their goals for their students, and what their understandings of their students entail. This study also will allow the possibility to expand and develop curriculum tailored specifically for the alternative student to help them become successful.

## **Chapter 2 - Review of the Literature**

Alternative schools have widely been known as schools for the “bad kids” and often places to separate at-risk students from the traditional population of high schools. An in-depth look at these schools and students can point to the fact that this is not the case, but rather these students are often misunderstood or have had a difficult situation in life. The question remains, Are these schools and students successful? Or are they merely places for at-risk students to be isolated from the traditional students? More importantly, how do we determine what success is?

This review of the literature is grounded in defining alternative schools and the premise behind their function. Contextually, it is necessary to understand the reasoning behind their existence and the goals of their design. Since their design and purpose are so broad, there are many types of alternative schools with different purposes and goals. However, most of these goals deal with academic achievement or how to be successful in the classroom. Defining success can be a difficult task that is often very personal in nature. An examination of the literature concerning success for traditional schools and alternative schools is conducted. Further examination of the literature evolves to a finer point as the definition of success is applied to traditional and alternative school students.

The focus of this study is based on alternative education and how teachers and administration influence alternative schools and the curriculum that they use—and more specifically, how the definitions of success are influential in curriculum, instruction, and expectations of alternative schools. The definition of alternative education is generally accepted to have some sort of relation to at-risk students, activities that fall outside of traditional K-12 curriculum and serve students who are deemed at-risk (Porowski et al., 2014). Students can be deemed at-risk through factors that may place them in danger of failure academically or dropping

out (Bulger & Watson, 2006). However, there is no real consensus between states and how the definition of alternative education influences school design. In fact, it could be argued that the definition is intentionally vague to give schools the ability to design their schools to fit the needs of the population they serve.

The emphasis of success, if the students and schools are successful, is at the forefront of every discussion when it comes to students, specifically alternative school students. Are the schools and students successful? In roughly the 1530s, the word success came from the Latin *successus*, to mean an advance, a coming up or a happy outcome (*Success / Origin and Meaning of Success by Online Etymology Dictionary*, n.d.). The definition revolved around an outcome that is positive in nature for the one involved. In the 1580s, the definition evolved into something more relatable, “accomplishment of desired ends” (*Success / Origin and Meaning of Success by Online Etymology Dictionary*, n.d.). However, as time passed and the state of society evolved, the definition has also evolved. In education, success is often directly tied with achievement of tasks whether or not those particular tasks are related to completing assignments/tests, classes or graduation. The one consistency in this is that the definition is a personal definition that can vary from person to person.

Throughout history, one of the primary questions of education is whether the process of educating our youth is successful. Are our schools successful and what does that look like? What defines success for our schools and our students? As the focus begins to narrow toward alternative schools the questions apply to them as well. Are alternative schools successful? Often the context of success in an alternative school is different from what success is in a traditional school. Alternative schools can be broadly defined to cover any educational activities that fall outside of the traditional curriculum (Aron, 09) but traditionally it tends to focus on students who



are deemed at-risk. As such, success in an alternative school setting may appear to be as simple as completing an assignment or finishing a class. Success in a traditional high school may appear to be graduation or enrolling into a post-secondary school or trade school. As a result, it can be very difficult to define and apply success to alternative schools and the students that they serve.

With that being said, how is success measured in the context of alternative education? Definitions of success can be intermingled within the student and can have an influence on who the students are and who the students become (Tierney, 2020). As such, definitions of success are deeply personal and vary from student to student. Often, students' identities are labeled by not only their actions, but also their successes in high school. Being labeled at-risk or assigned to the alternative schools can further cement the identity that they carry (Tierney, 2020). Identities for high school students can have a huge influence on their future academic success and, conversely, their post high school lives. As a result, the importance of a student's identity (whether fairly or unfairly assigned) can be substantial. However, the flip side to this identity crisis can involve a positive aspect to it as well. Tierney states that "youth who have been marginalized and disenfranchised enter into alternative schools and find success, renegotiating their identifies in school" (Tierney, 2018). One thing is for certain: a standardized definition of success is clearly counterproductive to helping students achieve the success that society demands of them.

Alternative education can be a misunderstood aspect of education. Since high school success is often defined by quantitative means of measurement (standardized test scores, percentage of students who enroll in secondary education schools, etc.) alternative success tends to not fit the mold of that measurement. A qualitative study needs to be done on what success looks like at an alternative school level. However, there is a need for a deeper examination of

what success is and how faculty members' definitions of success trickle down to the curriculum and expectations that they hold for their students. Since faculty members and administrators have an exceptional amount of influence on school design and subsequent success of the students, further research into this is necessary.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that will guide the study are as follows:

1. How do alternative school faculty define success in an alternative high school setting?
2. How do conceptualizations of purpose, definitions of success, approaches to relationship building, and high expectations for learning relate to one another and lead to curricular modifications?
  - A. How do alternative school faculty establish individualized expectations for learning?

While the definitions of success can vary from school to school and person to person, it is important to understand how success is defined in the context of an alternative school setting.

Alternative school faculty's definition of success can be extremely different from their counterparts who teach at traditional schools. Also, given the fact that success for their students can be considerably different than students who attend traditional schools, a closer examination of the alternative school faculty definition is important.

Another aspect of success that must be examined is how alternative school teachers define it and how that influences their curriculum and expectations of their students. Given that alternative school teachers have a tremendous amount of influence on the curriculum that they use and its subsequent influence on student success, an examination of the connection between the two aspects must be done. The expectations that the staff and faculty have of their students

can be a determining factor in the success that the student has at school. Furthermore, the teacher's expectations can be a determining factor in how far that student can and will go in their academic career.

Teacher expectations and subsequent perceptions of students can have a dramatic impact on student success. As stated above, often alternative education students are placed with a negative stigma or a negative perception that can follow them the rest of their academic careers. It cannot be understated the importance of teacher perceptions of student potential and their academic success in the future (Pas & Bradshaw, 2013). These perceptions go on to influence how teachers interact with these students in the future. At the most basic level, Pas and Bradshaw state that "teacher interactions with students are related to their perception of the students" (Pas & Bradshaw, 2013). This in turn, correlates with a link between the quality of student-teacher relationships and student achievement (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Pas & Bradshaw, 2013). Further, teacher insight into student functioning has also had implications into student achievement (Duffy et al., 2009; Lavrijsen et al., 2020). The importance of this is that as teachers adapt their curriculum to student performance, these modifications are heavily dependent on accurate student monitoring. (Helmke & Schrader, 1987; Thiede et al., 2015; Parsons et al., 2018). Student monitoring relates back to the relationships and perceptions that students often have with teachers, which relates back to student potential. The issue is that academic potential is not necessarily an observable trait but rather can incorrectly reflect achievement instead (Machts et al., 2016). Recognizing the difference between achievement and potential is important in that underachieving students may be misconstrued as less talented (Lavrijsen et al., 2020), when the reality is that these students simply may have potential but

have not been in a position to achieve academic goals. This correlation can lead to ask the question... “Is the definition of success for a student influenced by the student’s potential?”

There is a significant amount of literature available when it comes to alternative education. As the review of this literature becomes more refined, the amount drops significantly when it comes to specific topics. Much of this can be attributed to the extremely loose definition of alternative education. Alternative education has been defined as a form of education that exists outside of mainstream education (Aron, 09). Given this broad definition, it can be stated that some form of alternative education has been in existence since the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (OECD, 2008). However, that may appear in many different ways, including schools for at-risk students and for the gifted. Recently, alternative education has taken a prominent role in American public education (Lehr et al., 2009). However, there are no specific guidelines in how an alternative school should be designed. Alternative schools in the U.S. “can be used to describe a wide array of schools with differing perspectives on youth and differing relationships with the school districts in which they exist” (Raywid, 1999; Tierney, 2018). In fact, there is still debate on what alternative really means (Lange, 1998; Raywid, 1994). Often, the term alternative education has been applied so indiscriminately, that its meaning is often confused among educators, students, and the community (Kellmayer, 1995). Coupled with the fact that there isn’t a true accepted definition of alternative education, it is easy to understand why there may be confusion when it comes to how alternative education is applied. At the core of the definition, a fair assessment is “any school that is outside the normative form of conventional schools, by definition, an alternative” (Tierney, 2018).

While there are many types of alternative school programs (such as magnet schools, schools for gifted students, alternative schools for disruptive students, and vocational schools)

(Hinds, 2013), it is generally understood that alternative schools tend to serve students who are deemed at-risk of failure or dropping out. Students can be considered at-risk for a multitude of reasons; no longer targeting race or class, but encompassing any variety of limitation to learning (Bulger & Watson, 2006). Alternative schools are being created to help serve a diverse population and attempt to bridge the graduation gap between these diverse populations and the more traditional populations (Chisley, 2020). They have also been created for students who were not being served in a fair and equitable manner in a traditional setting (Lehr et al., 2009). Regardless of intent, alternative schools are proving a necessary aspect of the education system.

### **Alternative School Populations**

What sort of students do alternative schools serve and why do they attend alternative schools? Minority students are often overrepresented at alternative schools. Research of populations in alternative schools showed Hispanic students represent 34% of students and black students represent 26% (Nowicki, 2019). However, a further review of the research established that Hispanic and Black students are overrepresented by 7% and 10%, respectively, which are the two largest overrepresented groups by far (Nowicki, 2019).

Students who attend alternative schools are often victims of circumstance and environment that has a direct influence on their academic careers. Many at-risk students have a history of challenging school behavior, which can result in suspension, expulsion, and failure (McGee, 2015). Alternative education students often report rates of poverty and victims of violence (Denny et al., 2004), as well as higher rates of sexual abuse, substance abuse, suicide attempts, and pregnancy (Lehr et al., 2009). Nearly all of these students also qualify for free or

reduced lunch (Perzigian et al., 2017). Again, while all of these factors can deem a student at-risk, many students have multiple risk factors.

When the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was signed, the focus became ensuring that all students were successful (Tierney, 2018). However, as the United States slipped in graduation rate ranking worldwide and the focus on the dropout rate intensified, which would subsequently lead to unemployment rates, it became necessary to examine how to curb the growing rate of dropouts. From a monetary point of view, each graduate becomes especially important when the societal value of a high school diploma is examined.

How valuable is high school graduation to a student, the government, and the rest of society in aggregate? The analysis builds on the method developed by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy and presents numerical updates and extensions to their analysis. For the U.S., the estimated net present value (the social value) using a 3% real discount rate of this shadow price is approximately \$300,000 per each additional graduate (Vining & Weimer, 2019). In other words, in 2014, dropouts cost taxpayers an estimated \$957 billion each year over the course of their lives (*The True Cost of High School Dropouts / Graduation Alliance*, 2017). With that type of financial cost, the importance of alternative schools and at-risk intervention becomes extremely important. Eighty percent of the imprisoned populations are dropouts and are much more likely to be on social welfare programs and public health insurance for the rest of their lives (*The True Cost of High School Dropouts / Graduation Alliance*, 2017). This can increase financial burdens on the taxpayer, not to mention the impact it has on the dropouts themselves. Financial societal burdens aside, dropouts are much more likely to experience poorer health, racial discrimination, and devalue themselves as a result of dropping out (Hayes et al., 2002). The importance of interventions to prevent dropout cannot be overstated.

## **Alternative School Design**

Alternative schools have been traditionally designed to prevent high school dropouts and to assist those students deemed at-risk. However, to simply label alternative schools as dropout prevention wouldn't do justice for many students' attendance at alternative schools (Tierney, 2018). That being said, alternative schools can have many factors in how they are designed to best suit the needs of their students. Some schools may target students who have been expelled, suspended long term, or need to recover credits to graduate, while others are designed to support those students who have simply fallen through the cracks (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999). A primary theme in many, if not most, alternative schools is a reduction in class size in comparison to traditional settings (McGee, 2015), which is often essential in focusing attention on the students who need the academic attention. Lehr (2009) notes that in addition to a reduction in class size, alternative schools place an emphasis on smaller enrollment sizes and independent curriculum design. However, Tobin and Sprague identified eight different practices intended to support student behavior in alternative schools (Flower et al., 2011):

- Lower student-to-teacher ratios
- Highly structured classrooms
- Use of positive methods to encourage positive behaviors
- School-based adult mentoring
- Functional behavior assessment
- Social skills assessment
- High-quality instruction
- Parental involvement
- Positive behavioral interventions and support

These practices are critical to the success of alternative education and a positive outcome for the students that alternative schools serve.

Another theme is flexibility in program design. Alternative education programs often use non-traditional techniques to be flexible enough to meet the needs of at-risk students and keep them engaged (Martin & Brand, 2006). Given the nature of variety in alternative education and the students that it serves, flexibility in program design is a must. In order to properly address the unique needs of students who weren't successful in a traditional format, some creativity must be used. Some examples of this are open enrollment, year-round programming, compressed or expanded programs, credit-recovery courses, evening schedules, hands-on, career-related courses and internships, GED preparations courses to encourage student's further education, dual-enrollment, and credit for competency rather than the traditional "time in seat" (Martin & Brand, 2006). Often alternative school design by nature and purpose encourages student responsibility and self-determination (McGee, 2015). Given this, alternative school design can be viewed through a variety of lenses with a multitude of curriculum strategies, especially with the prevalence of online learning in the post-COVID era. Online learning has become a valuable tool in alternative education in that it allows students to still reach educational goals despite educational barriers that alternative school students may have. Regardless, Raywid states that alternative schools have two basic themes in common. They have "been designed to respond to a group that appears not to be optimally served by the regular program, and consequently they have represented varying degrees of departure from standard school organization, programs, and environments" (Raywid, p. 26, 1994). In other words, service of students whose needs aren't being met by traditional schools are the foundation of alternative schools.



## **Curriculum**

Curriculum design and overall school design are often two closely related topics. Among alternative schools there is a wide variety of schools that are represented in differences of quality, intent, and purpose (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017). Each alternative school can use a different methodology and strategy to reach their students. However, the one thing that remains constant is the curriculum needs to be personalized and learner centered. Learner-centered curriculums facilitate learning and achievement for diverse learners while making the student a cocreator in their educational process (Alfassi, 2004; Watson, 2011). This in turn allows student ownership of the learning environment. Often alternative education students are in need of academic confidence in order to progress on their academic journey. Learner-centered curriculums can offer that confidence with each accomplishment. Personalized education can allow students to reidentify themselves as learners and overcome barriers previously encountered (Steinberg & Almeida, 2010). Individualization of instruction is also essential in that many times students are on different grade levels in different subjects (Goodman, 1999). Since alternative education students are so diverse in their capabilities and previous educational experiences, individualized instruction is often necessary to help them succeed. Many of these students have had poor educational experiences prior to arrival at alternative schools, and flexibility is also necessary. Greater choices and flexibility also enhance the students' self-esteem and sense of belonging, resulting in fewer disruptions and leading to alternative schools as a whole producing overall positive outcomes for the students they serve (Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy 2014). Flexibility in alternative school curriculum and design will prove to be essential for the success of alternative school students.

## Success

Success in the traditional sense can be defined as a degree of succeeding or a favorable outcome (*Dictionary by Merriam-Webster: America's Most-Trusted Online Dictionary*, 2020). However, in the academic sense success can be a more influential definition. Historically speaking, specific aspects of educational documents and legislation have dramatically influenced what success looks like in an educational standpoint. As stated before, the word success can carry many different definitions. However, the literature shows that there are many different definitions in accordance with different groups. For example, a definition of success for high school students of color may be staying on track to graduate by their freshman year (Salisbury, 2020). Another study on teenage mothers (i.e. at-risk) revealed their definition of educational success was as varied as the mothers themselves (Boyd, 2020). This indicates that success can be an extremely personal definition of which there is no concrete answer for all.

Success can take on many different definitions, points of view, and outcomes. Success is a personal definition, and students need to understand that educational success is something they can define for themselves and not be held to a definition determined by someone else (Boyd, 2020). For alternative education students, defining success is something much different than what success is for traditional education students. As such, definitions of academic success in alternative education are redefined and expanded beyond typical definitions of school success. Tierney goes on to explain, “definitions of school success can be redefined, expanding beyond normative definitions of school success and building new possible social futures” (Tierney, 2020). Which speaks to how varied the definition of success can appear in an alternative school setting. When asked, some alternative school students relate success (or good grades) with effort, behavior and attendance (Nunn & Nunn, 2014). If a student puts forth the effort, doesn't

act out, and is in class, then the “good grades” will follow. Seemingly, within the realm of Nunn’s research, definitions of success are equitable with “good grades”. Further, from an alternative student perspective, low grades isn’t necessarily equated with low intelligence, as high grades aren’t equated with a higher intelligence (Nunn & Nunn, 2014). Defining success is just different for alternative education students.

### **Success for High School Students**

The definition of success for traditional high school students can be as varied as the means of obtaining definitions of success from high school students (Dicharry, 1987). Meaning, that the definitions of success can as varied as the means that is used to obtain them. Another factor is that often, success is often tied to mastery (or failure) of specific tasks. (Dicharry, 1987) If a student is able to master a particular task, then that particular student is considered a ‘success’ within the realms of that particular task. Further, if asked about success, high school students may also reference material items relating to money, job security, property ownership or leisure activities (Duplisea, 1974; MacKay-Lassonde, 1996; Mosconi & Emmett, 2003). It seems that to high school students, that materialistic gains are often measures of success. Cultural norms often reflect this definition and standard of success as individual achievement is seen as a mean towards material and financial success (Mosconi & Emmett, 2003). It would be folly to assume that all high school students understand success to be directly tied with materialistic gains. Often, it could be that success is defined in terms of achievement, personal development and satisfaction in career development (Mosconi & Emmett, 2003; Stephens et al., 1998). In the end, it must be understood that success is a personal definition that varies from person to person. Often this is based on culture, upbringing or life experience.

At the base level of the definition in a traditional high school setting, success is often linked specifically with graduation, sometimes specifically to a grade of 60 (D) or higher as determined by the school district (Ward, 2018). Schools and staff members often tie success to intelligence, stating that “intelligence is the root of success and effort can enhance it” (Nunn & Nunn, 2014). At other times, success and grades are tied together. Nunn interviews a student in her book *Defining Student Success: The Role of Student and Culture*, who states, “I know I have the ability to get an A,” which Nunn explains is the highest level of success in school (Nunn & Nunn, 2014). Even looking back to research undertaken at KSU in 1969, academic success was defined as “some method of expressing a student’s scholastic standing” (Mickey, 1969). One of the most popular measurements of success in high school students is placement in secondary schools (which includes both universities and colleges). Often high schools will keep track of data that will indicate what percentage of students attend secondary schools upon graduation. To build upon that idea, Mbuva states that “student success occurs when students enter into high school, college, and university, and are able to complete the programs through either personal intrinsic motivation, school organized advising interventions, tutoring programs, or counseling” (Mbuva, 2011). Success in this case is clearly to student achievement, often from the perspective of post high school achievement.

### **Measurements of Success**

Other measurements of success in a traditional high school setting include standardized testing. Ybarra noted that academic achievement is often tied to achievement of educational goals and measured by examinations or continuous assessments (Ybarra, 2016). Mickey stated that “another measure of academic success, sometimes used instead of grades is the standardized

achievement test” (Mickey, 1969). Standardized tests have been a large part of the American education system due to “No Child Left Behind” and other educational legislation. As a result, standardized tests have become a large part of how teachers, schools, and students are evaluated, even though they have contributed to severe problems in the U.S. (Morgan, 2014) and have been proven to be biased against students of low socio-economic status and students of color (Au, 2008). Since at-risk factors can include low socioeconomic status (Aron, 09) and minorities (20% African American and 20% Hispanic who attend alternative schools) (Pierce, 2017), it is evident that standardized tests are a poor measure of success in alternative school. Though research has clearly shown how ineffective standardized tests are, they are still prevalent in education today.

### **Success in Alternative Schools**

Success in alternative schools often looks vastly different than in its traditional counterparts. Oftentimes, at alternative schools, failure weighs heavily on the mind of alternative school students and, thus, avoiding the discussion of failure is pertinent (Nunn & Nunn, 2014). To put it another way, at alternative schools, success is often a lack of failure. However, measurement of alternative school success can be done in several ways. Standardized test scores, graduation rates, and enrollment in post-secondary schools are all factors that can be measured when it comes to alternative school success.

Standardized tests can be used in different ways in accordance with a high school curriculum—as exit exams (exams in which seniors must take in order to graduate) or they can be used as measurements of knowledge and success. However, it seems that at-risk students are at a disadvantage to begin with when they enter alternative schools, as they arrive with large gaps in

their knowledge base and/or a poor academic history (Metcalf, 2005). Learning disabilities, or other various disabilities, that place these students at risk can also be a tremendous influence on their ability to be successful on the test. However, another factor that often plays a large part of the success (or lack thereof) when it comes to the statistics of alternative education students' performance on standardized tests is that often students arrive midway through the school year. These students are often behind in grade level, and alternative education teachers often have a small window in order to adequately prepare these students for the tests. The mere enrollment of a student in an alternative school is indicative of a disruption in their education and their attendance in school (Ewing et al., 2021), as well as a predictor of a decline of attendance (Ewing et al., 2021; Wilkerson et al., 2016). The transient nature of many students isn't accounted for, and as a result the standardized test scores of alternative schools suffer. Teacher/school blaming can be a result of this failure when in fact many of these circumstances are uncontrollable (Metcalf, 2005). While standardized tests are often relied on to measure success, they are something that have varying factors that result in poor or failing scores.

