Building an Intentional Culture of Learning
from the Perspectives of Alternative High School Educators

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by
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Abstract

This narrative study explored the culture of learning in three alternative high schools and the best practices that resulted in graduation rates that exceeded the United States national average. The schools were selected because their graduation rates included their disadvantaged students, a population that, in traditional settings, historically lagged behind the national rate. The purpose of the study was to explore and understand the culture of learning in effective alternative high schools and to understand - through the voices, perspectives, and lived experiences of alternative high school educators - what these schools did and how that produced successful academic results for disadvantaged students. In this study, three facets of school culture, were explored, including the nature of the culture; how the culture nurtured confidence and motivation that led to personal, emotional, and academic growth; and what specific best practices were implemented by educators to effect positive outcomes for disadvantaged youth. The findings indicated that the relationships between teachers and students was paramount as a catalyst to establishing trust, student motivation, and achievement. The findings led to four conclusions: 1) nurturing, authentic teacher/student relationships are fundamental to students' personal and academic growth, and are supported by collaborative, interactive teams; 2) trust empowers students to participate in, voice their opinions about, and be responsible for their own learning; 3) personal and relevant learning opportunities increase student engagement and persistence, resulting in positive outcomes, both personal and academic; and 4) the connection between relationship-building, trust, and personal real world learning is synergistic, and together these constructs connote an intentional culture of learning. These findings are relevant today because the literature is scarce on alternative high schools, the voices of their teachers, and the intentionality of their cultures and best practices. How traditional high schools might adapt some of the study's
findings to meet the needs of disadvantaged students and of all students is a meaningful topic for future research and discussion.

Key Words: accountability, advisory, alternative schools, disadvantaged students, organizational culture, personalized learning, real world learning, relationship-building, relevance, school culture, student internships, student motivation, student voice, team collaboration, trust.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview

A graduation disparity exists in the United States that is subsumed within the national graduation rate (Rumberger, 2011). Namely, some demographic groups are achieving at rates well below the national average (Barton, 2005; Rumberger, 2011). Yet, in 2013, the United States government announced an educational victory: The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that the high school graduation rate had risen to 81 percent - the highest rate in more than two decades. This was significant because from 1996 to 2006, the national graduation rate was in the 60 percent range, achieving a 70 percent graduation rate only in 2004 and 2005 (Education Week, 2016; NCES, 2009). By 2012, the graduation rate had climbed to 79 percent, achieving a one percent gain for each of the next three years (Education Week, 2016; NCES, 2014). However, according to NCES (2014), many demographic groups are not included in this growth with most minorities, the economically disadvantaged, English language learners, and students with disabilities continuing to lag 10 to 20 points behind the national rate. Moreover, in that same year when the graduation rate first exceeded 80 percent, Rumberger (2013) reported that approximately 750,000 students dropped out of high school - more than 5,000 students every school day.

Most states have a legal drop out age, which may be 16 or 17 years of age with parental signed permission (Burrus & Roberts, 2012). Once students reach the legal age of majority at 18, they can sign themselves out of their school system (Parsons, 2015). However, there is a difference between legal compulsory education and the realities of dropping out (Rumberger, 2011). Many experts, such as Rumberger (2001, 2013), Burrus and Roberts (2012), and Neild and Balfanz (2006) agree that the drop out process started long before high school. For example,
in a study of Philadelphia public schools, Neild and Balfanz (2006) found that students who had poor records of work completion and engagement in school, eventually suffered failing grades and stopped coming to school. Likewise, in a 2001 report that he researched and prepared for the National Research Council, Committee on Educational Excellence, educational expert Rumberger noted that there was a rising trend of students dropping out before completing high school.

Many students drop out despite their being legally unable to do so. The majority of these students are considered to be disadvantaged (Rumberger, 2011), but there is no specific percentage reported for them for two reasons. First, there are several descriptive qualifiers for the word 'disadvantaged.' Second, many students are disadvantaged in more than one qualifying area. The definition of disadvantaged, as used in this study, follows:

The term 'disadvantaged' is generally defined as individuals or groups who were socially and/or economically deprived or discriminated against (Collins English Dictionary, 2003). Merriam Webster's online dictionary (2016) defines the term more specifically, stating that the disadvantaged are "lacking in the basic resources or conditions (such as standard housing, medical and educational facilities and civil rights) believed to be necessary for an equal position in society." In this study, definitions of disadvantaged were applied specifically to those students whose circumstances or disabilities impacted or compromised their educational opportunities. These included minorities, English language learners, those with special needs and learning disabilities, and those immigrants with little or no formal education. While their racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds were barriers to success, their personal and social situations were often the tipping points that led to their dropping out (Kozol, 2005; Rennie Center, 2014). Being poor was the common denominator; the fact was that these students tended to come from
low-income families, many of whom lived below the poverty line (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Kozol, 2005; Rumberger, 2011). In a report to the NCES, researchers Chapman, Laird, Ifill, and KewalRamani (2011) documented that poor students - whose family incomes are in the bottom 20 percent - are five times more likely to drop out of high school than those in the top 20 percent. Moreover, in an article on poverty and high school dropouts in the U.S., written for the American Psychological Association, Rumberger (2013) noted that more than 20 percent of students were poor and that poverty among Black and Hispanic families was five times the rate for White families.