Another determination of success in alternative schools is graduation rates. However, several factors can be involved in preventing the data to correspond with a successful alternative school. For example, the transient nature of many students can skew the data. Students who transfer late or graduate outside of the traditional four years do not "include these youth, lowering alternative schools' percentages" (Tierney, 2018; Rumberger, 2011). Often these students still graduate; however, the statistics may not reflect that. For example, seniors may transfer to alternative schools lacking in credits and fail to graduate in a four-year time frame, which reflects poorly on the alternative school even though it was much too late for the student to graduate on time (Tierney, 2018).

Enrollment in a four-year institution is often another measurement of success used by high schools. For example, the state of California tracked what percentage of students attended college, how many earned degrees, and stated the importance of a college degree in the process (approximately 63%) (Kurlaender et al., 2018). However, when it comes to at-risk students statistics show that 30% of students with two risk factors will attend college and less than 20% of students with three risk factors will attend college (Choy et al., 2000). The statistics bear out that colleges are largely attended by students from traditional high schools, and the percentage of students who attend college from alternative schools is substantially lower.

In alternative schools, earning credits that can be used toward their high school diplomas can often be representative of success. Credits can deeply influence the students and their placements in alternative schools. Being on pace with credits, or behind, is an extremely important topic in the students' discussion. Credits can be the highest form of currency that alternative schools use (Tierney, 2018). The nature of alternative education and the type of student that attends alternative schools present a different type of success. According to a study of 32 alternative schools in Virginia, there are two domains in which alternative schools measure achievement and success: (1) academic achievement and progress and (2) psychosocial/behavioral progress point of view (Duke et al., 1998). Indicators of academic achievement include:

- Percentage of eligible students who graduated with a diploma
- Percentage of eligible students who earned a GED
- Percentage of students who returned to a regular secondary school
- Percentage of students whose GPAs improved after arriving at the alternative school
- Reduction in the dropout rate for the alternative school

- Reduction in the dropout rate for the entire district
- Percentage of students earning credits toward graduation
- Percentage of students who returned to a regular secondary school and earned passing grades
- Percentage of students who improved scores on standardized tests required by the state or district
- Reduction in the percentage of failing grades (Duke et al., 1998)

These indicators allow a wide range of academic achievement. Students and alternative schools can define themselves as a success if any of these achievements are met, which gives testament to the broad definition of success that school districts use. It also testifies to the types of alternative schools themselves and the students who attend them. Quite simply it is extremely difficult to narrow down success for alternative school students.

Defining alternative school success can also be predicated on achievement from a behavioral aspect. Many districts use alternative schools as placements for students who have been suspended, expelled, or removed from their regular schools for disruptive behavior (Henry et al., 2021; Lehr et al., 2009). Since students who are being placed in or attend alternative schools have a higher proportion of emotional/behavioral disabilities than traditional schools (Gorney & Ysseldyke, 1993; Lehr et al., 2009) it is appropriate to measure success by achievement of behavioral and social/emotional development goals (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999) and not just measurements of success from an academic standpoint.

Indicators of progress within this domain include:

- Low number of serious violations of code of conduct
- High daily attendance rate



- Increased percentage of students who feel good about attending school
- Improvement in student attendance over previous rate for regular secondary school
- Reduction in daily disciplinary referrals
- Acquisition of social skills such as anger management and peer meditation
- Low number of suspensions/expulsions (Duke et al., 1998)

While the focus of alternative schools can obviously be on coursework and grades, an often-overlooked aspect is the progress that can be made on social/behavioral indicators. Students who make little or no progress on academic goals can still be considered successful when they make progress on their behavioral or social goals. Again, given the wide disparity of students who attend alternative schools, success for alternative education students can be viewed through many points of view. These indicators can often be overlooked by districts and administrations because of the lack of quantifiable data attached to these successes, but it can be argued that they are as important as, if not more important than, academic achievement.

## **Conclusion**

A review of the literature points to many aspects of study surrounding alternative education. Much of the literature is focused on design of alternative schools, placement in alternative schools, and whether alternative schools are successful. Further research evaluates and compares how success is defined for students in traditional high school and alternative school settings. Many qualitative studies have been done in regard to students who attend alternative schools and how they define and feel about their successes (or lack thereof) in alternative schools. These studies often emphasize the point of view of the students who attend alternative schools and the relevant themes that make alternative schools successful. Conversely,

there is a tremendous amount of literature on dropout prevention and the negative influence that dropouts have on themselves, their family, and society. Dropout prevention is an extremely important aspect of alternative schools and alternative education.

A discussion of success for students is necessary from the point of view of educators and faculty in alternative school settings. Given the flexibility afforded to alternative school staff, their perspective is important as it often determines expectations, curriculum, and standards of success. The implications of how faculty define success is important in the context of curriculum and expectations held for alternative school students. With this in mind, a study is necessary to examine how those definitions of success from the perspective of the faculty is influential on alternative school students, curriculum and the expectations of those students.

A review of the literature on alternative schools and how success is defined and used in traditional schools and alternative schools was conducted in a manner that started with a broad examination of alternative schools, their purposes, and how they are defined. Design of alternative schools was also examined to further understand what the literature states about alternative schools and their purpose. From this point, a more focused review was carried out on how traditional high school students and alternative school students define success and how those implications influence their educational goals. As the review became narrower in focus the intent of the examination began to settle within the confines of the gap in the literature.

It is the intent of this study to examine how success is defined by alternative school teachers and administration and how those definitions influence curriculum and expectations of alternative school students. Given a hermeneutic constructivist point of view (which states that each person brings with them experiences and prejudices in relationship to the world, language, human experience, and individual) to apply to how alternative school staff view success this

study looks to fill a gap in the literature of success in alternative schools. Furthermore, this examination of success from the perspective of alternative school staff will offer help in alignment of curriculum and expectations in alternative schools

## **Chapter 3 - Methodology**

### **Purpose and Standards of Quality**

Within the confines of social research, qualitative analysis can be defined broadly as “the nonnumerical examination and interpretation of observations, for the purpose of discovering underlying means and patterns of relationships” (Babbie, 2017). However, this specific definition is broad and further examination of the definition leads to Norman Lincoln and Yvonna Denzin’s thoughts. They state that “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (N. Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). To simplify, qualitative research searches out the stories, depth, and meaning of people’s experiences and attempts to understand those situations. Qualitative research cares less about numerical values and averages, and more about understanding specific situations, individuals, or even specific moments that are important (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Quantitative research places focus on numerical values, averages, and researching larger groups of participants. The focus for quantitative research can be placed on breadth, while qualitative research places its emphasis on depth.

Qualitative research is a vast and diverse type of research that has roots in many different types of research throughout history. It can be traced to Herodotus and Sextus Empiricus in the Greek time frame as they write about comparative knowledge written about human lifeways (N. K. Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). It has roots in oral histories passed down among Indigenous Peoples across the world. From Renaissance-era writings that describe everyday life like Castiglione did to De Las Casas’ writings on the suffering of Indigenous Peoples under Spanish rule, qualitative research and writing has been a large part of history throughout the world. Researchers would visit different cultures and study people and their customs through interviews

and observations, cementing qualitative study's roots in anthropology and sociology (Bhattacharya, 2017). However, when it comes to a more formalized version of qualitative research, the roots of that can be found in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century—origins that go directly to the University of Chicago, which featured institutional embedding of qualitative research (Jovanović, 2011). It would be folly to leave out the influence of Europeans such as Husserl, Mannheim, Elias, and Gadamer on qualitative research. Qualitative research has provided an alternative to the “classical model of standardized scientific research, which is labelled as quantitative” (Jovanović, 2011). Since quantitative research is synonymous with standardized scientific research, qualitative research often needs validation to be taken seriously by the general public. Great strides have been made recently in that aspect of qualitative research.

Standards for qualitative research have been discussed since it is both fluid and often open to interpretation. As such, there is a need for different criteria for quality qualitative research. Criteria serve to be beneficial and “help us learn, practice and perfect” (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). Guidelines also give validity to qualitative research that the general public may not understand. Numeric statistics and figures still seem to be the language that the general public and officials understand and what they consider to be scientific validation. Having guidelines and criteria can help lend credibility to qualitative research.

Dr. Tracy describes eight criteria for excellent qualitative research in her landmark article *Eight “Big-Tent” Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research*. She states that high-quality qualitative research is marked by eight key points: worthy topics, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics and meaningful coherence. (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017).

Inclusion of all eight key points can help provide credibility and ensure quality and rigor in the qualitative study.

Alternative education is certainly a worthy topic, especially given the funding controversy (at-risk funding that wasn't being used toward at-risk education) and the increased attention to inclusion. This certainly has put alternative education in the spotlight, so to speak. Can the determination of success for alternative schools and alternative education students help direct the funding issues? With state auditors questioning how the funding is being used and the increase in pressure of how the money is spent, the topic is relevant, significant, and extremely timely (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). It also adds a degree of accountability to how the funding is being used.

The study is also inclusive of rigor and sincerity in both the content and how the study was conducted. The methodological design was constructed using a responsive interview process. In using this particular methodology, it promotes rigor in the very nature of how the study was enacted. Hours of interview and research time were conducted in order to ensure that the data and sample size was large enough; "rigor is also judged by the care and practice of data collection and analysis procedures" (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). The design of a responsive interview promotes richness and depth in the type of answers received. "The researcher is looking for rich and detailed information, not for yes-or-no, agree-or-disagree response" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The study is sincere and very open and honest. The researcher has worked with the participants for many years and has a degree of understanding of their point of view. The participants all know the intent of the research and are all very close to the topic. The research is honest and transparent about "the researcher's biases, goals, and foibles, as well as how these played a role in the methods" of research (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). Many of the participants

have a great degree of passion when it comes to this topic and their work. “What matters is that those interviewed are involved with what you are studying” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

As a result of who was being interviewed and the process in which data was gathered, a tremendous amount of credibility was given to the study, not only specifically with the years of experience in the field, but with their education as well. The interview was designed to gather as much rich and vivid detail as possible in order to understand their perspectives. This study is based on perspectives and the personal definitions of those who are passionate about alternative education. The basis of that requires interviews and data that are filled with depth and detail. Interviewing for richness helps describe the scene layer by layer and gives the data more depth (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The more detail and vividness that can be added to the research, the increased likelihood of adding credibility to the study. Tracy states that “qualitative credibility is instead achieved through practices including thick description” (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017), which is the point of a responsive interview model.

This study adds resonance and depth to the topic as well. The interviewer attempts to obtain depth and detail from the participants and in doing so achieves findings that are transferable and relevant to education. For example, the definition of success and the perspectives that these teachers and administration provide allows the study to be relevant in traditional education as well as alternative education. Defining success and applying it in traditional high school should be studied in order to help with the transference of how success is applied to each student. This can become a significant contribution when students are being held to individualized standards of success, as opposed to a “cookie cutter mold” of success.

This study was ethical and conducted within the boundaries of the IRB. And the participants were treated with the utmost respect. All details were provided to them, and the

intent of the interview was extremely transparent. With the responsive interview model, both the participant and the interviewer understand that we are people and are treated with respect, with feelings, opinions and experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In fact, these experiences are the crux of what we are trying to learn about and obtain. These experiences are the backbone of the study, and oftentimes qualitative study in general. Learning about the participants' perspectives and experiences in order to enrich other's lives and experiences, qualitative researchers "do not claim they have found the truth, only that they have learned to see the world from the perspective of the interviewees" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

### **Research Questions**

In conducting the qualitative analysis of success in alternative education, the research led to a focus on the following questions.

1. How do alternative school faculty define success in an alternative high school setting?
2. How do conceptualizations of purpose, definitions of success, approaches to relationship building, and high expectations for learning relate to one another and lead to curricular modifications?
  - A. How do alternative school faculty establish individualized expectations for learning?

### **Subjectivity Statement**

For clarification, the researcher has spent his career in alternative education. For fifteen years, I (the researcher) have taught in alternative education for the same district, and a majority of those years have been spent in the same building. Throughout my tenure in alternative



education, there have been many different curriculums and procedures put into place to help alternative education students in the district become successful. I have also seen many different methods to determine how and what students are placed at the alternative school. One of the things that has drawn the researcher to this topic is that alternative education students are often overlooked. A deeper look into alternative education has always been a necessary yet often ignored need. This study will hopefully bring to light some aspects that alternative education faculty deserve.

I have spent 13 years working for the first principal and 10 years working with the former math teacher. Thus, the study is informed by the background and experiences that the researcher has been exposed to in 15 years of alternative education. With this experience comes an insight of a teacher who has spent the entirety of his career in alternative education. As an asset this experience should allow me to make inferences and connections within the data to help draw conclusions that may not be recognized from more traditional researchers. The contradiction to this is that my experience tends to fall into just the realm of alternative education and I do not have much (only one semester due to COVID) of experience teaching at a traditional high school. I currently teach at the alternative school in question.

While these background and experiences represent an important asset for the inquiry, they also introduce potential for bias if not carefully unpacked and managed. Bracketing was employed in the study to help protect the subjectivity of the study. In using this technique, the researcher was asked the same questions that the participants were asked to help understand any biases that the researcher may have.

Part of the process to protect the integrity of the study was to employ bracketing and in the spirit of this process, I wanted to present my own answers to the research questions.

1. How do alternative school faculty define success in an alternative school setting?

Response - I feel that defining success is something that is individualized and a definition that can change from person to person and even day to day. The population at an alternative school are often presented with barriers that traditional high school students do not have, and as such have different definitions of a success. Success can be something as simple as completing a task that brings them closer to their end goal. The goal can also be a complex definition, one that is comparable to graduation from high school. The one constant is that success is an individual definition that is as varied as the person involved. Strictly speaking from an academic perspective, achievements and steps toward a designated goal would define success for alternative education students. Often these goals are implied or they can be specifically stated, but progress towards reaching them is the imperative part of it.

2. How do conceptualizations of purpose, definitions of success, approaches to relationship building, and high expectations for learning relate to one another and lead to curricular modifications?

Response - Purpose, definitions of success, relationship building, and expectations are all interrelated in that without one of the above mentioned, the others don't exist. Building relationships with students will help faculty understand what success means for that individual alternative education student. Without the process of building a relationship with the student, truly understanding what success is for that particular student appears to be in virtually impossible. With understanding of what success means for a particular student, the next logical step is to understand what expectations to have of that student. Expectations of the student and understanding what it takes for the student to be success in turn helps

understand what purpose means for that student. However, at the foundation of all of this, is the development of the relationship with that student. Without the relationship, none of that is possible.

A. How do alternative school faculty establish individualized expectations for learning?

Response - Understanding what success means for the individual student, (referring back to the development of the relationship) helps the teacher develop expectations and what success means for that student. Without knowledge of the student (i.e. developing a relationship with the student) the teacher cannot understand what that student deems to be success is, and cannot understand what expectations to hold for that student.

These are my personal opinions of the research questions. In order to protect the integrity of the study, I wanted to express these ideas in order help give an understanding of the perspective of the researcher and where the researcher is coming from. These opinions will help protect the integrity of the study by allowing the reader to not only understand the point of view of the researcher but allows the reader to align the data within the confines of the study.

## **Theoretical Framework**

While there are many different research methods employed by qualitative researchers, the purpose of a phenomenological study is to understand an individual's experience or phenomena and understand how it impacts a person's viewpoint on lived experiences. To further specify, Husserl states, "The purpose of phenomenological interviews is to attain a first-person description of some specified domain of experience" (Thompson et al., 1989). However, while understanding how phenomena impact a person's viewpoint on certain ideologies and perspectives, it is important to narrow the specific epistemological method.

Whereas phenomenological description aims at a faithful description of the lived experience and is accomplished by a bracketing of the researcher's frame of reference, constructivist hermeneutics acknowledges the embedded nature of the researcher's frame as the beginning point in the process of coming to understand and interpret the phenomena under study (Horn, 1998).

The process of acquiring of knowledge can be viewed from many different perspectives. For the purpose of this study, a broad description of the epistemology will contribute to describe the theoretical framework that was used. Maynard defines epistemology as "concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate" (Maynard, 1994, p. 8). In other words, epistemology is concerned with not only what we know, but more so how we know (Crotty, 1998). However, the importance of epistemological awareness cannot be overstated. Transparency and the wherewithal to understand the "what" as well as the "why" is of utmost importance in the current political and academic climate, in which many question the design choices, purposes, and trustworthiness of qualitative studies (Freeman et al., 2007). While there are different types of epistemologies that often intertwine, the focus of this particular study is a constructivist epistemology.

Constructivism and constructionism are often compared in meaning and application. Crotty differentiates the two by stating that "constructivism for epistemological considerations focuses exclusively on 'the meaning-making activity of the individual mind' and to use constructionism where the focus includes 'the collective generation (and transmission) of meaning'" (Crotty, 1998, p.58). In other words, constructivism's focus is more so on the individual's experiences and views, and the constructionist view would focus on the collective

societal point of view. Crotty goes on to say that social constructionism can shape the way we see and define things (Crotty, 1998). While this application is very appropriate in education research, the emphasis in alternative education is often the individual as opposed to the collective societal masses that attend a traditional high school setting.

The basic definition of constructivism as it relates to educational research is simply “a particular way of discovering how people understand their worlds or paradigms” (Denicolo et al., 2016, p. 4). However, as further investigation will indicate, constructivism is much more complex than that definition. Crotty narrows that definition by stating that constructivism “focuses exclusively on the meaning-making activity of the individual mind” (Crotty, 1998, p. 58).

Constructivism’s focus is on the individual, the experiences that the individual has, and how it impacts the way individuals view things. To further define constructivism, “constructivism asserts that nothing represents a neutral perspective – nothing exists before consciousness shapes it into something perceptible” (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 8). Nothing exists within our realm without our perception and impact upon it. Only then can it be defined and used; each one of us has a different point of view on almost everything that we encounter.

The foundation of alternative education is to help the student (often deemed at-risk) who is not successful in the mainstream education system. Thus, the numbers of students are less important than their stories and how best to help them achieve success. As such, these students are unable to become successful in the situations that society places them. A constructionist point of view depends on the situations that the students have been in, which typically tends to skew negatively given the situations that they are in. However, a constructivist point of view places the emphasis on the person and their lived experiences. That each student brings with them “a rich

array of prior experiences, knowledge, and beliefs that they use in constructing new understandings” (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002). Since the purpose of the study is to determine how staff members define success and its subsequent influence on their students, an individualized approach must be taken when studying this topic.

Hermeneutics is the “methodological principal of interpretation” (*Definition of HERMENEUTIC*, n.d.). To place that into context, it is the interpretation of language. Constructivism, as we have discussed is the “meaning-making of the individual mind” (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). Couple the two together, a theoretical framework takes shape. “Hermeneutic Constructivism is a theoretical framework able to inform qualitative inquiry through its support of a deep dialogical engagement with the psychologically proactive individual that we ourselves all are” (Peck & Mummery, 2018, p. 392). Interpretation of the lived experiences can be expressed through four different principles: the world, language, human experience, and the individual.

Historically speaking, Husserl remains the father figure of much of what hermeneutics is grounded in. Husserl’s study in phenomenology and his breakthroughs within that methodology are the foundation for many other epistemological methods. Hermeneutics falls under such a category. However, one of the primary scholars that has researched, written, and helped define hermeneutics in a research methodology was Hans-George Gadamer. Gadamer’s foundation of philosophy revolves around language and conversation. Gadamer argues “that all understanding involves something like a common language, albeit a common language that is itself formed in the process of understanding itself” (Malpas, 2018). Hermeneutics and language are interconnected, and language is the primary focus of the hermeneutic experience.

Hermeneutic Constructivism begins by stating that the human experience is the experience of the world (Peck & Mummery, 2018). Each of us experiences the world through

our own lens, and the world is in fact occurring outside of what we experience on an individual basis. For that matter, it is impossible for us to experience everything that occurs in the world, so we must interpret what is occurring to the individual. We attempt to understand the world around us in order to go about the within the world (Peck & Mummery, 2018). This understanding places us in a “stream of events” that gives meaning to what is occurring around us. Hermeneutic Constructivists do not believe in an observer, independent reality, but rather in the reliance of language among a community of observers (Raskin, 2002). The dependence of understanding in language communication and linguistics cannot be underestimated. The interpretation of this communication and understanding the individual’s perspective within the context of the world is key to understanding from a hermeneutic constructivist point of view.

One of the most important things to understand is that language is what makes us human. Hermeneutic Constructivism acknowledges that language is more than merely an instrument for working in the world; instead, it is the medium of being human, not in terms of restriction to the possibilities of human understanding, but rather as its very condition (Peck & Mummery, 2018, p. 393).

Within the definition and construct of Hermeneutic Constructivism, the person learns from their experience and interpretation of the world around them. However, language is the necessary medium for the person to learn and interpret the experience. Dialogue between two people is easily identified, but the dialogue between a person and the world around them is part of the human experience. From this, the person’s interpretation and projection of that learned experience onto others is what this study is focusing on.

It is established that language is the medium in which understanding occurs. “A person’s understanding processes are guided by his or her languaging of events” (Peck & Mummery,

2018, p. 394). The interview process within the realm of qualitative study reaches to understand this. Understanding the process and the ability to convey this understanding is part of what makes us human. Interpretation of this understanding and use of the language to convey this interpretation is essential in qualitative study. How people interpret and convey the world around them—once an understanding occurs, it cannot go back—indicates a level of intelligence on the subject matter itself (Malpas, 2018).

One thing that must be strongly considered is the point of view of the interviewee and the understanding that they have of the topic. The ability to convey this into language is how learning and understanding occurs, both from the perspective of the interviewee learning from the experience/world around them and the ability to convey these experiences to the interviewer. With understanding comes language and vice versa.

The focus of the subject matter is determined by how knowledge and understanding is processed by the individual person. This information and understanding is the totality of what a person can bring to language—at any given moment—about a thing that is to be understood. “In other words, if we were to ask another person to tell us about something, then what he or she could bring to language on the subject matter represents what that person understands about that something” (Peck & Mummery, 2018, p. 394).

In conclusion, Hermeneutic Constructivism strives to understand how the world around the individual is interpreted and how it is conveyed by that person. This study is trying to understand how teachers in an alternative school setting interpret success and how it influences alternative schools that they work at. In order to do so, a responsive interview study methodology was used. Constructivism inquires how the individual interprets the world around them and how it has influenced their being. Hermeneutic Constructivism strives to understand



that and emphasizes the language in which those understandings are projected. *Mot juste* can be described as “the exactly right word or phrasing” (*Mot Juste / Definition of Mot Juste by Merriam-Webster*, n.d.). Using that definition, Hermeneutic Constructivism achieves its complete elaboration as a theoretical position that supports the search for *mot juste* of the inner outlook of the participant, a level of abstraction that is consistent with the inherently unique and deeply nuanced individuals that we genuinely are (Peck & Mummery, 2018).

### **Methodological Framework**

The responsive interview model is a methodology that was used for this study. According to Rubin and Rubin, the responsive interview is a specific style of qualitative interviewing. Responsive interviews emphasize the building of relationships between the participant and the interviewer and tends to lead toward a more give-and-take in the conversation (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Responsive interviewing has four main characteristics:

3. Responsive interviewing emphasizes search for context and richness while accepting the complexity and ambiguity of real life.
4. The personalities of both interviewer and conversational partner impact the questioning.
5. Interview is an exchange that occurs within a meaningful relationship between interviewer and interviewee.
6. The design remains flexible, from the first formulation of the research topic to the last bit of analysis in the data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 38).

The general purpose of the responsive interview model is to gather in-depth data in a naturalistic point of view. Responsive interviewers view the interviewees as partners and not research subjects. A slight emphasis can be on the development of the relationship or partnership

as opposed to simple data gathering. This helps develop depth and brevity to collected data. The responsive interviewer must also be flexible and supportive in the process to help develop the relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

Within the methodology, there are many approaches that the researcher can take within qualitative interview studies. However, the text offers different suggestions to ensure that the interview process garners the best possible data within this methodology. The first is to keep the interview “fresh” and “real.” One of the advantages of the interview study is to gain firsthand knowledge (or as close as possible) to the research topic. The purpose is to understand the topic and gain a depth of knowledge that simple statistics cannot provide. “The studies present the words of individuals who know about the issues from their own experience and knowledge, hence they portray real people, real events, and real experiences” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 35).

One of the tremendous advantages of a responsive interview study is the ability to get details from the interviewee that a researcher may not get from other types of studies. For example, setting the fact of obtaining details about the topic aside, details about *how* the interviewee responds and the possible emotion attached to the response can be noticed and documented as opposed to simply documenting responses given. When it comes to adding richness to the interview, Rubin and Rubin suggest that “richness means there is a density of ideas in your writing, reflecting the complexity of the world the interviewees live in” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 2). Both aspects strengthen and add depth to a qualitative interview study.

Obviously, accuracy and credibility are necessary to the success of any research project; however, credibility is especially important when working within the confines of a responsive interview method. The foundation of an interview study is to find knowledgeable and credible participants to interview for data and the subsequent data analysis. In fact, the “credibility of

your research can depend on demonstrating how knowledgeable your interviewees are” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Determining the credibility and being able to prove that the interview subjects are credible is a very important part of the interview study.

Within this methodology there is a variety of differences that can be used. However, the responsive interview methodology is a very specific type of interview style within the framework of a qualitative interview study. One of the primary aspects of the responsive interview is to make the interviewee feel comfortable and to apply some of the same social rules to interviews. Taking turns speaking, acknowledging understanding and rudeness when overstepping one another (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) are just some of the similarities between a conversation and responsive interviews. The importance of the similarities cannot be overstated as oftentimes (especially in a professional setting) comfort of the interviewee is paramount to getting honest answers that provide depth to the study. Especially within the first interview, the interviewees can be seen to relax and enjoy themselves, which can help the research process immensely, not to mention the quality of data being provided by the interviewee.

## **Research Design**

**Participant Selection** – Participants were selected from the staff of an alternative school in eastern Kansas. As many of the current staff were selected (who were willing to participate) and although there are a wide variety of experiences and education within the staff, the flexibility of the methodology allowed for deep inquiry within each interview. 9 total participants were interviewed; seven of whom are female. Of those seven, three have doctorates in education, two have graduate degrees, one has a bachelor’s degree, and the other attended college but didn’t finish. Two of the females are African American and the other females are Caucasian. The other

two staff members are both white males with graduate degrees in education and are certified administrators as well.

**Research Site** – All interviews were conducted on school grounds in accordance with health and safety guidelines due to the COVID pandemic.

**Membership Role** – The researcher has worked in the building with the participants for various amounts of years. One participant has been working in alternative education as long as the researcher, while the others have fewer years of experience. There has been a professional relationship with all of the participants; however, some of the participants haven't been working in the building as long as the researcher.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Nine in-depth, open-ended responsive interviews were used to collect data. This type of interview tends to focus on digging deeper into the participant's experiences and gaining a better understanding of the experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017). In-depth interviews are also essential when exploring personal and sensitive issues (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A responsive interview is a specific type of qualitative interview. It emphasizes flexibility and adjustable questioning techniques. In fact, it is expected that the interviewer accepts the personality of the participant and adjusts the questioning (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Two rounds of interviews were conducted, and upon completion of each round transcription and coding occurred for a total of 16 interviews. This was done to ensure after each round the "freshness" of the interview remained so transcription and coding would be relevant. Saldaña states that "the majority of qualitative researchers will code their data both during and after collection as an analytic tactic, for coding is analysis" (Saldaña, 2016). However once this

was complete, a second round of coding was done, because coding is cyclical (Saldana, 2016). Once completed, the codes were analyzed to gather a sense of the data and compare the data of the participants. The intent was to discover the pattern and meaning between the participants and notice underlying themes hidden in the data. As Saldaña states, “Quantitative analysis calculates the mean. Qualitative analysis calculates meaning” (Saldana, 2016).

### **Data Management and Analysis**

The focus of qualitative research is to discover and understand non-numerical data and can be used to understand the human element or story of a human reality. Specifically, “qualitative research aims to work within the context of human experiences and the ways in which meaning is made out of those experiences” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 6). There are many approaches and methods to data analysis in qualitative research, and they are often as diverse as qualitative research itself. In general, qualitative data analysis is an inductive process. Inductive analysis can be defined as “approaches that primarily use detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data by an evaluator or researcher” (Thomas, 2006). To put it simply, Bhattacharya describes it as “working ‘up’ from the data” (Bhattacharya, 2017). The process is described by Bhattacharya as “looking at the raw data, chunk them into small units of meaning (codes), cluster similar analytical units and label them as categories and identify patterns across the categories” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 150). While this process is occurring, the researcher would also want to note emotions, thoughts, questions, or anything else that the researcher may conclude as they are analyzing the data.

For the sake of this particular study, the basic process for data analysis was quite simple. After the data was collected and the data transcribed into a practical format, the analysis began.

Once the initial data was collected, it was transcribed and coded through first and second cycle processes as described below. Codes are “researcher based constructs that symbolize data” (Vogt et al., 2014). Codes are then organized into categories for later use, as Saldaña describes, “Attributes interpreted meaning for each individual datum for later use of pattern detection, categorization, assertion, proposition or theory development and other analytic uses” (Saldaña, 2016). The coding process is both simple and elaborate in its methods. Looking at the data, categorizing the various data points is a simplistic view of coding. While there are many different methods of coding, this researcher chose to use structural coding for first cycle analysis.

Structural coding is a method that relates data to a specific research question and collected for further detailed analysis (Saldaña, 2016). As more data is collected it can be further analyzed and gathered in different categories. From within these categories, the data can be clustered together and broken down into different sub-categories. For example, within the first interview with the principal of the alternative high school, he ties success very closely with student self-satisfaction. If the student feels satisfied with whatever accomplishment they have achieved, then in the opinion of the principal that student is a success. The category that is labeled “success” can be further broken down from “success” to “success – self-satisfaction.” This will be done with each node as more data are analyzed and added. From there the researcher can establish patterns from each category.

As Wertz et al. explains, categories that are too separate are artificial. Human life is multilayered, contradictory, and multivalent, and the strands are always interconnected (Wertz et al., 2011). Research and, more specifically, coding are aspects that are connected to one another. While first cycle coding is a basis for organizing and developing the initial research process, second cycle coding is more elaborate in its process. In second cycle coding, codes are

reorganized and condensed into different themes, and the number of codes should decrease with each cycle.

The transition from first cycle coding to second cycle coding includes analysis before coding can be completed and second cycle coding can begin. The researcher used a lump coding method when initially working with the data. However, as analysis continued, the codes were condensed from a larger number to smaller, more manageable chunks for analysis. Saldaña explains, “In sum, if you feel overwhelmed by the number of codes you assigned to the data, then condense them further for analysis or second cycle processes” (Saldaña, 2016). This is the process that the researcher took in data transition and analysis. Pulling “chunks” of data from the transcripts and then lumping them in with other similar codes helped make the data more streamlined and easier to work with. From there, assigning simple codes to the nodes helped transition to second cycle coding.

Second cycle coding is more than just merely a reorganization of codes; it also incorporates analysis and pathways of the topic on hand. Often, the codes and different cycles of coding guide the research as each cycle is analyzed. There are different styles and methods of second cycle coding that can fit different methods of research. For example, focused coding is used toward developing grounded theory. Elaborative coding builds on past studies and uses it to support the current research project. However, the method that was used in this research project was pattern coding. Pattern coding is a “way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of categories, themes, or concepts” (Saldaña, 2016). Another way to describe pattern coding is reorganizing codes and identifying a theme within the codes. The importance of identifying a theme cannot be overstated. pattern coding is much more than just reorganizing the codes and has many uses in research, including the following, which were especially relevant within the

study conducted: (1) conducting large amounts of data into smaller number of analytic units, (2) development of major themes from the data, and (3) the search for rules, causes, and explanations in the data (Miles et al., 2018).

The purpose of the study is to find themes within the data to understand what success is in an alternative school setting, how it is influential in the curriculum, and how the faculty and staff influence the curriculum. Using the data and subsequent transcriptions, pattern coding was extremely beneficial in getting the data to manageable portions. While coding and examining the data, referencing Tracy and applying Tracy's guidelines throughout the study allowed consistency and diligence in data analysis.

### **Data Representation**

Once data collection and analysis are complete, representation will be in the form of a thematic description. This thematic description will allow for an accessible format in which the data can be reviewed, and the interpretation of the researcher can be understood. The data will also be represented in a visual format to allow for understanding of how the conclusions were realized. Codes will be organized into a visual graph to show the themes that have emerged from the data. The codes will be refined to show the number of times that the themes are referenced and give an understanding of how important the data surrounding the themes are. Nvivo will be the primary tool to ensure that this is done correctly. The data will be refined from raw data to codes and categories. The categories can be compared and make progress toward themes and concepts (Saldaña, 2016).



## **Ethics**

This study was submitted to IRB and has been approved by IRB. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants and to maintain the integrity of the interviews during research. Data will be kept for approximately three years before being destroyed. While the integrity of the interview process and data collection process was maintained, it must be noted that the participants comprised coworkers with higher degrees of education, and one participant is a long-time administrator of the researcher. Upon completion of the research project, there will be a greater understanding of success, each other, and how alternative education can be improved.

## Chapter 4 - Results and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to determine how success is/was defined by alternative education staff, and how those definitions influence alternative education curriculum and expectations of students who attend the alternative school. With this knowledge, it is hoped that alternative schools can help their students become more successful by developing curriculum and cultivating definitions of success for their students. To guide the study, the following research questions were used.

1. How do alternative school faculty define success in an alternative high school setting?
2. How do conceptualizations of purpose, definitions of success, approaches to relationship building, and high expectations for learning relate to one another and lead to curricular modifications?

- A. How do alternative school faculty establish individualized expectations for learning?

As stated above, data was gathered from nine participants using open ended interviews with an examining perspective of hermeneutic constructivist point of view. Each participant was interviewed in two different sessions, at the alternative school. The data was recorded, transcribed and coded for examination. Themes were sought out in the data to help analyze the data. This chapter will consist of a brief description of the participants, an examination of the themes that emerge from the data and finally how that data relates to the research questions themselves.

The participants are described below; however, pseudonyms have been used to protect their confidentiality.

**Sam-**

Sam is a Caucasian, middle aged male that was the current principal of the alternative school when the study first began. However, when the study was concluded, Sam had moved up into a district level leadership position. Sam began his career by joining the military after one year of college. After three years in the military, Sam went on to join the police force and spent almost 20 years there. Working his way up within the ranks of the police force, he decided that he wanted to finish college and get his teaching degree. Sam completed his degree and taught middle school social studies for six years prior to obtaining his administrative graduate degree and becoming principal at the alternative school. He stepped into a difficult situation at the alternative school in which he was replacing an interim administrator and had to learn quickly and on the job. After working at the alternative school for 12 years, Sam took a position in the district administration. Throughout his career, Sam would always seek to help students and kids in difficult situations.

They (the school district) had programs where let them (SPED students) work after school and helped the custodians and things like that and they got paid and so I had to keep track of their time and all that and I always worked with the underdogs, you know because back then they believed if you were in special education, you know, you were in the basement of the building you didn't come off with the real people, you know, and so I just you know, took care of the kids (Sam, personal communication, April 1, 2021).

Sam indicated that throughout his career, he would tend to work with the underdogs, (so to speak) and students who may not have a voice to help them become successful. It must be noted that during his description of working with these students, Sam became a bit emotional in his remembrance of his times working with them. Even within his role on the police force, Sam would state that he would often look out for the kids in need of help. He states that “During my

time in law enforcement. I tried to work with youth to keep them from you know, getting in trouble” (Sam, personal communication, April 1, 2021). Throughout his career, Sam has shown a desire to help those students in need – even prior to his career in teaching. The sorts of students who would be deemed at-risk, or students who would end up attending alternative schools.

### **Chad-**

Chad is a Caucasian middle-aged male who had been teaching at the alternative school for approximately 10 years. Chad is a graduate from a local school and came from a household of educators with both of his parents teaching. In fact, Chad went to school in the same building that his father taught at, and it had an influence on his educational experience. Chad and his brothers were held to high educational standards by his parents which is evident in his teaching and his academic accomplishments. He graduated with an undergraduate degree and a graduate degree in Education. He is dual certified in math and special ed and was often called upon to use both certifications to help his students become successful. Chad currently works as a special education administrator in a neighboring school district. Chad always held high expectations for his students, as a result of the high expectations that he held for himself. The higher that he held the expectations of himself, this would reflect upon his students, and the job that he does. Chad states,

Oh yeah, my expectations have driven me not just in school, but also in my career. I’ve also tried to instill a lot of those ideas and a lot of those goals that I’ve created for myself with the students (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021).

These ideas and goals are often mutually beneficial for the students as well as Chad in his academic career. The expectations that he had for himself growing up have shown up in the expectations that he places on his students.

### **Ruby-**

Ruby is a Caucasian, younger middle-aged female who was a behavioral interventionist at the alternative school. Her job title essentially revolved around working with students whose behavior is deemed extremely high risk and as such, need specified attention in an isolated room. She would work with these students to try and help with their social/emotional learning, content-based learning as well as development of proper social skills and interactions with others. Ruby came from a small town and graduated from a very small high school and viewed education as a way to better herself. Her parents held her to high standards in education which would lead to her success in college and her career. Ruby's education includes a bachelor's degree in elementary education, a graduate degree in curriculum and instruction and "ABD" in her doctorate work. She worked in the alternative education building for three years, and subsequently moved with her husband Chad, to a neighboring school district last year.

### **Marcy-**

Marcy is an older middle aged African American woman who teaches English at the alternative school. She has certifications in Special Ed, English, and administration. She has a doctorate in Special Education with an emphasis on reading. In her education, she was held to a high educational standard by her family, however her post-secondary education was largely done of her own volition. She has a wealth of knowledge and experience having taught everywhere

from Chicago, Texas, New York, Japan and Egypt. One of the constant things throughout her career is Marcy's ability to care about the students and what she teaches them. She states,

You have to care. If you care and they (the students) think about that for a while, and maybe it's not till next week, but maybe they think that they have to care and that they're responsible for themselves. I think that my mama (and other family members) put in me a desire to keep helping students (Marcy, personal communication, March 26, 2021).

Marcy's passion for teaching has given her motivation to continue to teach during the difficult pandemic and to try to continue to help students become successful. "I'm very passionate about teaching very passionate probably overly so" (Marcy, personal communication, March 26, 2021). Marcy's passion has also led her to teach her students based on the needs of the students how they define success for themselves.

#### **Tara-**

Tara is a young, African American female teacher who teaches JAG at the alternative school. JAG is a class that emphasizes development of leadership and employability skills. The purpose of JAG is to help students learn skills to help them become successful in their future educational and career endeavors. Tara has taught in the program for three years after graduating from the same high school within the school district. She then went to graduate from a local university and has been working since. Educational expectations of her by her parents were high as she was expected to go on to graduate and receive a higher education. She maintains high expectations on her students in order to help them become as successful as they can be.

I don't feel like you should ever lower your standards and I told my students that you know, like if you guys are going to have this mentality that my standards are too high.

That's fine. I'm going to continue to have these high expectations because that's what you need in life. (Tara, personal communication, March 24, 2021).

High expectations of students can also correlate to increased student learning (Lumsden, 1997) which reflect the importance of maintaining these high expectations that Tara has for her students. Tara's high expectations of her students are a reflection of the expectations that she had of herself growing up.

### **Dorothy-**

Dorothy is an older Caucasian female who teaches Special Education at the alternative school. She retired after the end of the previous school year after working in various districts since 1991. In high school, Dorothy wanted to be a nurse, but a sickness prevented her from following up on that. At her high school, there were programs available to students that would allow them to experience different career avenues in order to help the students choose an appropriate career path. This led to Dorothy's choice to become a teacher and guide students to "explore things" (Dorothy, personal communication, June 2, 2021). The programs to help expose her and her peers at her high school to different careers had a profound influence on her career decisions. She stated in her interview, (there were) "lots of lots of exposure that I really feel like I benefited from before it was time to graduate from high school" (Dorothy, personal communication, June 2, 2021). These programs would influence her decision to enter the field of education and would also influence how she defined success for her students.

### **Katie-**

Katie is a middle-aged Caucasian female with a doctorate in education. At the time of the interview Katie taught English and was a Behavioral Interventionist. As a Behavioral Interventionist, Katie would speak to students who were having difficulties, place plans in order

to help improve student behavior and eliminate disruptive behaviors. Students were often placed in her classroom to help the students cope with the social and emotional stresses that the students often dealt with. However, her position was eliminated, and she no longer works in the district.

As Katie was growing up, her parents had high expectations of her in school, however she says that they were “very hands off” when it came to her education (Katie, personal communication, November 1, 2021). To note, Katie also attended an alternative high school growing up and eventually ended up earning her Ed.D. As a behavioral interventionist, developing relationships was a high priority for her. Katie states “I try to relate to each one (student) and I try to build a relationship with each one (student), I found that with the scope of work that we do. I mean they’re willing to do a lot more work than for me” (Katie, personal communication, November 1, 2021). Katie placed an emphasis on developing relationships and understanding what success meant for that student based on those relationships. Her past experiences would also influence how she defined success for her students.

### **Danielle-**

Danielle is a middle-aged Hispanic female who is the current principal at the alternative school. This is currently her first year as principal and prior to this, she worked as an assistant principal in another high school. Growing up her parents held high expectations of her in academics with the expectation to attend a post-secondary school. She has met and exceeded these expectations with the completion of her doctorate in Education. One of the things that she has discussed is a flexible mindset in working with alternative students and the curriculum that is being used. She states “I think that you can't use a cookie cutter program to teach kids. Like when they have all these adversities and you do have to make modifications to the curricula for them to be successful” (Danielle, personal communication, November 9, 2021). This mindset



has helped her work with a wide variety of students from immigrants to the alternative population that the alternative school currently serves.

**Hailey-**

Hailey is a young Caucasian female who is a long-term science substitute at the alternative school. She does not have a teaching license but is in the process of earning the certification necessary to become a full-time teacher. At the time of the first interview, she had been employed for a few weeks after subbing for other schools in the district. Growing up, she came from a family of educators and of course, expectations of her in school were very high. She has endeavored to maintain high expectations while remaining flexible with her students. In doing so, has found a career that she is passionate about. Hailey states,

But I do think that because I'm not as strict in certain areas. These kids feel like they can come in and say what they want and then they pay attention. I feel personally, that I am fairly successful already because I can see that these kids are trying for me and it kind of validating (Hailey, personal communication, November 9, 2021).

Hailey's parental expectations were also reflected in the expectations that were provided by her teachers as well. She would have teachers who could see the potential in her and would subsequently hold her to high standards in the classroom. Holding these high expectations balanced with the flexibility to understand student perspective has shown to be a successful strategy in her classroom. She states

So I just I don't think that I am super strict per se, but I do have them do a lot of work and to keep up on things but I think that the leniency and other areas keeps them motivated to continue on in my class (Hailey, personal communication, November 9, 2021).

Hailey's classroom management and her understanding of her students shows in student progress and motivation. She understands that balance is key to encouraging students to remain motivated to work in her class.

## **Themes**

During the coding and analysis process, three themes from the data emerged. The first theme that emerged was that success in alternative education is highly individualized and primarily entails small achievements of goals or success that compound upon one another. The second theme that emerged is that building relationships with students is of the utmost importance to develop success and subsequent expectations for alternative students. Finally, individualized expectations and curricular modifications are dependent on the relationship with the individual student and the knowledge of what success means for that particular student.

### **Theme One**

Success in alternative education is individualized, however, it is often comprised of small successes that are built upon one another.

### **Sam-**

The long-time principal of the alternative school spent the early part of his education career teaching social studies at the middle school. Sam states, "As I taught school, I tried to get kids to understand that, you know, you gotta do what you have to do and success can be looked at it in very many different ways" (Sam, personal communication, April 1, 2021). Success in his view, is very personal and applied to the person and the expectations that they had. He further

states “I told them as long as they did the best they could and went and got jobs or went to school... As long as they were doing what they could... If they felt successful, they were successful” (Sam, personal communication, April 1, 2021). Success is also something that is dependent on the happiness of the student. Sam states, “I believe that success in my 13 years now as the principal, I’ve tried to get kids to understand that whatever they do as long as their happy doing it, they can consider themselves a success” (Sam, personal communication, April 1, 2021). Sam also discussed how short-term successes can build upon themselves into long term successes. This is essential in motivation and not allowing students to become frustrated and give up. He states,

They can't do math and all of a sudden it comes to them so they can see that for short term that they can be successful or you know, you take your history contracts and they don't understand (initially) but you work with them to get them to understand and they realize that they can do it. It's not as hard as they thought. They know that there's things that they can now do that. All they got to do is put in a little work and they can have that continued success. So yeah, I think they see short-term success and it turns into long-term success (Sam, personal communication, April 1, 2021).

Students can have continued long-term success after experiencing short term success and building upon those short-term successes. This is key in not only motivation for students, but to continue their academic careers.

All of the participants were asked to describe a success story in the students that they have encountered at some point in their careers. Sam described a success story that involved a student at the alternative school while he was principal.

Well, we have I think the one that probably stands out the most we had a girl that came through and she was always in trouble and you know getting kicked out of school, getting suspended, but if you look at her life, she was the victim of human trafficking. She was kicked to the curb by her parent. She lived but was living with relatives but most of the time she was living with the people that were trafficking her, but we got her some help. We got her hooked up with some mental health counseling and during her senior year. She not only finished, but she also while she was finishing her senior class has she got her CNA license and she's now working at two different nursing homes and doing well. She's got a child and she's living her life and she's a success story (Sam, personal communication, April 1, 2021).

One of the primary reasons that this student's success stood out for Sam was the incredible amount of adversity that the student had endured. She had endured such a dire situation in her home life and was able to overcome the adversity in order to be successfully employed, a functioning member of society and raise her child.

#### **Chad-**

Chad who is dual certified in math and SPED had similar thoughts when it came to success in that success is something that is personal and individualized. However, his thoughts on success were more goal oriented when it came to himself and his students. Chad stated "yeah, so to me, success is hitting that Milestone, you know success for me is measured in increments" (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021). He goes on to say "You want to put a mark to reach for something short term. Short term goals make that your success and from there build on each of those small successes. Eventually you can get that large goal you're

looking for” (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021). Finally, Chad gave an extremely important piece of data with the following quote. He states,

Yeah, because what are you going to take away from a failure if I can learn a lesson from a failure, then I have then found success in that field. That’s true. And that’s another thing these kids do. (They) understand that you can fail and still have a successful moment in the failure” (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021).

Chad mentioned that the achievement of goals doesn’t necessarily define what success is. This concept is extremely important in that success isn’t necessarily tied directly to achievement of goals or typical perceptions of what success is. The importance lies in the fact that a moment of learning could be defined as a success, even within the realms of failure.

When Chad was asked to describe a success story that was important to him, he mentioned a student that he had at the alternative school. He goes on to describe a student named Joseph.

He was in that group, that group came in and they’d just goof off. So, I mean they didn't want to do anything. Yeah, you know, they came in to goof off and have fun and draw and sleep and whatever else you can think of and you know, especially Joseph. I felt with him, he always had a hot head and would try to find every way he could to avoid work and especially struggled with it and math was a struggle for him. So, it took me his entire time in our building to get him to finish three credits of math and it wasn't anything that was super complicated. I don't think it was anything beyond his ability level, but he had this mental block against it. And it took time to build his view of being successful. To get him just to work through it and I think it took probably almost a year and a half before he started seeing that he was capable of finishing it and that

even if he was struggling, you know working with me and not against me he was going to find that success. He wouldn't stand in the way (of his own success) because I wouldn't allow that to happen. So, towards the end of that, you know, he and his friends were kind of the same way. I know his friend didn't graduate in the end though. It didn't know he dropped out but by the time he dropped that he was all done with math. So at least for these kids they finished all their math requirements. I know Joseph did though. Yeah. So those are the kinds of kids I see. The most success with the kids when I work with them. That's what I like to see just those kids. Finding their success after they don't think they can. (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021).

Chad's example of a successful student revolved around helping a student get past the difficulty that the student put in front of himself in order to successfully graduate. Seemingly, the student was placing a barrier in his own path to success, and Chad was able to help the student understand that he could be successful and accomplish the tasks on hand.

### **Ruby-**

Ruby began her description of success in a manner of small accomplishments that work towards a goal. Specially, reaching the goal is a success, not necessarily the obtainment of that goal. Ruby states

Continue making gains, huh? Continually making gains because it's not necessarily about reaching your end goal, it's about getting to that end goal. And then what can I do to get past it? I guess that's just how I can define success. So if you do have a goal and you make it, it's not just the goal that was successful, it was the process to it. Hmm. So to define success as difficult because I see it as a multi-step thing. (Ruby, personal communication, June 2, 2021).

Ruby's description of success includes the attainment of goals as part of the success, but she also mentioned the process of obtaining the goals. While success is meeting a goal, the process of learning and accomplishing that goal is also a part of the success. Ruby also discussed how success and its definition evolve as people grow older and mature. She states

I think success changes from childhood to all the way through your adulthood because it's a child's success is for a parent, a child successes, can they, you know, feed themselves. Can they tie their shoes? Those are the successful things. We look at those milestones (Ruby, personal communication, June 2, 2021).

As the student grows and evolves, the milestones change. The definitions of success evolve and sometimes become more complicated. As the definitions of success evolve, so do the goals that are required to be met. She states "once they're in school, it is, can you read? Can you write, can you do math? As they get older it's can you understand and build upon these equations? Can you create an essay? I think it varies" (Ruby, personal communication, June 2, 2021).

Ruby's definition of success is constantly evolving and changing as the person grows older. Even though the academic goals aren't necessarily synonymous with the physical growth of the person, the academic goals also constantly evolve and change.

This understanding how success is a personal definition that varies from person to person. From here, she goes on to state,

I think as we get there, the success factors change. That's why I think it's always a continual process because it's one of those things where, ok, as a kindergartener, can you write your ABCs? That's great. That was success. But now we have to put those ABCs together to make some words. And now I have to put those

words together to make a sentence so it constantly builds upon itself (Ruby, personal communication, June 2, 2021).

Ruby also discussed that the definition of success is individualized as well. For some students, being successful can mean something different than for another student. She mentioned a former student at the alternative school. She describes

A former student we had last year that never finished. She's gone. I saw her the other day with her baby, and she's working at one of the clubs, that's which, and that's success for her. I'm seeing her going 'you are not married, you're working at the club, that's not the best and you have a baby without a dad' and she's perfectly fine with it. So, in her, in that perspective, and her mind, she must see herself as successful. (Ruby, personal communication, June 2, 2021).

Ruby's example of a former student points to that even within the context of the example, the student's definition of success is vastly different from the parameters of what Ruby would define success within. Regardless, the student felt that she was in a good place and as a result a success story.

Another factor Ruby discusses is cultural influences on culture and definitions of culture. She brings up her hometown and uses it as an example to describe how success can be different in each cultural setting.

So, we also have a very high migrant population. There's a lot that come up from Mexico. Sure, there are a lot of them but for them, success is just getting their kids through high school without having a baby because like there was one year that we had. I think it was 10 children, born from eighth grade to senior year, ten babies, and they were all young mothers. So and then one of them, like two of them, they got married, their parents signed for them to



get married in those age group. Yeah, so it's one of those things where for them success is to get them through high school and then to find help them find a job. If they get through high school and they find jobs, because for that population, there's their idea of success is not needing the government to help them pay for anything. To them, that is their success (Ruby, personal communication, June 2, 2021).

Ruby alludes to the differences in how success is different for different cultural groups as well. Success can vary from individual to individual or from group to group. Another aspect of success that can vary is the outward perception of what success is from person to person and group to group. However, success is something that is defined by the person and not necessarily from an outside perspective.

Ruby was asked about a specific incident of success for a student that she has had in the past. She mentioned a student who's reading levels were extremely low for that student's grade level. She describes the situation as such.

There was one kid I had, I'll never forget him. He was a junior high student reading at a second grade level. So, during his time in school he'd been in foster care and bounce back and forth. And a lot of mental health issues, because of a trauma, he endured as a child, our whole goal was to get him from second grade reading level in that year to fourth or fifth, we got him to fourth. So that was pretty awesome (Ruby, personal communication, June 2, 2021).

For Ruby, helping the student go from a second grade reading level to a fourth grade reading level was a tremendous success even though he was reading below grade level comparatively to his peers. For him, making the educational gain from a second grade reading level to a fourth grade reading level was a success.

## **Marcy-**

Marcy has had a wide variety of experience in the educational system. As such, her definition of success has drawn on the years of experience that she has. However, her definition is very basic in nature. She states that success is “setting goals and achieving them” (Marcy, personal communication, March 26, 2021). From there, building upon those goals and instilling the desire to “want more and work within your means to get what you need and want” (Marcy, personal communication, March 26, 2021) is how she defines success in alternative education. Instilling the intrinsic motivation to achieve the goals for her students is a goal for her. When she was asked about a success story of one her students, Marcy described a student that she had that went on to achieve a tremendous level of success.

A student came to me, his mother sent him to me. He was a junior over at the main building (traditional high school) and he came and he needed help applying to West Point. I said, why do you come to me? And he said because my mother thinks you're brilliant, so I said, okay, let's get on it. Show me your essay, we need to go back and do some pulling and making sure that he met those deadlines. He got in. So, to me that that's been my most successful story.

One of the reasons that this situation was important to Marcy was the high level of accomplishment that the student achieved with her help. Being accepted into West Point with her guidance was something that she really considered to be a great success.

## **Tara-**

Tara took a broader approach to defining success. She makes the connection from success to stability by stating

I think success equals stability growing up. For me, it was stability and I think success is the same. If you can be well off and you're

happy with whatever it is that you're doing, you know, you don't have to want for anything that's success for me (Tara, personal communication, March 24, 2021).

For Tara, success is connected to stability and comfort in life. She equates success to happiness and financial stability. If a person has the means to live comfortably and is happy in their pursuit of those means, then that person is successful.

She also mentioned that when it comes to success in her classroom, she said that it starts off with the students graduating and getting on to a path off success (Tara, personal communication, March 24, 2021). Moving forward, that teaching them (the students) the skills it takes to have a good job and be good citizens (Tara, personal communication, March 24, 2021). Since she her class revolves around teaching students skills to transition into job preparedness, her definition of success correlates with that sentiment. Tara states "I'm big on pathways, you know. We want to make sure success in our class is to make sure they have the skills that they need to transition into that job career preparedness" (Tara, personal communication, March 24, 2021). Her definition of success tends to focus more on the larger picture with students taking steps along a path towards their career goals.

### **Dorothy-**

Dorothy's definition of success starts broad but becomes more specific as she discusses it more. "Success is being a contributing member of society with responsibilities to the community, whatever your community is, or whatever part of community you want to be in" (Dorothy, personal communication, June 2, 2021). However, as the discussion evolved she stated that "completing a class is a very important thing for our students. I think they need small successes, but it may be small to me, but to them, that's a big success" (Dorothy, personal communication, June 2, 2021). Self-satisfaction is also intertwined with her definition of success

as she states “It is something to see them be proud of themselves that they were able to complete just a class and hopefully earn a high school diploma” (Dorothy, personal communication, June 2, 2021). Dorothy views success from an academic standpoint and the relationship between success and completing coursework to help the student graduate. The goal is to graduate, and in order to do this, smaller successes (such as completing courses) lead to the goal of graduation.

**Katie-**

Katie views success in a manner that is all encompassing. In that she views success on a broader scale in which students need to be healthy from all aspects in order to be successful in the classroom.

To be a holistic perspective where it would be physical health, mental health emotional well-being before academics because if you don’t have that first, then you can’t have the second part. Making sure that the basic needs are attended to before you can go the next level (Katie, personal communication, November 1, 2021).

She goes on to specifically point to define success within the context of student happiness. If a student is happy and healthy, then students are capable of being successful and authentically learning. When asked how she would specifically define what success is for alternative education students, she states, “to me, it would be happiness and well-being of the students number one because, of course, Maslow taught us that if you don't have that, you can't get anything else” (Katie, personal communication, November 1, 2021). She also equates success with authentic learning.

Authentic learning is important to the success of the students in that there's not going to be authentic learning and it's not going to be a retention. So, what's the point of them is coming here and

doing anything if they're not going to learn. So real learning has to first establish, some type of community connection, a community of practice, a support structure, where there's enough social interaction that they're able to get along (Katie, personal communication, November 1, 2021).

According to Kate if a student isn't authentically learning, then the school isn't being successful in educating that student. In order for that student to authentically learn, the student must be healthy in their social, emotional and physical aspects of life.

### **Danielle-**

Danielle is the current principal at the alternative school and in her career, she has viewed success on many different levels. However, when describing success, she discusses it in a manner that varies for each student. "I think it depends on the kid" she says, (Danielle, personal communication, November 9, 2021) and each one comes to the school in a different situation. Often students come to the school in situations where they may not successfully graduate, but they can be successful. Danielle states,

They (students) didn't have time to stay here and get their diploma. But the time that they were here, you know, we tried to make the best of it. We tried to help them grow. I think it's our duty as educators to educate them whether it be in content or life skills (Danielle, personal communication, November 9, 2021).

From this perspective, success and education isn't directly focused on graduation or even completion of coursework. It has to do with educating the student in different aspects of life. Danielle also points to the reality that all students in alternative education don't graduate. She says, "I hope that they can find success in other ways other than just the diploma. I mean, we want everybody to have that diploma but the reality is it's not going to happen for everybody"

(Danielle, personal communication, November 9, 2021). There is a harsh truth in that statement in that not all students do graduate. So, success can be measured for those students in growth, no matter how small. “So I think you have to give them opportunities to show little successes” (Danielle, personal communication, November 9, 2021) she says. This gives them (student) something to build off of as they go through their academic coursework and not feel overwhelmed. She emphasizes the small steps for her students in order to become successful.

You can get that diploma, but we're going to take it one step at a time and you're going to work in here in this history class and finish this. And then you're going to go to your next period, and you might finish one or two assignments or whatever and that's success, you know. Don't give up, or don't be unmotivated just by looking at the big picture like celebrate the small successes along the way (Danielle, personal communication, November 9, 2021).

These small steps are important for the students to remain motivated and to continue with their coursework. Even though not all students can be deemed a success from the standpoint of graduation, these students can be a success by accomplishing small goals and learning life skills.

### **Hailey-**

Hailey's view on success for alternative students is very similar to the Danielle's in that success is not always associated with graduation or completing expected tasks. In her view, it relates to learning and attempting different tasks. She states,

To me, success isn't necessarily rigid standards. It's not always 'you pass this class, you get this' way. It could be from someone who is coming into this classroom, who has very little knowledge of science or art because that's what I'm doing. And just learning something as long as they're trying and are learning and they have

made a personal effort to do these things. Then, to me, that it's successful (Hailey, personal communication, November 9, 2021).

Much like the others, Hailey feels that success is individual and can vary greatly. Meeting standards don't necessarily define successes, but individual accomplishments do. She also equates effort and learning to success as opposed to simply meeting standards.

Hailey also discusses success for different students. She mentions students who don't put forth any effort and doesn't pay attention as a student who isn't successful in her eyes. "I would say that a student that comes in here and pays no attention hasn't learned anything all year is not successful" (Hailey, personal communication, November 9, 2021). Even though, that student could be a "success" from an outside perspective. There are other "types" of students that she mentions that may be in her class that are successful even though their transcripts may not show it. She states,

you get the kids that come in that are transferring from other high schools and they haven't learned anything since elementary school. And they just haven't paid attention to me. And for me to feel successful as a teacher, it is that to get these kids pay attention and make an effort to actually learn. So even if they only learn something. Like they're not to the standards of that kid that has the A, but if they have learned something in this classroom, they are successful (Hailey, personal communication, November 9, 2021).

Hailey's philosophy on success demonstrates a flexibility in what success is to alternative education students. Success in her perspective, is relatable to that of learning and effort as opposed to strictly achievement.

## **Theme Two**

The second theme that emerged is that building relationships with students is of the utmost importance to develop success, concepts of purpose for the alternative education student and subsequent expectations for alternative students. Within this theme, the understanding is that without relationships with students, success, knowledge of expectations or purpose will not be possible.

### **Sam-**

During Sam's time teaching he understood the importance of developing a relationship with his students. This understanding would later carry over to his days as a principal and the essential nature of smaller numbers in the alternative classroom. Sam goes on to say,

This is nothing bad about the high school, but their number over there, they don't always have that close of a relationship with their students. I've had kids walk into my class, and I know something isn't right. And there's no sense trying to teach what you were gonna teach him that day until you figure out what's wrong (Sam, personal communication, April 1, 2021).

Sam notes the importance of teacher-student relationships and the influence that those relationships can have even on the day-to-day aspects of teaching. He also alludes to the importance of the low student/teacher ratio and its influence on developing teacher relationships with the students.

The development of relationships with students is essential in order for the student and teacher to be successful. Sam makes the connection between the relationships between the students and teachers and its importance on student motivation and achievement. He talks about the staff at the alternative school and their ability to make connections and relationships with



their students. He states, “we come across to the kids different and we hear more and they see (that) we care more and so they care for the most part” (Sam, personal communication, April 1, 2021). As Sam states, these relationships can equate directly to student achievement and success; if the students understand that if the staff care about them and their endeavors then the likelihood of the students becoming successful will be greater.

Another thing that Sam mentions of interest is that the benefits of the relationship between student/teacher is often mutual. He states, “you look at the pessimistic side of things and in watching these kids grow, it makes you look at the opportunities that we've created for them and for us, you know, we're better people for what we do” (Sam, personal communication, April 1, 2021). This is an often-overlooked aspect of education, that the faculty and staff often benefit from the development of relationships with their students. Not only from the perspective of helping the students achieve success and meet expectations but becoming better teachers and gathering an understanding of how to better help students.

#### **Chad-**

Developing relationships with students was essential to Chad in how he developed his curriculum and expectations with his students. He credits his upbringing and the experience of having both of his parents in education give him an understanding of how relationships with his students can mold the expectations that he has for his students. Chad states, “that’s kind of what I’ve taken from growing up with my parents in education and how to look at what students should be able to do as I’m working with the students, especially in an alternative setting” (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021). Chad’s belief that expectations and understanding what the students are capable of are understood through the relationships he has with his students. He went on to elaborate in that he stated “that he tries to get the students to establish

their own expectations by working with them and showing them what they can achieve if they work hard and hopefully they'll start getting that intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic motivation" (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021). One of his goals is to have the students have high expectations for themselves and eventually become intrinsically motivated.

Chad also mentioned that in his relationships with his students he wanted to establish comfort in that his students knew that they could come to him with questions. "I want to be that person that others can come and say 'hey, I'm not sure what to do here'. And then I can give them some ideas or some solutions that might help them" (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021). The development of comfort between Chad and his students is important in that he wants his students to be comfortable enough to come to him for help in content and other aspects of life. The relationships that Chad has with his students have helped him establish a purpose for his students and develop goals for both him and his students. He states, "A lot of those ideas and a lot of those goals that I've created for myself, I've created with the students as well" (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021). Chad's goals for himself and his students are often congruent. Part of his professional goals are directly related to the student's success and become mutually beneficial.

These goals and relationships are another step in the process of helping students become successful in their academic careers. Within the realms of the relationships that Chad has with his students is the importance of teaching students how to be successful. He states, "We gotta teach what success is from the beginning. Hmm because that's not something we teach in schools anymore, whether it's alternative or general (education) they talk about goals, but they don't identify how to reach them" (Chad, personal communication, March 25, 2021). Often students don't know how to be successful or what it takes to be successful. Goals and success are both

points of discussion that are often discussed by faculty and staff, yet many students aren't taught how to be successful or reach goals. Understanding how to be successful is just as important as the act of being successful.

### **Ruby-**

The development of relationships with her students was essential in Ruby's job as a behavioral interventionist. The foundation of what she did was developing a relationship with her students and establishing goals for her students. She states "the goals we set for those kids were not always academic. They were mental health, emotional and it was so wonderful". (Ruby, personal communication, June 2, 2021). She also uses the relationships that she develops with her students to develop expectations for her students. However, this can be frustrating because the situation has caused the student to be behind. She states, "so that's frustrating but it's not like I get frustrated at the student. I get frustrated at the situation. How can I fix it? How can I change their mind?" (Ruby, personal communication, June 2, 2021). This frustration stems from having expectations of the students, and the student not being able to meet them as a result of the situation that they are in.

The expectations that Ruby has for herself, her family and her students stemmed from her high expectations as a student. She states that "I have that natural. Let's just do better. You can do it, right?" (Ruby, personal communication, June 2, 2021) sort of mentality that passes to her students. As a result of her personality and the relationships she forms with her students, if they don't meet her expectations because of a lack of desire or drive, it makes her feel sad for the students. Ruby mentioned this

I get frustrated when I get, I'd not even say frustrated. I guess, I'd say sad when they can't see how it could benefit them. I don't think it's really frustration. It's, I feel, I feel very sad for them and that's

like trying to figure out how to get them to see it (Ruby, personal communication, June 2, 2021).

While teacher/student relationships can be enlightening and beneficial, because of the nature of these relationships, they can be frustrating as well. The frustration a faculty member feels can stem from the student not meeting expectations, or not understanding the importance of reaching the goals set for them.

### **Marcy-**

Marcy's experience in teaching is broad in that she has taught many different types of students all across the world. She understands of the importance of developing relationships with her students in order for them to be successful. She states, "I try to instill in them the desire to want more, within your means and to work within your means to get what you need, what you want" (Marcy, personal communication, March 26, 2021). The desire for her students to improve and set attainable goals for the student cannot be done without the establishment of a relationship with her students. With this in mind, Marcy stated that her philosophy in teaching revolved around an understanding of what her student wants to accomplish and helping her student reach those goals. The understanding, however, is that the student put forth the effort to learn as well. "So, therefore I'm going to try to help you as much as possible, but you've got to put in something too" (Marcy, personal communication, March 26, 2021). Raising these expectations from what the students came to the alternative school is the challenge as well. She states, "A lot of our children here have been allowed to just get by. They want to continue that because it's easy" (Marcy, personal communication, March 26, 2021). Expectations of the students is just as individualized as the teacher themselves. Marcy explains, "individualized according to the teacher and we're different, we have different backgrounds" (Marcy, personal

communication, March 26, 2021). This point is especially important in that not only do students have individualized expectations, but the teachers have individualized expectations of their students as well.

However, one of the most important things that Marcy brought up was advice that she would give to teachers when they would come to her for advice. Marcy discussed this by stating,

A lot of teachers, they would approach me in that how do I keep trying and keep working and like I told Katie, whoever they put in front of me, I'll teach them. When they (the student) give up, when they tell me they don't care, I'll say "you have to because (if you don't) you're giving somebody else the power to make a decision for you. And that's not what you want. You have to care. Please care (Marcy, personal communication, March 26, 2021).

Caring about the students, caring about the relationships and giving the students an understanding of how important their education is. Education gives the student the ability to have control over their own lives and their destinies.

### **Tara-**

Tara's background coupled with her high expectations of herself have translated into having high expectations of her students. She credits having an "inner drive" that would motivate her to do her best in all things academic and she wants her students to feel the same. "I have these high expectations, but I have to tell myself, that they're probably not built like I was. They just don't have that inner drive that I had and I get frustrated because they don't." (Tara, personal communication, March 24, 2021). She goes on to elaborate by explaining, "You know when you really have a passion for working or your job or anywhere, but when you really have a passion for working with young adults and you strive to see them be successful and they don't see the potential that they have in themselves, it can get really frustrating" (Tara, personal

communication, March 24, 2021). These expectations are developed as a result of the relationship that Tara has with her students. She goes to say,

I can say I did my due diligence by encouraging it (high expectations and success), you know and supporting that so I set the standards high and I'm consistent with that. I think that's a big key they have already so many people in their lives that maybe just don't care and they already have their peers that are pulling them down. So when you get that one person who can just uplift you and say 'yes, you can' maybe that's all that they need. I'm learning you won't reach them all and you might not reach them in that moment. But later on, I'm already seeing that something that you said or did will stick with them and affect them later on in life. So, I just try to set that high standard and be consistent with it(Tara, personal communication, March 24, 2021).

This is important in holding high expectations of the students in that it is reliant on the relationship that she has with her students. The relationships that she develops with her students is extremely important in not only development of expectations, but in what success is for the student as well. Tara states, "sometimes they just need understanding and you have to get on their level to truly help them" (Tara, personal communication, March 24, 2021). Development of relationships and understanding what the student needs to be successful is something that Tara emphasizes. She mentioned a student who was able to graduate and become a success story from her time at the alternative school. Tara stated,

She was not showing up to school a lot. So I wasn't too sure if she was going to graduate and she did. She got everything together that she needed to and she was able to graduate and she was working, you know whole time. She's working basically taking care of her siblings and all that so she graduated that was the first success. She

continued working and she reached out to me the other day because at the beginning of the school year she said Miss T, she said Miss T. She said I just want to she reached out and want to say thank you. She said at the beginning of the school year you asked us about careers and I gave you one that was realistic and one that was not so realistic. And yeah, and I told you what it was and you told me that that wasn't unreal. She said I want to say thank you. She said because of that effort you you're the only one, you know in my 18 years of living that told me that that wasn't an unrealistic goal, you know, you were the only one and because of that I pursued that career and just got accepted into film school. And so she was thanking me just for being the one just for being the one to encourage her to chase after whatever it was (Tara, personal communication, March 24, 2021).

Tara believed in the student and when the student was successful, it was a very fulfilling moment for her. That a student she believed in was not only successful, but successful in the achievement of her goals and dreams.

### **Dorothy-**

Dorothy was a special education teacher at the alternative school. Much of her job revolved around developing relationships with her students, understanding what aspects of the curriculum were appropriate for their abilities and helping them become successful in spite of whatever barrier exists for them. While she ironically didn't care for the phrase "relationship" in regards to the students, she was very aware of what a student/teacher relationship was and was extremely accurate in defining it. She states,

I think it takes time is what it really does and I'm not I'm not big on the term family or relationship. I'm just not real big on it, but yet to say it in a nutshell, that is what it really is. A relationship in that

the student becomes comfortable with you and that they can ask you something and they're going to they have that trust or faith or that expectation of you that you're going to help them steer them in the right direction, even if you can't help them. Which really is helping to find the answer or problem-solving that they're struggling with. (Dorothy, personal communication, June 2, 2021).

She defines relationship (in an educational sense) as a comfort level between a student and teacher in which the student can and will ask for help with the understanding that the teacher will help them if possible. This understanding is essential in development of relationships, the parameters of what the teacher/student relationship are, and what the expectations of the student and teacher are.

Dorothy also discusses the importance of the student/teacher relationship to the teacher as well. She brings this up by stating,

You might be the only person in that day that's a bright spot for that kid. I think that that's it. And, and they, you know, for example, when you have a substitute teacher coming for you for the day you see the student is like down it really, you know. They are very let down and that that does something for you. Brings you up as a teacher. We want to give more to the students (Dorothy, personal communication, June 2, 2021).

She alludes to the fact that it is a mutually beneficial, positive can help motivate the teacher to help other students as well. Her discussion on what a relationship is, and how beneficial it is for both parties involved is extremely important in understanding the dynamic of the student/teacher relationship and how the importance of it in helping the student become successful.

When Dorothy was asked about a success story that she had experienced in her career, she recalled the following.



I had one kid and I had his brother and didn't know that they were siblings at all. Very military. Brought up well, young men. It was nearing the end of the school year and I've been through a lot. I've been physically hurt by three yahoo's who had shoved each other into the desk and the desk in the me. I was between the desk and the filing cabinet and shoved me into it and I didn't need an ambulance but I had to be taken to the hospital. That young man and his girlfriend. She was also in there. They would come several times like during the day and this was even before I was hurt. They'd talk to me and apologize for those yahoo's and continue to do so up until they graduated. They'd see me after graduation, come by and talk with me (Dorothy, personal communication, June 2, 2021).

The importance of this success story is the fact that it primarily lies in the relationship that she developed with this young man and his girlfriend. Further, the relationship she developed with these two extended beyond high school which was evident in their return to talk with her. Success for her, didn't revolve around academics, but focused more so on the relationship itself with these students.

### **Katie-**

As the other behavioral interventionist at the alternative school, it was essential that Katie establish firm relationships with her students in order to help them become successful. In fact, building relationships with her students in this manner was a priority for her in order to do her job. She empathizes with the students and understands that they may not have had good experiences in school. She states,

They (students) may have had a bad experience in school because a lot of them talk about teachers that are power trippers or just bossy or who don't care about them or who just, you know, sit

there and gab at the kids all day and they don't really care about them as human beings. So, I try to relate to each one and I try to build a relationship with each one (Katie, personal communication, November 1, 2021).

Katie also points to the importance of building relationships and equates this as one of the most important aspects of school. Without the teacher/student relationship building aspect, Katie feels that school is pointless. She explained by stating,

You know, if teachers aren't taking the time to build a relationship with them in order to help them to be successful as defined by learning completing credits and efficacy, then I don't see the point of them having to come to school (Katie, personal communication, November 1, 2021).

For Katie, the relationships that are developed are an essential part of alternative schools, but she also feels that the relationships that are formed help the student become more productive from an academic point of view. She discussed this by stating,

I found that with the scope of work that we do, they're willing to do a lot more work for me then I believe they would if I didn't make the effort to relate to them and have a relationship with them (Katie, personal communication, November 1, 2021).

The interpersonal relationships that she has with a student can be a motivating factor in the academic progress of that student. Katie felt that the relationship she developed with her students was not only essential to their education, but helped become a motivating force for the student to complete the coursework. However, she also felt that teacher/student relationships can be a negative factor and thus, can hinder that student significantly. She described this scenario by stating, “students can just get fed up with a teacher, or we've had so many of those never come back this year, just based on interpersonal relationships, and it's sad that academically and

educationally they're suffering" (Katie, personal communication, November 8, 2021). Pointing to negative relationships between teachers and students is important in that the assumption is that the relationships are positive. Unfortunately, that's not always the case.

Katie was asked about a success story in her classroom and she viewed it from a broader perspective. She looked at it from the perspective of the entirety of the class as opposed to a singular story of success. She stated,

Every day I have a little wins but in the same day you can have a big laugh. Do you know like throughout the day? It can totally change your day. You know, any time that they say, oh, I didn't know that. Or oh, I get it now or you know, I never liked English before or I was never good at writing paragraphs or anything like that, that helps them to feel smart or to feel better about themselves or to help them feel like they can do. Things like that is a win for me. (Katie, personal communication, November 8, 2021).

In examination of that description, it could easily be stated that it could be a definition of success as well. Katie views student success as a success for herself and the more successful her students are, the more successful she feels. This speaks to the relationships that she had with her students and reciprocity of success in her classroom.

### **Danielle-**

Danielle's role as principal of the alternative school has helped her form ideas and understanding on the importance of relationships within an academic setting. Her position as an administrator has allowed her to see the importance of developing relationships with students from an administrative perspective. Within this perspective, Danielle views relationships with students to try and help guide them to achieve their goals. She states, "I think you need to sit down with that student. Find out what their strengths are, what their hopes are, where they see

themselves in the future and show them a way to achieve it” (Danielle, personal communication, November 9, 2021). This “big picture” point of view of the student relationship will help the student see what their vision of success is and help them to that larger goal. Much like Katie, Danielle also pointed to a positive relationship with the teacher as a motivating factor in multiple aspects of academics. Attendance, work ethic, effort can all be positive results in a faculty/student relationship. She states,

One thing that I found at the middle school and high school is if those students have something in that building that they can relate to, they like, whether it be another boy, a friend, teacher of class, whatever they're going to show up. They might not do the work but, they're going to be here because there's something in that building that once you know, that motivates them to be there (Danielle, personal communication, November 9, 2021).

There are obviously many different factors in academics in play, central to that is the atmosphere of the school and the relationships that the students and faculty have. Students often feel that a relationship is a primary reason for them to even attend school or continue to attend and as a result, these relationships are essential for the students to become successful. Danielle goes on to say that part of her relationship with the students is advocacy for that student. She states,

I just act in a way that I can advocate for student, you know, because I know their potential and so I'll do whatever I need to do to advocate for them and help people understand that. Each child is different. Each child has different potentials and it's our job to find out all about that. You know, what we need to do or how we can help that kid (Danielle, personal communication, November 9, 2021).

From this perspective she views the teacher/administrator as a guide to help the students along and reach their potential. Understanding what that potential is a result of the relationship that is developed with the student and faculty. Further, she goes on to say that it's frustrating when teachers don't take the time to develop relationships with their students because it's so important to form these relationships with the students.

My frustration is, like teachers, not even knowing like student names. Not just teachers, but coaches, like it's really simple to learn a kid's name. That's how you start by showing (you care) Hey, I know your name. I know your student, my class. I care about you. I want to get to know you. Here's a survey that you can have an opportunity to tell me about you. Tell me what your interests are. Tell me what your background is. What do you like? Tell me how you can be successful in my classroom. And what can I do to help you be successful in my classroom? What's difficult for you here? So that I have a complete understanding of who you are, why you're here (at the alternative school), what you need, what you need from me, to be successful (Danielle, personal communication, December 3, 2021).

She points to the fact that the effort to form relationships can be so minimal. The reality is, that the students need to understand that the teachers care and the relationships that they form with their teachers become an essential part of their success.

When Danielle was asked about a success story that stuck out in her mind, she pointed to a student that she had prior to her arrival at the alternative school.

So, I had a student, had two students, two siblings come as I was teaching newcomers at middle school and they came from Cambodia. They didn't speak any English, none whatsoever. And one of them, the brother was just like motivated to learn and he just

fit. He, what's the word I'm looking for. His assimilated well into the culture and into the school system and fit just like any newcomer at the middle school level. So, your talking 11, 12, or 13 and ended up getting an accepted into K-State, taking classes at K-State, you know, and so just his story alone. You have a somebody coming to the country who doesn't speak any English is able to achieve that level of success. You know, what does that say? For our kiddos? Been here since kindergarten who grew up with this language, who have been in classrooms. They know this educational system. They know about colleges, you know, so everybody has obstacles that they have to overcome and it depends on the person and their motivation as to what they're able to achieve. (Danielle, personal communication, November 9, 2021).

She mentioned this student and all of the adversity that the student overcame and the accomplishments that he was able to achieve in spite of the barriers that he had. Further, she compares a student like that to the alternative school students and points out that internal motivation is paramount to student achievement and success. Faculty guidance can only go so far.

### **Hailey-**

Hailey while being a new teacher, (actually designated a long term sub for the rest of the year) has quickly understood the importance of developing relationships with her students. She understands how these relationships develop into something positive for the students. If the student feels better about the relationship that they have with the teacher, the likelier they are to try complete their coursework. She explains,

I think that the relationships I have developed with my students have made them feel motivated to better pay attention as well as try in classes. I also feel that the respect that we have generated

amongst the students allows them to feel like they are in a safe environment where they can learn and enjoy what they are learning (Hailey, personal communication, December 9, 2021).

Hailey brings up an excellent point when she points out the feeling of safety. Not only from a physical aspect, but the mention of a safe emotional environment as well. By developing this relationship, she helps the students feel a comfort level with her and in her classroom that allows the students to learn.

Another thing that Hailey does when developing relationships with the students is to try and focus on the positives that the students bring to the classroom as opposed to focusing on the negatives, such as negative behavior, poor grades, etc. She states, “I also try to shed light on the student’s strengths instead of focusing on their downfalls” (Hailey, personal communication, December 9, 2021). Often with the students that attend the alternative school, much of what surrounds the students is negativity and focusing on the positive aspects of the students can help foster that relationship. Also alluding to a sentiment that Danielle mentioned, Hailey mentioned that students will try harder for a teacher in which they have a relationship with. Hailey states, “sometimes I feel like they don’t want to lose the relationship built so they try harder” (Hailey, personal communication, December 9, 2021). Hailey’s understanding of the importance of relationships in motivation was evident. She understood that students may not be motivated to learn the content, but they are often motivated to work for their teacher. In another part of the interview, Hailey reiterates this sentiment by stating that “I think that the relationships I have developed with my students have made them feel motivated to better pay attention as well as try in classes” (Hailey, personal communication, December 9, 2021). The relationships formed with the students obviously have a positive influence on the students and teachers, assuming that the relationship is a positive one.

Hailey's success story was about a student who recently found out he earned a scholarship to a local community college. She says,

well one that I recently saw is and I've had that I've heard anything bad about him. But Ty. He actually got a scholarship to go study. Yeah, he found out in my classroom and he went and told everyone that he got a scholarship to go to one of the community colleges about an hour ago. Well, I see the rest of them, but not the rest of them, but I see a lot of them that don't really do anything and I just saw how excited he was and I mean, it's not just him. I mean I've seen other people that got to go to school or they got to do things that they wanted to do and that's just the one that kind of stood out because it's my first year teaching and he just likes being in this class. And he was so excited to tell me. (Hailey, personal communication, November 9, 2021).

Hailey's success revolved around the relationship that she had with that student and his accomplishments. Further, it was the excitement that the student was feeling to tell Hailey that speaks to the relationship that they had and the mutual excitement she had for him.

### **Theme Three**

Individualized expectations and curricular modifications are dependent on the relationship with the individual student and the knowledge of what success means for that particular student. Through the relationship that the teacher/administrator has with the student, individualized curriculum and expectations are developed with that specific individual in mind.

### **Sam-**

During Sam's tenure as administrator at the alternative school, he was witness to many changes in the landscape of alternative education. However, through much of the time, expectations and curriculums were different and individualized based on the student's needs. In



reference to the curriculum that the alternative school used, he states, “I think we do it in a way that I don’t want to say makes it easier. We do it in a way that the kids have a better opportunity because they came here to us struggling” (Sam, personal communication, April 19, 2021).

Individualized expectations and curriculum are certainly essential in the alternative school setting. Understanding the student perspective is also a large part of the relationship dynamic that is necessary. Sam mentioned that the understanding of the perspective of the student can influence student success and he goes on further to state,

We look at it as we’ve got to get it done before the year’s over. They (the traditional high school) look at it in weeks or years at a glance or weeks at a glance. It does not always work here because most of the kids that we have here haven’t had the greatest life and things come up that when they walk in the building or into your classroom, you know whether you’re going to have a good day with them or a bad day. Because our numbers are small enough that we know our kids. (Sam, personal communication, April 19, 2021).

Sam references that the traditional high school’s focus is a week-by-week synopsis of the curriculum and content that needs to be covered. However, because of the dynamic of many alternative school students, a week-by-week synopsis or pace may not be feasible. He alludes to the importance of understanding of the student and developing a relationship with the student in order to put the student in a position to be successful.

Sam discussed expectations for alternative education students as well. His comments focused on expectations on the alternative school as a whole and the expectations that are held for alternative education students. He states,

I hope that there were people who look back and say they were successful, but we’ve done it different. We’ve taught the same

things, but we've done it different, so I don't think our expectations are less than what's over there (at the traditional high school). We just look at it different (Sam, personal communication, April 1, 2021).

Sam hopes that the understanding is that the curriculum and the methodology to reach the alternative education students are different and flexible for the alternative education student. While the content remained the same, the methods used to reach those students were different. He goes on to say, "I think over here we were a little laid back... Right or wrong, we're a little bit laid back, and we just want to get everything that we can get out of the kids that we can" (Sam, personal communication, April 1, 2021).

Sam concluded his comments with a statement on meeting students after they left the alternative high school. He mentioned

they're going to learn more and you know, we may think that our kids leave here and didn't learn a darn thing, but it's surprising to talk to some of them afterwards and they say man, I'm sure glad that you guys did what you did with me (Sam, personal communication, April 1, 2021).

This is a reflection on the dynamic of the relationship between students and faculty and the fact that many students finally understand that the faculty is there to help them become successful. While at the time, the students may not understand that they come to realization that the faculty is there to help them.

#### **Chad-**

Chad's extensive background in SPED has given him the experience of modifying curriculums to meet the needs of the students on his caseload. He was able to use that

experience to individualize and modify the curriculum to meet the needs of the students in his own classroom. He described the process by stating,

So one of the things you know coming from a SPED background and having to modify different curriculums when it came to doing my own curriculum it was different than when I was working with a curriculum from another teacher. So my first year I did (taught) middle school and I had to adjust curriculums for all my students in all classes. And it's kind of difficult unless the students exceptionally off pace with the current grade level to come up with new curriculums to meet their needs. So, it's important to be able to adjust the curriculum enough that they can do the grade level work. But maybe not in the same capacity as a regular student within the classroom. So that sixth-grade year, we spent a lot of time reducing workloads, finding new ways for them to demonstrate a mastery of the concept. It may be different, may be looking at a different way of explaining it but still was the same material and what I found in doing that was I could come up with a multitude of ways to discuss the same concept. Every situation along the route I would find the one that would actually make the most sense to the student and at least get enough of an idea that they could complete a task. So, you know, it's been the idea of success as we talked about was any form of growth. So, if a student needed to get better at doing addition, subtraction, multiplication and division and that's what their entire goal was set to but yet in sixth grade you do fractions, you do some basic algebra with variables. So, how can I tie that goal into what they're doing in the classroom and then and then help them get some form of mastery in the classroom (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021).

Knowledge of what the student needs and an understanding of what the student is capable at that particular time is imperative for Chad to be able to modify the approach to and develop curriculum for that student. His understanding of what the student needs is dependent on his knowledge of the student and the relationship that he has with the student. He goes on to elaborate,

I relate it back to where they were before they're supposed to be working and I think that was one of the more enlightening times I've had as a teacher and trying to meet individual students because I had to learn as much as they have to learn when I came here. I was able to adapt that quite well, and that's kind of how I run my curriculums now if I have a student who really struggles on completing a task, but you know, they seem like they can get the concept. We're trying to figure out I might just take away part of the workload, do enough to show me that you know what you're doing and I'm not going to beat you over the head with it. You know, I'm going to I'll cut off half of half the problems if you can demonstrate an understanding of the steps you have to take. If you don't understand the way that video works, well, let's have a conversation about this and see if I can't do this a different way. So I don't really I don't want to say modify the curriculum, but I modify how we approach the curriculum (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021).

Chad's curriculum modifications (or approaches to the curriculum) is done to help the student become as successful as possible. Using the knowledge of the student developed through a relationship with the student, Chad is able to ensure that the curriculum is appropriate for that student and the student's abilities.

When developing expectations for his students, Chad mentioned a factor in alternative education students that can hinder their progress and subsequent goals in education. He mentioned an inability for many alternative education students to plan long term. He states, “I kind of alluded to it but it's because we have to meet each student where they're at here. I attended a conference once that said most students in an alternative school can't plan more than two weeks ahead” (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021). This inability to plan long term can be a result of several factors that place the student “at-risk” and as a result, it can be difficult for a teacher to develop long term plans and expectations for the student. Chad states,

You can't see beyond tomorrow because a lot of our students don't know when the next time they're going to go home, or they go home to an abusive household. They don't know if the home they to go will be there, so we have a lot of kids here who are very ‘live day by day, the whole live paycheck to paycheck idea’ (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021).

However, when it comes to expectations of the alternative education students in his classroom, Chad pointed to the fact that while alternative education teachers may have the same expectations of their students comparatively to traditional classroom students, he mentioned the approach to meet those expectations may be different. Chad states,

I think I think all educators share the expectation that students succeed at the highest level. Now, I think what we see as that idea of what we see is that idea of success those different. I think the way we approach it is different. So is the expectation the same. I'm going to say yes, but that expectation is defined differently. I want to see all my students get good grades in math and I expect my students to work hard and get good grades in math. However,

that doesn't mean they're going to all do it the same way. Yeah, so what I think that's a big difference is over there (at the traditional high school). they go about everything generally using one methodology to convey curriculum to students. It's been a long time since I've sat in a classroom but when I do, they're given the same assignment they came the same directions are given the same amount of work time. Hmm, and that's pretty cookie cutter for a traditional classroom setting. Here we don't do that (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021).

An individualized curriculum is possible in a smaller setting that the alternative school provides. The importance of being able to meet the individual student's curricular needs is essential to the success of the student.

Chad elaborates on the importance of individualized curriculum and standards at an alternative school. He describes the process of how he views curriculum and developing it to help his students succeed. He states,

We give everybody an assignment but then we go to each student separately talk to each student and then we look at what they do. So, you know this student over here who really, really struggling with math. Maybe that student could only get 75% of that assignment figured out. They didn't get a single question. Right? Because they only got 75% of the problem word figured out. Is that succeeding at a high level? It is for that student. You know, look at this student over here who I don't usually have to sit down and work with and they have an assignment but they only got 50 percent. Is that exceeding at a high level for that student? Hopefully not, it's same work. But different levels of expectation even though it's the same expectation. Does that makes sense where I'm going? I attribute that mentality and that philosophy to the time I spent working in special ed because in special education

we have to write goals that are individual for every student that we identified as needing additional services that has some form of a disability. And the whole idea of these goals we write is to show that there's improvement now. I've written goals that talk about a student going from an F level work in some subject to a B-level work with supports. I've also written a goal where a student comes to class if they come to class more than two times a week that's showing success because otherwise, they wouldn't show up at all. So the level that you looked at for an expectation, or what you look at for Success may not change the expectation you have of them, but it will change how you see that expectation being reached (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021).

Chad places such a high emphasis on individualized expectations that can only be understood with an understanding of the individual student. This understanding can only be met by developing a relationship with that student and understanding what that student needs and what are appropriate expectations to place on that student.

### **Ruby-**

Ruby's background in SPED and her position as a behavioral interventionist has given her a perspective that has helped her modify the curriculum to meet the needs of her students. Her focus is on the student and where the student is currently at; what skills do the student current have. "My students are like, 'can you stop obsessing if I get that?' But I'm always looking at what can you do next? What? Okay, we got this skill. Let's get the next skill. We got this skill, we got the next skill" (Ruby, personal communication, March 24, 2021). Her desire to help her students succeeds is individualized to that particular student. The emphasis is helping her students obtain the skills in order to be successful. Each student has individualized needs in skill development. However, she expressed a frustration of the school system in that the system

places focus on where the student should be. She explained this by stating, “Unfortunately, that's the part of the school I hate; we don't necessarily meet each kid, where they're at. We meet each kid where their grade level supposed to be at” (Ruby, personal communication, June 2, 2021). Ruby’s point about meeting the student where they are at is an especially important point. Often the students are misplaced in assignment, fall behind in where they should be or don’t have the skills that are required to be successful enough to move on in their academic journey. These skills are often overlooked and the assumption is made that the student has the skills to move on (often based on their age) when they don’t have them. This is detrimental to the student and often results in the student falling further and further behind.

Ruby also commented on how she helps students with improvement and meeting the expectations of her students. She would try to focus on the student as whole as opposed to just emphasizing the academic aspect for her students. In order for this to be successful she must develop a strong relationship with the student. She describes her process as

I look at education because now I'm not just focusing on educating the students on academics, but I'm also thinking of the whole person, which is what I which is why a lot of my curriculum is what I do. I have their academics. Yes, before content I have something before every core class that is to work on them as a person. I have them do things like gratitude, we focus on gratitude every day, we focus on growth mindset, everyday. We focus on some on social-emotional lessons, we focus on daily check-ins. How am I doing today? Am I hot? Am I cold? Am I frustrated? Where I am? We do self-reflection on how we feel. We are as a person, every day, those are things that I never thought when I started teaching I thought that would be a regular part of my classes. And now, I can't imagine trying to do my classes without it because I think, as a teacher I think we evolved in our practices



along the way. Are we seeing what's beneficial? What's not?  
(Ruby, personal communication, March 24, 2021).

She has to understand what the student needs to be successful as well as understanding what the student needs to overcome. This can only be done by developing a relationship with that student. She also understands that each individual changes day by day and the curriculum that she uses can subsequently change, day by day. Ruby expressed this sentiment by stating “I think it just shifts and I think watching students have successes, whether it's socially, emotionally. Whether it's just them as a person or academics, helps you shift, how you, how you address students and what you do (Ruby, personal communication, March 24, 2021). As a result, her curriculum is as individualized as the student themselves.

#### **Marcy-**

Marcy, much like Ruby and Chad, has certification and extensive background in SPED. This is noted because of the nature of SPED requires individualization of curriculum and modifications in order to help the student succeed. When Marcy was asked about modifications of curriculum, she stated that she does in fact individualize the curriculum for her alternative education students. She states, “Yes I've adapted, and even within a class I may have some children doing something that goes right to my special ed background. Knowing how to manipulate that and keep everybody going” (Marcy, personal communication, March 26, 2021). Adapting the curriculum to fit the needs of the students is something that Marcy considers especially important.

Marcy also went on to mention the importance of curriculum development and making the curriculum relevant to the student. She teaches English and making the connections from the topic to the students is something that she considers especially important. Marcy states,

Wherever I can find something happening in the real world today to put with them and use to help them to relate to because the stories in English are all classics. They've been around a while, but they don't want to read them (Marcy, personal communication, March 26, 2021).

Marcy understands the importance of making the content relatable and relevant to the students. She does this by developing a relationship with the student and understanding what the students' interests are and how the content would be interesting to the student. Marcy describes her process as follows.

No matter what I am teaching, my first week is all about diagnosing. I find out where the student is cognitive-wise in small extra credit assignments. I require a daily oral positive statement. This reveals mood and tolerance and gives me insight how to approach certain Individuals. I also have them to ask any intelligent, school, appropriate question. This reveals issues and concerns that may not go said otherwise. Differentiated teaching and grading is then applied where and when needed. I take the opportunity to get each students to shine as they all have their strengths and weaknesses (Marcy, personal communication, March 26, 2021).

Essentially Marcy develops her relationships with her students in order to assess and garner an understanding of what the student knows, what the student needs to know and progress from there. Small success and goal setting for the student is also used in conjunction with relationships in order to help the student progress. She states,

Relationships are very important though I am not sure exactly how to measure them. I have worked with very difficult students and easy ones as well. The key is first for them to know that I am

human, capable of making mistakes. I have students who will produce nothing for another teacher and will at least give me the minimum. I have them to set attainable goals and I also set them. They don't always accomplish their goals and neither do I, but there is always room for encouragement. It is much easier to develop a relationship with students with hands on work versus abstract pencil paper because It's a different conversation (Marcy, personal communication, March 26, 2021).

Through this process Ruby is able to assess and help her students become as successful as they can or want to be in her topic area. She also is able to understand what they are capable of and how to best guide them to be successful. Further, she wants them to understand her perspective and understand what she wants from them.

#### **Tara-**

A large part of Tara's job as a Career Specialist in the JAG program is teaching a curriculum that will enable the students to be successful in the classroom and after graduation. In order to do this successfully, Tara needs to know the student, what the student wants and needs to be successful within the context of that student. In other words, Tara needs to understand how that student defines success and understand what the student's goals are. In order to do this, she needs to develop relationships with her students to understand how to best help that student. She states,

I'm big on pathways, you know, we're not 'you have to go to college to be successful you have to do this'. You have to be big on pathway. So if you want to go the military route. Vocational School employment, you know, if you just want to go right into the workforce, whatever pathway you're going into. So, we want to make sure success in our class is to make sure they have the skills

that they need to transition into that job career preparedness program. So how they get to that road how they get to that destination they are on you know, whatever they prefer, but again success would be when they get to where they want to be in life and they're happy. So we want to see them graduate for sure and then go on to pursue that next step. (Tara, personal communication, March 24, 2021).

Tara's goals that she sets with her students is dependent on her relationships with her students. However, when asked specifically about the importance of relationships and its influence on curriculum design, she stated

Once you can get a rapport with a student and reach them on that level then they'll open to you, and you can truly reach them in so many ways. I think it starts with that and that's something that you have to be passionate about (Tara, personal communication, March 24, 2021).

Tara indicated that the relationship building process with her students is something that teachers need to be passionate about when trying to help the students become successful. Passion in education is often essential to the students and their success. Passion is also sometimes contagious and the students can become passionate about their own academics as well. These relationships with her students also help drive and inform her of the students' needs in order to help them be successful. She states,

Just the interactions with each one in and of itself has to be modified because when you work from a place of trauma informed care, you truly want to help the student. I set high expectations for all my students, but the progress that I see in one may be totally different than the progress I see in another I have to just make sure I am understanding of that and how to work with certain students.

It would be certain things like trying to give them extra time to finish something or being that extra push. You know, like ‘hey, did you do that? did you do that something’ that I don't have to do for necessarily all my students. So, it's just the individual way I work with each student to try and get them to do the things that they need to do to pass the class and learn. So I think as far as that goes, I mean really everything that I do is a lot different than a lot of other teachers I know (Tara, personal communication, March 24, 2021).

Tara’s relationships with her students is the foundation of how she interacts with her students and how she pushes them to be better students. She understands that the different students have different needs and the way that she works with each student is individualized to that student themselves.

Tara was also asked about curriculum modifications and an individualized curriculum to meet the needs of the student. She pointed to the fact that the purpose of alternative school (as opposed to the traditional high school) is to help students become successful in an individualized manner. She states, “I think especially in a school like this you have to make accommodations. You can't really go about it like you would at high school” (Tara, personal communication, March 24, 2021). Tara’s mention of accommodations is especially important in an alternative school. Given the number of barriers that the alternative students have and the factors that place them at-risk, accommodations are often necessary for students to be successful in an alternative setting. When asked to elaborate how she personally worked with students to individualize their curriculums, she stated

We don't have a set curriculum. I don't have to teach this in the third school year, or that in another school year, you know, I teach based off of what they want to know and what they need to know

and I ask them particularly, ‘What are some things you want to know and need to know and so I just try to go based off of that need. So, I just try to go with the need and the need this year may be different from next year. So that's just pretty much their wants and needs are going to be totally different than my next group of students. And so as long as I'm meeting those and they're learning, I think I'm doing my job. (Tara, personal communication, March 24,2021).

Tara’s understanding of what she needs to teach and what she feels the students need to learn stems from the relationships that she has with her students. Her curriculum adapts and evolves with the students that she has in any given hour of the day. This flexibility allows her to meet the needs of the students that she has in class; the knowledge of the students needs dictates her curriculum.

### **Dorothy-**

Dorothy’s position as the SPED teacher at the alternative school placed her in the position to make modifications to the curriculum to best suit the needs of her students. Further, she would develop expectations based on the student and the modifications to the curriculum.

When she was asked about curriculum modifications, Dorothy answered,

We've done just about everything, I'm sure. As far as reading to a student who cannot read, putting up a picture of, you know, The Grapes of Wrath for example, in our curriculum that we have with the Edgenuity. Knowing what part that the student could read aloud. Now, this is one on one with the student who can read aloud where they struggle or that the person would be confident enough to read with you or to you. Eliminating options of answers, sitting through the program where they do read the instruction on the computer (Dorothy, personal communication, June 2, 2021).

These are some strategies that Dorothy has employed to help her students be successful.

Understanding what the student can or cannot do is paramount for Dorothy to understand how to best help the student. Then she can understand what modifications would best help that student.

She would go on to describe some things that she felt that she had done to help the students become successful as a result of the relationships that she had with her students. She stated

Okay, what's, what's wrong with Johnny? There's nothing wrong with Johnny, he learns a different way and maybe need to see the counselor. Now I just felt like that was a success for me being able to be part of that and help the students and identify you know what their exceptionality was (Marcy, personal communication, March 26, 2021).

Dorothy's success in helping her students was based on the relationships she had with her students. Further, her position as a SPED teacher is reliant on understanding the students' capabilities. In order to understand their capabilities, she needs to develop a relationship with her students in order to help them become successful in the classroom.

### **Katie-**

As stated, Katie's primary role at the alternative school was that of the behavioral interventionist. However, she also certified to teach English and taught a course of English at the alternative school. Her position as a behavioral interventionist required her to develop relationships with her students, but she also saw the need for strong relationships in her English classroom as well. She described her relationships with her students as

I've spent two years, you know, building relationships, building trust and they've said all kinds of things to me. I have had kids call me in the middle of the night and I've had kids try to kill themselves and cut themselves and you know say the only reason I

came to school today is because you're here and so am I know I'm making a difference. (Katie, personal communication, November 1, 2021).

These relationships that Katie has formed with her students have been essential in understanding how to develop her curriculum in her English classrooms. These relationships have also influenced the accommodations that she feels her students need to be successful. Using these relationships, Katie develops a constructivist type of methodology when it comes to teaching a lesson by understanding what the students feel comfortable with and building upon that comfort level. Katie gave an example of a lesson she taught below.

We kind of will start with a new piece of literature. Then the next day we'll listen to it and we'll read it and the next day will try to find a play or some type of visual. So, they're getting it the same information in many different ways and then towards the end of the week, we'll do a visual like we'll go into a collage maker and pull out images that remind them of that story for whatever reason or they can draw it out. Or, you know, some type of a visual representation. And then for the larger projects for like pieces of literature that take two weeks to cover and are kind of like either midterm or semester and like imitating would be, you know, then we will write an essay. They always say 'Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh'. And I'm like, 'No. Listen. You write paragraphs every day. Three to four paragraphs is an essay. Five paragraphs is a very long essay, so put those five days together, you're writing an essay every week, just in your journals. So, we usually do that together or I give them a structure or an outline, but once again, everything is collaborative. So then they say, "wow, I can do that" (Katie, personal communication, November 8, 2021).



Katie places an emphasis on building on student knowledge and more importantly, giving them confidence to be able to complete the tasks given to her students. She does this through developing relationships with her students and helping them develop the skills to be successful in her classroom.

### **Danielle-**

Danielle's perspective of administrator on curriculum and relationships in the classroom may be slightly different than the ones of a classroom teacher. However, she has been a teacher in the past and refers to this experience as well as her experiences as administrator to provide input on how relationships influence curriculum and instruction in the alternative school setting. When asked about the curriculum use in the classroom, Danielle stated "I think that you can't use a cookie cutter program to teach kids. Like when they have all these adversities and you have to make modifications to the curricula for them to be successful (Danielle, personal communication, November 9, 2021). She believes that an individualized curriculum is beneficial to the students at the alternative school. She elaborates

They (students) have a level of knowledge. And so if we want to have them be successful, like we're going to have to meet them where they are and build some kind of curriculum or some kind of method to continue from that from that level and push them forward (Danielle, personal communication, November 9, 2021).

According to Danielle, understanding the individual student's background and knowledge base is extremely important to help them become successful. This knowledge can be used to help students become successful by tailoring an individualized curriculum for them. Given that many of the alternative school students have barriers to their educational success, she feels that an individualized curriculum is best suited to help them become successful.

We have the ability to make those kinds of changes. So anything we can do to like break down the material and make it simpler for kids to understand because they might not have the reading skills necessary for a high school student (Danielle, personal communication, November 9, 2021).

Danielle also drew on her background as an ESL (English as a Second Language) to help her understand the need for modifications and an individualized curriculum. The relationships developed within this context helps her understand what is necessary to help her help her students become successful. She states,

So, I was an ESL teacher. So, every day we made modifications to the curriculum, and we had to do whatever works for the kid and we knew that some of them learned well by like, visually watching the video or by auditory by like repeating things or hearing things and then writing. So, I think when you see that you have a student who has, who might not get the lesson in a certain way, you've got to become creative and figure out like how else can I teach it (Danielle, personal communication, November 9, 2021).

Her experience in ESL certainly gave her the background necessary to help students with modifications and accommodations. Her experience also helped her understand the need for a flexible, individualized curriculum.

### **Hailey-**

Hailey is in her first year of teaching and she has had to develop an understanding of the curriculum that the students are taking very quickly. With this understanding, she has also had to assess the students' progress and develop relationships with the students to check their knowledge and develop an appropriate curriculum for the students in her class. She then has had

to develop modifications for her students to help them understand the content and become successful. She describes the modification process as such.

I have a biology class and gave them a chapter 6 test and my highest one of them did fairly well, my highest grade was like a 68 but the other ones for like 36 percent, you know, and so I'm having to figure out that I'm thinking we need to do more visual learning and different kinds of learning other than just sitting here. And which as you've seen, I really don't just sit here, but I'm trying to get them more hands-on activities using their laptops and coming up to the board and showing me how to do the equations that we're working on. We made cell membranes, we made plasma membranes on that. I like to have them do diagrams so that they can understand what's going through that process. Because I really want these kids to be successful in this classroom and pass it so they don't have to retake it. So, I mean I'm making modifications as we go, as I'm going and just learning what these students know and trying to figure out what works for them and what doesn't work for them. (Hailey, personal communication, November 9, 2021).

Hailey's thought process is to understand what the students' knowledge base is and to build their curriculum on that. She is attempting to tailor the curriculum to meet their needs, as opposed to the students adjusting to the curriculum. It also speaks to the importance of the constructivist perception that new knowledge is built upon a foundation of knowledge that the learn previously has. (Phillips, 1995).

Hailey understands the importance of the relationships with the students and the influence that her relationship with her students has on academics and curriculum. She also describes the importance of her student's knowledge that she does indeed care about them and their education.

Hailey mentioned this idea by stating “the students know that, while I do love and care for each of them, they know that I will not hesitate to give them the grade that they truly deserve” (Hailey, personal communication, December 9, 2021). The importance of this concept is important in that the students understand that she does care, but at the same time, their effort is essential to the relationship on hand. This also describes the nature of Hailey’s relationship with her students. She cares for them, they understand that, but certain expectations and levels of effort are expected in order for the students to be successful in her class. Hailey’s relationships with the students plays an essential part of the curriculum that she develops with her students. She tries to make the activities engaging in order to maintain interest in the activities. She states, “I also try hard to make the lessons I teach engaging and interactive. The more interactive a lesson, the more students participate and like what they are doing” (Hailey, personal communication, December 9, 2021). This understanding and flexibility is essential to help her students understand the content and be successful in her class.

### **Summary**

Nine participants were interviewed for this study and the participants that were interviewed for this study were/are all faculty and staff of the alternative school. The range of educational background for the participants ranged in doctorates in education, to one participant having a partial degree in education. The participants also had a wide variety of experience in the alternative education field, with some of the participants having multiple years at the alternative school to a couple other participants being in their first year.

The findings and data were essentially divided into three different themes. These themes derived from the research questions and drove the data organization and processing that

followed. As the data was organized, maintained and examined, the data formed into three themes.

The first theme that emerged was that success in alternative education is highly individualized and primarily entails small achievements of goals or success that compound upon one another. Since many alternative education students can have multiple barriers to success in their education, definitions of success for alternative education students often varies significantly from their traditional high school counterparts. Participants were asked to define success personally and to define success for their alternative education students. When asked about success in the classroom, many of the participants pointed to small individual successes that often would lead to larger more significant successes. However, the participants would agree that success is largely defined on an individual basis and that the definition of success is as varied as the person themselves. Each person has an individual definition of success and coupled with that definition; each person has different expectations that are based on those individual definitions of success.

The second theme that emerged is that building relationships with students is of the utmost importance to develop success and subsequent expectations for alternative students. The participants all expressed that the relationship with the student is extremely important in determining the how that student defines success and just as importantly, what success is to that student. Further, faculty understanding of what success is to that student drives expectations of that student. All of this knowledge is based on a foundation of learning and understanding more about the student. This cannot be done without a relationship that is developed between faculty and student. The student/faculty relationships are important, specifically in that the knowledge of the student can often drive curriculum development and the modifications for the student. The

importance of these relationships is highlighted further by the nature of alternative education students. Generally, since alternative education targets students who are deemed at-risk, relationships and understanding of the student is essential to help them become successful. Knowledge of the barriers that many students have, and the inherent difficulties that place the students at-risk in the first place is extremely important in knowing how to help alternative education students become successful.

Finally, individualized expectations and curricular modifications are dependent on the relationship with the individual student and the knowledge of what success means for that particular student. Alternative education students often need curricular modifications and/or individualized curriculums to help them become successful. Flexibility in this aspect is essential for many alternative education students in order for them to become successful. Each of the participants discussed the importance of this and the need to be flexible and/or show the ability to modify or develop curriculum for their students. Definitions of success would drive expectations which would drive curricular modifications and individualized curriculums. The definition of success and expectations that the faculty have of the students are the foundation of which the modifications and individualized curriculums would rest. In the chapter to follow an examination of the data will be conducted from a hermeneutic constructivist point of view. The data and literature will also be examined in reference to the literature and placed within that context.

## **Chapter 5 - Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to determine how success was defined by the faculty members at a Midwestern alternative school and how these definitions influence the expectations for their students and curriculum used. As the study evolved, the importance of the student/faculty relationships began to emerge. The critical nature of these relationships became evident in not only the curriculums being used for the students, but in the expectations as well. As a result, the research questions used to guide the study were:

1. How do alternative school faculty define success in an alternative high school setting?
2. How do conceptualizations of purpose, definitions of success, approaches to relationship building, and high expectations for learning relate to one another and lead to curricular modifications?
  - A. How do alternative school faculty establish individualized expectations for learning?

Nine faculty members of the alternative school were interviewed using an open-ended interview methodology to gather the data. Data was then coded and examined in which three different themes emerged. These themes drove the data analysis and subsequent conclusions.

In this chapter, I will provide a summary of the data gathered, theme by theme. This organization will allow me to categorically present the data and findings by each theme. I will also align the research gathered within the previous literature and place it within the context of the current research. I will examine and discuss the data through the lens of a hermeneutic constructivist perspective theme by theme and their relationship to one another. After the

completion of this, I will discuss how the data and conclusions can be used and recommendations for future research.

## **Summary**

The definition of success can be viewed through many perspectives, which is dependent on the point of view of the person who defines it. Webster's defines success as the "favorable or desired outcome or the attainment of wealth, favor, or eminence" (*Dictionary by Merriam-Webster: America's Most-Trusted Online Dictionary*, 2020). Cambridge defines success as "the achieving of the results wanted or hoped for" (*SUCCESS / Definition in the Cambridge English Dictionary*, n.d.). Since there is a disparity between those definitions, a focus on defining success in an educational context is necessary. Each of the participants was asked how they define success and how they define success for their students. The participants were also asked how they feel students at the alternative high school would define success.

As the definitions were discussed, it became evident that success is highly individualized. Success doesn't exist in a vacuum but is interwoven into specific contexts and practices for that individual (Tierney, 2020). As a result, definitions of success for students are individualized, which leads to individualized expectations of alternative students. These expectations cannot exist without relationships with students, and three themes emerged from the data that was collected and examined from the participants.

The first theme is that success in alternative education is highly individualized and primarily made up of small achievements of goals or success that compound upon one another. Often, success is defined in a manner that differs from student to student. What is a success for one student may not be a success for another. Since success is often so varied, expectations for those students should also be individualized. Success and the realization of those successes and



goals are intertwined with the expectations for those individual students. Further, the data points to the fact many alternative students may struggle with long-term goals and, as such, smaller, short-term goals that are more likely to be accomplished are appropriate for these students to build success. Individualization of both these goals and success for the student is necessary to help that student become successful in his or her academic career.

The second theme focuses on relationships and the importance of faculty and student relationships—more specifically, the importance of relationships in defining success for alternative school students and the expectations that are held for them. The participants all discussed the importance of having a relationship with the student for multiple reasons. To understand how that student defines success and to develop an appropriate curriculum for the student, some sort of relationship must be established. With a relationship in place and an understanding of what the student needs, a curriculum can be developed that will be in the best interest of the student and help that student succeed. Conversely, expectations come with an understanding of the student and how that student defines success. Relationships are also extremely important in understanding the capabilities of the student and the barriers that the alternative school students may have in their lives. Since the alternative school is primarily made up of at-risk students, barriers in their education often exist. Knowledge of these barriers is essential in not only understanding the student, but helping the student develop a curriculum as well.

Each of the themes evolved and became more specific throughout the examination of the data. The final theme that emerged is that individualized expectations and curricular modifications are dependent on the relationship with the student and the knowledge of what success means for that student. As stated, many of the participants expressed the importance of relationships with

the student to help them become successful. However, this theme was specific in that individualized expectations and curricular modifications are reliant on the faculty-student relationships. These relationships are so important that the dynamics of curricular modifications and expectations are built upon the foundation of the individual's definition of success. A true knowledge of how the student defines success is best done through a developed relationship with that student. Without this knowledge, curricular development and modifications (if necessary) cannot not be done appropriately. Flexibility is also imperative for alternative education students and the curriculum used. Appropriate use of this flexibility with alternative education students isn't possible without a relationship with the student. Further, expectations of the student cannot be held without knowledge of the student. Since success is such a personal definition and expectations are based on how the individual defines success, expectations cannot be properly defined without the relationship with the student.

## **Discussion**

One of the foundations of alternative education is to serve the population of students who are deemed at risk and in danger of failing to graduate. The nature of alternative education is to serve those students who fall outside of the majority and in a population where the numbers of students are less important than the experiences and views behind them. Common characteristics of alternative schools include small size (including small class rosters, small school enrollments and lower teacher to student ratio) (Lehr et al., 2009). As such, when the data is collected and viewed from a theoretical standpoint, constructivism is a very appropriate framework to view the data. In the context of this study and the examination of the data, constructivism's definition is "a particular way of discovering how people understand their worlds or paradigm" (Denicolo et al., 2016). However, as the definition of constructivism is sharpened for this study, the emphasis is

placed on “the individual and the meaning-making activity of the individual mind” (Crotty, 1998 p. 58). In the context of education and social constructivism, the understanding is that students bring with them an array of prior experiences, knowledge, and beliefs that they use in constructing new understandings (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002). Hermeneutics can be defined as “the art of understanding” (Roux, 2016); to be more specific, Gadamer regards hermeneutics as not only specifically interpretation and understanding but also as an attempt to describe and explain the circumstances with which understanding must take place (Gadamer, 1975; Roux, 2016). The two theoretical frameworks together can be interpreted as an understanding and attempt to explain the lived experiences of the individual and how they understand their own world. Even more specifically, hermeneutic constructivism can be applied in an examination of the individual’s experiences and the world around that individual.

The perspective of hermeneutic constructivism can be appropriately applied to the three themes to garner a better understanding of the data. If the data is examined from this perspective, an understanding of how participants’ lived experiences influence how they define success for their students. This understanding also influences how success is defined and understood from the perspective of the alternative education student. There is such an emphasis on developing relationships to develop curriculum and expectations based on the student definitions of success that a hermeneutic constructivist perspective is beneficial to understanding the student, how a teacher defines success, his or her experiences, and, more importantly, how the world around them dictates how the student defines success, which drives curriculum and expectations.

**Theme One-** Success in alternative education is individualized; however, it is often comprised of small successes that are built upon one another.

Most of the participants related success as being unique to the specific student and factors that weigh upon how that student defines success. Chad mentioned that success is “the next goal in line” (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021) and, viewing this statement through the lens of a hermeneutic constructivist, this aligns with the theoretical framework. Each goal, each small success is dependent on what that student feels is appropriate and how that student views the world around them. The experiences that the student has gone through dictate what those goals are. The goals have to be appropriate for that specific student and must balance between being attainable and yet challenging enough to make academic progress for that student. For those students, little successes can be more important than large successes and build upon one another. Further, as Dorothy said, “It may be small to me, but it’s a big success to them” (Dorothy, personal communication, June 2, 2021). This reinforces the fact that success is based on the individual, their experiences, and eventually their expectations. A hermeneutic constructivist perspective is especially appropriate in the examination of success with this in mind.

Chad brought up a specific piece of data that is especially important for faculty and staff to understand, not only from a hermeneutic constructivist perspective, but from a perspective of an alternative teacher as well. He stated, “Understand you can still feel success and still have a successful moment in the failure” (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021). This is especially relevant in that teachers need to understand that students (as well as teachers) may be able to build upon their experiences in a failure. Students and teachers can still learn and achieve, even if they fail to reach their goals. While this may set the student back temporarily in the achievement of their goals, it may also help them reach their goals in the future. Often, some of the most significant successes and learning can occur in the midst of a failure. This understanding furthers the hermeneutic constructivism perspective in that the lived experiences of the student is

inclusive of the failures that the student has had in his or her world and how these experiences influence the student and how they define success. Often, hidden success can be obtained from the failures that the student (and teacher) has experienced through the process of learning.

With this in mind, learning can be counted as a success, even if the event or task is deemed a failure. Hailey mentioned this in her interview by stating that students are “learning something as long as they’re trying and have made a personal effort to do these things” (Hailey, personal communication, November 9, 2021). This act of learning can improve the lived experience of the individual and help them build upon their experiences, allowing the student to grow. This growth can certainly indicate success even through the perspective of individualized definitions and accomplishment of goals.

Another aspect discussed was the propensity of success to evolve and grow with the student. The lived experiences and understanding of the student influence how that student defines success. As the student grows and gains knowledge and experience, their definitions of success also evolve. Success is something that should be ever changing.

Examination of the participants and how they define success for alternative education students led to the conclusion that success is relatable to two different points of view. First, the student is making some sort of progress or achievement of smaller goals toward a larger goal. Obtainable goals that are achieved help with the well-being of the student, as well as their progress toward the larger goal. This goal can vary from individual to individual based on the lived experiences and outlook of that particular person. The smaller successes build upon one another and help the student down the pathway to a larger goal. These smaller successes can widely vary based on how the student defines success.

Secondly, success can be defined in a manner that is dedicated to the improvement of the student in unmeasurable ways. The well-being of the student, whether the student “learns something,” or the effort the student puts into reaching their educational goals can account for success; however, these are not necessarily things that can be measured easily. For example, Katie mentioned that for her success was the happiness and well-being of the student (Katie, personal communication, November 8, 2021), but this isn’t something that can be measured quantifiably. However, for the hermeneutic constructivist, this is an important aspect to discuss in that it indicates growth in the lived experience of the student. Effort, happiness, and learning are all factors that add to the lived experience and the growth of the student, which in turn indicate success for the student. The hermeneutic constructivist would state that this lived experience, the examinations of these lived experiences (and whether or not the student learns from them, and is considered a success), and how they apply to the individual would dictate growth and success for that student.

Along this vein, a feeling of self-satisfaction and accomplishment for that student can also contribute to how a student defines success. If a student feels that their accomplishment is “worthy” of a feeling of self-satisfaction, then in that student’s eyes it is a successful accomplishment. Much like other definitions of success, this is dependent on the individual and their lived experiences. If the student feels positive about the effort that they put in, the result that they received, and has a feeling of self-satisfaction, this is considered a success for that student.

**Theme Two-** Building relationships with students is of the utmost importance to develop success and subsequent expectations for alternative students.

The development of relationships was something that all of the staff members seemed to pride themselves on. All recognized the importance of relationships with their students to learn more about the student and the lived experiences of the students. The knowledge gained from the relationships with the student would be the foundation of knowing how that student defined success and, further, how to develop expectations and curriculum modifications if necessary. Without the relationship, the knowledge of how that student defines success (and subsequent influence on curriculum and expectations) is not possible. A hermeneutic constructivist would emphasize the importance of the relationship to develop the necessary knowledge, gain an understanding of the lived experience of the student, and, more importantly, examine the individual's experiences.

The foundation of theme two is the relationship between the faculty and the student. The initial reaction is that the relationship often focuses on the student as being the beneficiary. That the relationship will greatly benefit the student through curriculum, guidance expectations, or academic success. While this is often the case, the overlooked aspect is that the faculty also benefit from the relationship. The relationships make the faculty better at their jobs through working with different students and gathering a larger source of lived experiences to draw upon. Sam brought this up when discussing the students and the relationships that they have with the faculty. Often these students are surrounded by negative perceptions and factors when it comes to their home lives or academic situations. Through the development of the relationships with the students, faculty develop an immense sense of pride and self-satisfaction seeing these students become successful. Sam refers to this by stating, "In watching these kids grow, it makes you look at the opportunities that we've created for them. And for us, you know, we're better people for what we

do” (Sam, personal communication, April 1, 2021). From the perspective of the faculty member, this growth can be the most valuable aspect of teaching and what makes teachers become better.

Likewise, developing relationships with students can help faculty not only grow, but but also become more successful in their personal endeavors. A hermeneutic constructivist would note that this is beneficial to the growth of the lived experiences of the person and this self-examination of the experience helps the faculty member become a better person. Chad and Ruby both discussed how relationships would evolve into goals, and that helping the students reach their goals would, in turn, help the faculty members reach their own goals. Faculty members become successful and specifically meet the parameters of how success should be defined.

The relationship that faculty develops with their students can be viewed upon as a guide: the teacher is guiding students along their academic path and helping the students grow and add to their lived experiences. During the data collection process, there was an especially important piece of data that Marcy divulged when it came to advice that she shares with her students. She tells them, “You have to (care) because (if you don’t) you’re giving somebody else the power to make a decision for you” (Marcy, personal communication, March 26, 2021). She tries to explain that apathy places the control and power of the student’s life in someone else’s hands. Coming from Marcy, who is of African American descent and remembers segregated schools, this is an especially powerful piece of advice to alternative education students. Further, she is trying to instill some of the lessons she learned in her lived experiences into her students. A hermeneutic constructivist perspective would state that she is sharing her previously examined lived experiences with her students. The powerful lesson she has learned is that trying to teach her students goes beyond academics and into their daily lives. The students’ education gives them power and the ability to control their lives and their future.



The importance of students understanding what autonomy means and how it can positively influence their lives is a lesson that cannot be learned from curriculum or text. These lessons are taught through the lived experiences of the teacher and can provide a sense of power for the student. Students need to understand that through education, they can gain a stronger sense of control over their lives and claim autonomy in reaching their educational goals. However, the difficulty can be ensuring that the students understand this concept and making the connection between the lessons learned in the classroom and their application in “real life.”

Given that alternative education students often have difficulties making long-term goals, this can be a difficult lesson to convey to them. Coupled with the fact that many alternative education students often have a negative outlook on education and a borderline mistrust of authority figures and the education system, the lesson on autonomy and control over their own lives can be difficult to convey. However, this further emphasizes the importance of teaching these lessons to alternative education students.

Dorothy mentioned that in relationships developed with alternative education students, there is a sense of trust being built. Students trust in teachers to guide them the correct way (Dorothy, personal communication, June 2, 2021) when it comes to academics or life in general. The development of this trust is a powerful aspect of the faculty-student relationship. Alternative education students can be mistrustful of education, authority figures, and the education system; gaining this trust is an important aspect of developing relationships with the students. Without it, the relationship is difficult to cultivate and maintain. Given that so much is dependent on the faculty-student relationship, trust is essential.

Through the lens of a hermeneutic constructivist, the importance of relationships with the students is magnified. Understanding the lived experiences of the student and being able to

examine and express these experiences through the relationship is essential to the development of success, curriculum, and expectations of the student. Through this theoretical framework, the perspective of the student is understood. The relationship with the student is the foundation, and the definition of success and curriculum/expectations are built upon this foundation. A simple visualization is a pyramid with the base being relationships with students and the top being definitions of success, curricular modifications and student achievement. While this pyramid may be student centered in what they can accomplish and how, teachers need to understand the student's perspective to help them achieve their goals. The essential nature of the faculty-student relationship cannot be overstated in alternative education.

**Theme Three-** Individualized expectations and curriculums (and subsequent curricular modifications) are based on relationships and how the student defines success.

Expectations are built upon the knowledge of the student, their experiences (both academic and personal), and what success means to them. How the students define success correlates directly with what their expectations are. If they define success in a particular manner, then the expectation of meeting that definition is a measurement. As stated previously, to understand how the student defines success, a relationship must be developed to examine the student's lived experiences and the world around them.

Expectations must be developed before curriculum, and curriculum modifications, can be made. Through this manner, an individualized curriculum and modifications (if needed for the student) can be developed based on the student's expectations and how they define success. Chad mentioned that each student needs to establish their own expectations and different paths to success (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021). With different definitions of success,

individualized levels of expectations emerge for each student. These expectations are based on definitions of success, which are based on the understanding of lived experiences of the student. The hermeneutic constructivist perspective points to the importance of an understanding of the lived experience of the student and its application to expectations and success.

Once expectations are understood for each student, then curriculum design and modifications can be enacted to help the student succeed. Multiple participants mentioned the need for individualized curriculums for alternative education students. Chad and Danielle both mentioned there can't be a "cookie cutter" curriculum to meet the needs of alternative education students, but rather individualized curriculums that are tailored to meet the needs of each student. The phrase "cookie cutter" often describes a curriculum in which students must adjust to the curriculum and not the curriculum being tailored for the student. As mentioned earlier, one of the primary advantages of alternative education is lower student-to-teacher ratios, in which this sort of tailoring through student-faculty relationships is possible.

Finally, many participants emphasized the need to understand the alternative education student and meet the student where they are—not where they "should be" (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021; Danielle, personal communication, November 9, 2021; Ruby, personal communication, June 2, 2021). Often, students (both traditional and alternative) are placed at the wrong level or in the wrong situation based on age or grade. This sets students up for failure in that the students don't have the skills or experience to be successful at that level. This is why the examination of the students' lived experience is important. It gives give the faculty and staff an understanding of where the student *is* academically (and personally) as opposed to where they *should be* based on age or proposed grade. The hermeneutic constructivist would point

to the importance of developing a relationship to understand the student's lived experiences and an understanding of the world around the student to help them become successful.

The factors that often place students in the alternative education system also may place them at risk of failure. The nature of alternative education is often transient, in that students can be placed at the alternative school throughout the year. As a result, student knowledge and skillset may need to be diagnosed in order to understand what modifications the student needs. Developing a relationship with the student often helps with the diagnosis and an understanding of what modifications are appropriate for that student. Each participant mentioned the importance of curriculum modification to meet the needs for each student in some manner. Sam said, "We give the students an opportunity to do things differently" (Sam, personal communication, April 19, 2021). Tara mentioned that she tailors her curriculum to meet her students' needs. Hailey stated that she assessed student progress and developed modifications to help her students. Katie mentioned the accommodations she incorporates to make her students successful. Dorothy described that much of her job consisted of making modifications for her students. This indicates the importance of teachers and faculty being flexible in modifying and individualizing the curriculum to help the students become successful. Understanding what the curriculum modifications are for the students isn't truly possible without an understanding of the student, their lived experiences, and an examination of the world around them.

### **Alignment in the Literature**

Within the realms of the available literature, there is a substantial amount on alternative education. Lange and Sletten wrote a brief history and research synopsis of alternative education in 2002. In this piece, the emphasis is on the history of alternative education, an overview of the

population of students who attended alternative schools, and the general outcomes of alternative schools (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Seven years later, Aron wrote a landmark overview for the U.S. Department of Labor called *An Overview of Alternative Education*. In his review, Aron defined alternative education and discussed the students who attended alternative schools and the programs used (Aron, 09). This would serve as a foundation piece for many alternative education studies moving forward, having been cited by other writers over 400 times. Lehr, Tan, and Ysseldkye would write *Alternative Schools: A Synthesis of State-Level Policy and Research* and provide an understanding of state-level policy of alternative education. Porowski, O'Conner, and Luo wrote *How Do States Define Alternative Education* and further defined state-level policy of alternative education. All of the above writings provide a foundation of research in an attempt to define alternative education, define state policy in regard to alternative education, and use alternative schools in their school districts.

As the research became more specific, there was a significant amount of research in design of alternative schools. Alternative school design became especially important in the literature as the need for alternative schools became more apparent. Districts began to look into state-level type of policy concerning alternative education and the requirements necessary for alternative schools. As the need for alternative schools increased, the need for research concerning design was evident. Since alternative education is loosely based, alternative schools would often look different from one another across the state. Duke and Griesdorn would discuss policy and considerations in alternative school design (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999). From an examination of alternative school design, the leap to research concerning alternative school evaluation is easy and understandable.

Evaluation of alternative education become an important source of information for states and districts to determine if their schools were successful. Measurements of alternative schools

can often be a difficult thing to understand since success in alternative schools isn't often measurable or quantifiable. However, Dugger and Dugger wrote about the evaluation of alternative schools with the intent to note changes in attendance and achievement of self-esteem (Dugger & Dugger, 1998). Hinds' research on the development and usage of the Alternative High School Evaluation Toolkit is an attempt to give administration the tools to evaluate programs that are often difficult to evaluate (Hinds, 2013). An understanding of success and what success means to alternative education students is essential to understanding alternative schools and their effectiveness.

When it comes to defining success for alternative education students, there is a substantial amount of literature available (relatively speaking, of course). The examination of success from the perspective of the student is often the focus of the literature. In these studies, students will typically be the participants and the researchers will examine how those students define success. Tierney has written multiple research papers on alternative education; his examination of success and how it influences alternative students' identities is especially important. Definitions of success can dramatically influence how alternative education students are allowed to participate in school and the identities that are created (Tierney, 2020). He notes how the definitions of success influence not only their academic careers, but their identities and who they become as well. The importance of this cannot be overstated as alternative education students often face negative perceptions outside of the building, and how success is defined for them can influence their self-perception inside of the building as well.

This study views success from the perspective of the faculty of alternative schools and examines how the definition of success is defined for the student based on information gathered from faculty-student relationships, as well as how these definitions influence expectations and

curriculums developed for the students in this alternative school. This study fills a gap and a need for research as most research is from the perspective of alternative education students. A study from the perspective of faculty and their definition for success in alternative schools is unique.

One notable study of alternative education from the perspective of the faculty examined the strengths and weaknesses of an alternative school (Free, 2017). This study complements my study in that the environment and culture of the alternative school are addressed in Free's study, as opposed to success and the relationship between faculty and students. The perspective of the faculty is often unique since they see the change and growth (or lack thereof) in the students on a day-to-day basis. Often, research needs to examine the point of view of the individuals who interact with the students each day and understand the issues they deal with. The faculty at the alternative school have an expertise that few others have. That perspective is often overlooked because the focus can be on results, evaluations, measurements, or the students themselves. While these are all viable and appropriate perspectives of research, faculty perspective is important in that there are very few people who understand the alternative education student and have the experience to work with them or the desire to do so. This perspective can be essential in gathering a true understanding and complete picture of alternative education.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Some limitations of the study involved factors that certainly could not be ignored in conducting the research. The first was the fact that the open-ended interview process could be influenced by personal factors. A participant could be having a difficult day, which could skew their answers during the interviews. Since many of the questions involved asking the participants about their feelings and opinions, outside factors could easily influence how the participants

answered. For example, one participant had found out recently that her position was being terminated. Another participant was going to retire and transfer positions. Two other participants were in the process of relocating, and another participant was new to the position. At the time of gathering data, there was some turmoil in the participants' personal and professional lives that could have influenced their answers. These stresses were also compounded by COVID-19 and the fact that the district was dealing with the difficulties of educating youth in the midst of a pandemic. Faculty and staff were asked to teach at multiple buildings and do their best to educate their students in a professional manner.

Another limitation was that data was gathered over the course of two different academic years. Seven participants were from the prior school year, while the other two participants were from the more recent school year. As a result of that, some staff members chose not to be interviewed. During this period, there was a significant amount of turnover: three staff members left for other jobs out of district, another was promoted in district, and another retired. Support staff weren't interviewed for this study, although their opinions and input could certainly have added depth to the data.

The questioning did not involve discussion of the culture and environment at the alternative school. The culture and environment can have a significant impact on student success and how the student is perceived when it comes to their own viewpoints on success. Questioning the school's overall culture could have certainly influenced the direction of the study and the data examination.

Finally, data was examined through the lens of a hermeneutic constructivist perspective. Researchers of a different theoretical framework may have had different perspectives and points of view to examine. Further, interview questions and examination of the data may have been



interpreted differently and results drastically different had they been conducted and examined through a different theoretical framework.

## **Conclusion**

In qualitative research, the emphasis is on searching for the depth of the research, as opposed to the width, when compared to quantitative research. Alternative education and the study of alternative education is no different. Since alternative education often places the focus on helping the individual who is at risk as opposed to the masses, so to speak, alternative education research aligns itself nicely within the realm of qualitative research. That's not to say that quantitative research isn't necessary or useful in alternative education research. In fact, there is a tremendous need for quantitative research in the field of alternative education. However, the importance of understanding the story behind the students and faculty is essential to gathering an understanding of the schools. The students' stories are what drive alternative education and the faculty that endeavor to help them.

Since the stories and backgrounds of alternative education students are so different, the challenge is finding what success is for each student and fitting that definition into the context of curriculum. Often, there is a fine line between maintaining rigor and making the curriculum feasible. From an outside perspective, maintaining this balance is difficult to understand. Often, those faculty who understand the students and have developed relationships with them are the only ones who can truly understand what appropriate curriculum for the student is.

Dr. Jerry Johnson told me that "how people define success drives what they do" (J. Johnson, personal communication, November 17, 2021) and, coupled with Dr. Tierney's assertion that definitions of success define who students become (Tierney, 2020), it becomes evident how

important the definition of success truly is. Often the basic level of success and its definition for students revolve around academia and goals that are met. However, the true definition of success for alternative education students (and arguably all students) carries a much deeper, personal meaning. Since success defines who we are and what we can become, defining success strictly from an academic perspective is inadequate. Getting a true gauge of how a student defines success and understanding the student and his or her backstory can be difficult, if not impossible, in a traditional high school setting with such a large population of students. One of the single biggest advantages and necessities of the alternative school is a low student-to-faculty ratio. A low ratio makes it easier for students and faculty to develop quality relationships, which leads to faculty understanding what success means for that student.

Relationships with the students are extremely important to developing definitions of success for students and understanding curriculums for the students. Curriculum and modifications for alternative education students are often constantly evolving, especially given that the definition of success evolves as the student grows academically and ages. Even if the student leaves the alternative school, success for that student can constantly change, and contact needs to be maintained to ensure the student remains successful.

Chad stated that students can often have moments of success in failure (Chad, personal communication, March 23, 2021), and I mention this again to emphasize the importance of being able to learn from failure. Success can often be equated to learning, but the reality is that it is hard to distinguish or quantify what learning is. Further, if faculty don't have a relationship with the students, or knowledge of their lived experiences, it is difficult to understand what learning means to each person. So, it is important to understand that learning and success often equate to different

things for people; learning and success can be dependent on one another, as well as independent of one another.

Another important point is Marcy's emphasis on empowerment. Her relationships with students and her own lived experiences give her a perspective that many faculty do not have. Since she can remember segregation, and her background has involved a sense of self-reliance, she has a unique and valuable perspective to offer to the students: the importance of education and its direct connection to empowerment and the student's ability to control their own lives. She has the ability to share these unique lived experiences and is an example of what a person can do with education. The autonomy that she encourages her students to claim through education is a powerful lesson that should not be taken lightly from her students.

Finally, teaching at an alternative school can be beneficial to staff members as well. Teaching at-risk students can be an immense challenge given the barriers and personal issues that the students have. The reward and frustration of working with alternative education students can be immense. Often there is a tremendous amount of negativity (both internal and external) that surrounds these students and can influence the staff members. However, when an alternative education student is successful (when they otherwise may not ever be) there is a tremendous amount of satisfaction. Further, helping these students succeed aids the staff in becoming better teachers and people overall. Sam states, "It makes you look at the opportunities that we've created for them. And for us, you know, we're better people for what we do" (Sam, personal communication, April 19, 2021). Not every student can be helped or wants to be, but in the end we, as staff, try our best to guide them in achieving success. In the process we become better teachers and, truly, that's all we can hope for.

Throughout the process of gathering and examination of the data, three themes emerged in the research. However, several other factors also emerged from the data to shed light on the importance of relationships, curriculum, and education. First, and foremost, a relationship must be developed between the student and the teacher to help the teacher understand the lived experience of the student and how that student defines success. Trust is an essential part of the relationship-building aspect between the student and the faculty. Without this sense of trust, faculty can't build the relationships that are necessary to understand and help the student become successful. Further, an understanding of student perspective is essential in helping the student become successful and achieving whatever goals that the student sets out for themselves. This sense of empathy and understanding of the student perspective is extremely important in virtually all aspects of the student's education and the relationship that the student has with the faculty.

Second, teaching autonomy and a sense of control over their lives through their education is especially important and an extremely powerful sentiment for alternative education students. Through this, alternative education students can improve their lives and claim a sense of authority in their lives. Understanding this aspect of education is especially important for students who are considered at risk; there are many factors they cannot control that are the cause of their at-risk categorization. This sense of empowerment through education is critical to help at-risk students understand how to improve their lives and is a valuable lesson in how to claim their autonomy.

A sense of autonomy leads to a sense of identity. As Tierney states, definitions of success often correlate with identity (Tierney, 2020) and through this success, student identity is connected with a sense of autonomy. Success, identity, and autonomy are related to one another in regard to success and education for alternative school students. As students become more successful, their identities can often shift, giving the student a sense of empowerment and autonomy. This sense

of empowerment can reinforce the alternative student's positive sense of identity, which shows how all three factors are interconnected and can be dependent on one another.

### **Future Studies**

There is a need for more studies moving forward, especially as the need for alternative education grows and the attention on alternative education becomes more focused (given the amount of funding to facilitate alternative schools and the nature of the smaller numbers of students that attend these schools). In traditional high school settings, success is often measured in a quantifiable manner, but in the case of alternative schools it isn't as easy as that. The question is often asked, "Why are we spending so much money to fund such a small number of students?" Traditional studies may dictate the resources are not used efficiently; however, further research indicates otherwise. A deeper analysis is necessary to understand if alternative schools are indeed being successful. Given the disparity of the types of alternative schools, studies to determine success will also need to be customized and varied. A cookie-cutter approach to studying alternative schools will simply not be successful.

In order for a more complete study, I'd recommend more faculty participants. It would be extremely beneficial to collect data from counselors, secretaries, and other support staff. These staff members often interact with and understand the students in ways that teachers and administration do not. Gathering data from these participants would add depth and a different perspective to the data. If possible, interviewing parents would also be beneficial, not only to add to the stories of the student, but to also gain a deeper understanding of the student's lived experiences. This would also provide depth and foundation to the faculty-student relationship and help develop an understanding of what success means to that student.

A study would also benefit from having research questions focused on success and the culture and environment of the school, how the faculty-student relationships influence the culture of the school and an in-depth look at how the success of the students is influenced (if they are) by the students' relationships with the school and the staff. An examination into the potential of the students would also be beneficial to the study. Potential and expectations can be seemingly two different things. Expectations can be placed on a student and can be met but still not reach the student's potential. An examination of a student's potential could provide some clarity into the success of the alternative school and the student as well.

Research into alternative education would also benefit from including a quantitative aspect to the study. A mixed-methods approach would allow the researcher to gather data from a quantitative perspective and use the measurable data to help support whether the student or school is successful. (For example, if the student is making progress toward a quantitative goal or needs to reach a numerical value to be successful.) From a qualitative perspective, a discourse analysis could be beneficial to interpreting the data collected from the staff members. This would aid in developing a deeper understanding of what the data is and, more importantly, *who* the participants truly are.

Another research consideration that should be done in regard to alternative education is a further in-depth analysis of teachers' growth and improvement within the realm of alternative education. An analysis of this nature would help garner an understanding of the how relationships with students in alternative education help teachers improve and grow. This study could be both mixed-methods and/or a qualitative examination of how the teachers are improving using administrative teacher assessment, as well as student interviews. This study would also involve a

significant length of time to examine and assess the student-faculty relationship, as well as the improvement for both the teacher and the student.

While a study has been done specifically on student identities and their relationship to success in alternative schools, another study could be done on student identities, success, and empowerment. An examination of the congruence of those factors and how they relate to one another as students progress through the alternative high school and leave is an especially important aspect to examine. A qualitative examination would help researchers understand the significance of success in alternative high schools for students, how this success influenced their identities, and how the students feel empowered to take control of their lives.

Finally, a study concerning the success of alternative schools should track the students from the time they enter the alternative school to when they leave (whether they are going back to traditional high school, graduating, dropping out, moving, or any other reason). This can add to the data pool and help determine if the student is successful as they progress through their career. Often success can be a series of small successful goals that build upon one another, and this situation is no different. Building upon the success (or lack thereof) of the alternative school as the student progresses through his or her academic career is something to monitor and will give an understanding of the success at the alternative school. Further, this examination and tracking of the student can give some insight on the autonomy that the student has gained as a result of his or her success in the alternative school. Maintaining contact with the students upon leaving school and interviewing them as they proceed through life can give researchers a better outlook on the success of the alternative schools and if the students feel autonomous or empowered as a result of their success (or failure) in the alternative school. This connection back to the alternative school

is especially important to examine as it gives an understanding of what empowerment and success look like for that student.



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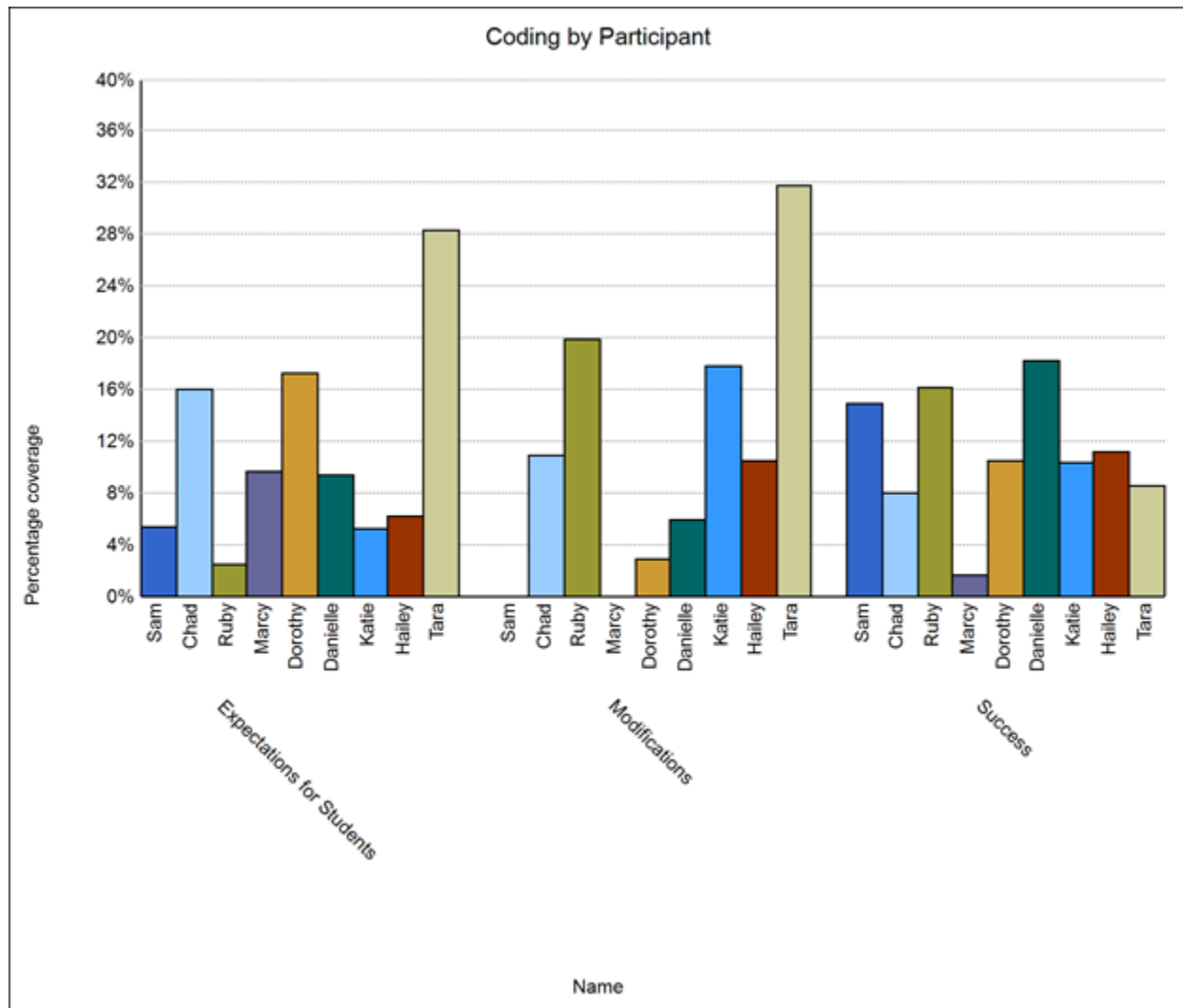
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## Appendix A - Coding by Participant-Percent Coverage

**Appendix A Figure 1.**

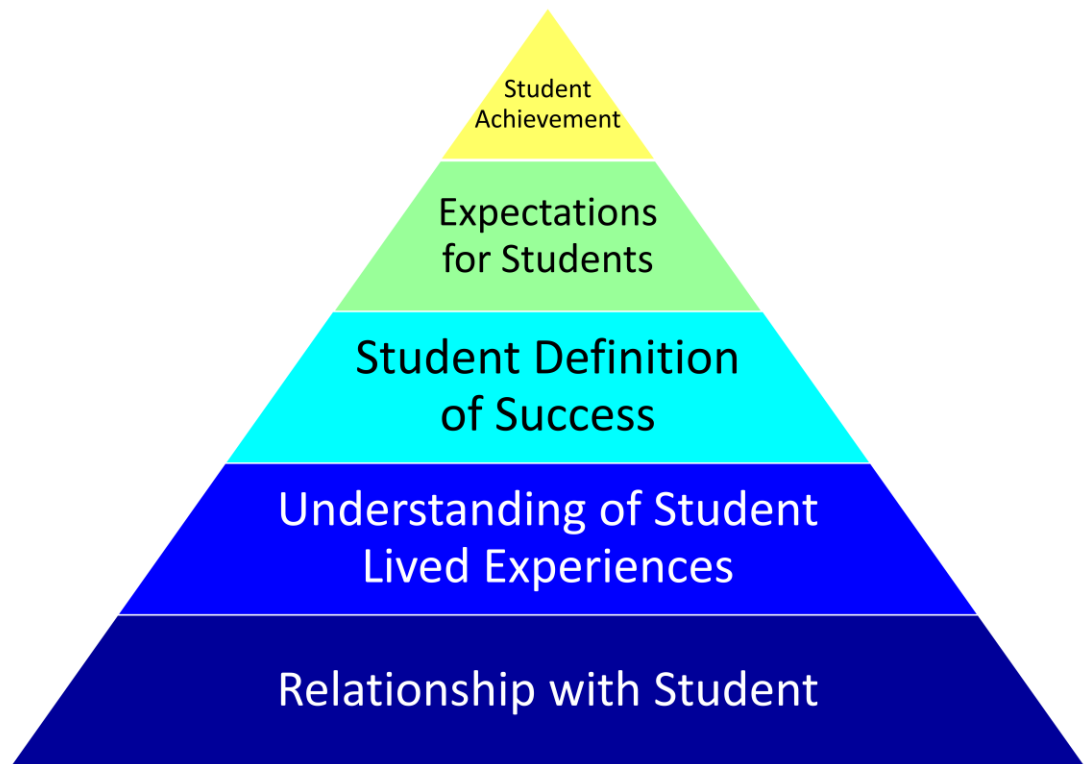
*Coding by Participant – Percentage Coverage*



## Appendix B - Pyramid of Success in Alternative Schools

### Appendix B Figure 1.

*Pyramid of Success in Alternative Schools*



*Note.* Pictured above is a visual pyramid of success for alternative education students. The foundation of success is developing a relationship with the student to understand the lived experiences of the student and understanding how that student defines success. Expectations of the student can be understood once this occurs, and student achievement follows.

## **Appendix C - Interview Questions**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **Faculty Definitions of Success and their Influence on Alternative Education**

1. Tell me about your backgrounds in education - both in a professional manner and in their experiences growing up.
2. What sort of expectations that were held of them by your teachers and their parents/guardians?
3. How do you think these expectations influenced your own experiences in education (both professionally and personally)?
4. How do you personally define success? How do you define success in terms of alternative education?
5. How do they think alternative education students define success?
6. How do you think that various definitions impact alternative education and the curriculum used in alternative education?
7. How do you think these definitions are different from alternative education students in comparison to traditional education students?
8. How do you think that expectations alternative education staff have impacted the students that we have?
9. How do you think these definitions/expectations have influenced alternative education programs?
10. What are some ideas you have for changes you would implement based on some of these ideas?

#### **Round Two Interview Questions–**

1. How do you think that the perceptions of alternative school students influence their success?
2. Tell me about one of your favorite stories of success that you have witnessed as a teacher/administrator. What do you think made it stand out in your mind?
3. What about that situation made it successful (or more so) as compared to other situations?

4. Can you describe what student success looks like in an alternative school setting?
5. Why does this look different as compared to what success looks like in a traditional school setting?
6. Do you think that there are some differences between short term and long term success in an alternative setting vs a traditional setting? If so, what do you think they are? If not, why not?
7. Can you describe some curriculum modifications that you have made in an alternative school setting to help move them towards what you view success as?
8. How have these descriptions and stories of success impacted you professionally (for example how have they helped dictate design curriculum) ?
9. How do you think that our (alternative education) students would describe a success story in education?
10. How important do you think that the relationships you develop with your students are to their success, the curriculum that you decide to teach?
11. How do your relationships with your students help you individualize the curriculums that you use and the expectations that you have for your students?