Despite the apparent gains in the national graduation rate (NCES, 2013), the dropout gap between disadvantaged students and their advantaged peers is projected to grow (Barton, 2005; Rumberger, 2011; Wolk, 2010) as their population continues to rise (Fix & Passel, 2003). The situation is a significant cause for concern because disadvantaged students are considered to be at the highest risk of dropping out of traditional U.S. school environments that adhere to classical approaches to teaching and learning (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2010).

Over the years, traditional public schools have adopted programs and adapted curriculum to try and meet the changing needs of an increasingly diverse student population with equally diverse learning challenges and needs (Anyon, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006). However, the traditional approach and methodology to teaching remains (Barton, 2005; Rumberger, 2011; Wolk, 2009). General characteristics of traditional school environments include the following: 1) they are predominantly teacher-directed; 2) they tend to employ a standardized curriculum and pedagogy; 3) the primary cultural focus is on academic achievement; 4) teaching methods tend to focus on skill, drill, memorization, and testing; 5) relationship-building between students and teachers is usually of secondary importance to academic performance; and 6) students are
expected to assimilate to the learning environment of the school rather than vice-versa (Meier, 1995; Rumberger, 2011; Watson, 2011; Wolk, 2009). The problem is not that traditional schools and educators are unaware or uncaring. The problem is that these schools and educators are constrained by size along with oversight and financial control by the federal government (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ravitch, 2010). In addition to the traditional mindset noted earlier, for schools with large populations of disadvantaged students, a lack of resources and student circumstances compound the challenges (Hargreaves & Shirley; 2012; Rennie Center, 2014; Rumberger, 2011, 2013). However, change is occurring through the emergence of alternative approaches to education. One promising approach is found in alternative schools, which offer students educational opportunities based on innovative perspectives in both teaching and learning (Watson, 2011; Wolk, 2010). Alternative schools were the focus of this study.

Throughout the last 35 years, as the number of disadvantaged students grew (Fix & Passel, 2003; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007), a different type of educational organization - the alternative school - emerged across the U.S., offering a distinctive model and philosophy of education (Barton, 2005). Although all schools (like all organizations) have unique cultures, in a traditional school environment, the focus is predominantly academic (Barton, 2005; Rumberger, 2011). Conversely, alternative schools focus on curriculum and methods that are intentionally designed to meet the individual needs of students, that are both social and academic, and that create a multi-faceted and personalized approach to education (Wolk, 2010). In fact, a growing number of alternative schools experience a high degree of retention and graduation among students (Watson, 2011). Some scholars believe that it is the culture of alternative schools, with an intentional focus on both the social and academic needs of students, that creates a holistic learning experience - one that proves more successful with disadvantaged students (Barton,
2005; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Meier, 1995; Wolk, 2010). The equal focus on social and academic development that is found in alternative schools establishes an environment, or a culture of learning, that is different from most traditional schools where the culture of learning emphasizes academic achievement.

The term "culture of learning" is widespread, but not universal in meaning. Rather, it reflects an organization's philosophy and vision as interpreted by its leaders and members. For example, although he never used the phrase culture of learning, Senge's (2006) idea of a learning organization was just that because, to Senge, a learning organization is an environment of collaboration where individuals can learn, grow, and create to enrich their own and the organization's potential. For Dewey (2001), a culture of learning is one where inquiry, exploration, experiential and real-world learning are at the core of the individual student's experience. For example, in a military academy, a culture of learning revolves around discipline, adherence to the chain of command, an honor code, and camaraderie. A culture of learning comprises climate, teaching and learning pedagogy, and priorities, which may differ from one organization and from one group of individuals to the next.

Alternative schools appear to have intentional cultures of learning that are systemic throughout the school, and each seems to be rooted in a vision that is willingly shared and manifested in all of its members (Senge et al., 2012), including teachers and students. The phenomenon of this particular culture of learning embodies both the nurturing of relationships and the development of academic achievement. Therefore, the focus of this study was to better understand, from the perspective of the teacher, how the phenomenon of a culture of learning in alternative high schools supported disadvantaged students' social and academic achievement. It is the belief of this researcher that those educators who are closest to the students have important
insights to share about this phenomenon. For this reason, the voices of alternative school educators, which are rarely heard throughout the literature (Campbell, 2013; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011) were the vehicles for the insights gained in this research. The following section describes some of the economic, social, and personal circumstances that surround and pervade the lives of disadvantaged students.

**The Context**

**Disadvantaged Youth**

Disadvantaged students are hard to define since they may enter school with a range of educational, economic and social challenges (Anyon, 2005). Compared to their more advantaged peers, disadvantaged students are often poor, and the lack of disposable family income results in fewer life experiences for students' reference and enriched learning (Anyon, 2005; Kozol, 2005). Those who live in poor areas are less likely to complete high school than those who live in the suburbs (Dillon, 2009; Johnson, Strange & Madden, 2010; Jordan, Kostandini & Mykerezi, 2012; NCES, 2010). The poor are five times as likely to drop out as those who are more affluent (Rumberger, 2013), and, as noted earlier, poverty among Black and Hispanic families is greater than the poverty rate for White families. Also, the NCES (2014) affirmed that in many states, about one third of students from low-income families do not graduate. If they are immigrants or first generation students, these students and their families tend to cluster in enclaves which help to preserve their ethnic and racial cultures, but at the expense of becoming bi-cultural (Anyon, 2005).

Among those who are disadvantaged, learning difficulties may be further compounded if little or no English is spoken in the home (Rumberger, 2011; The Federal Register, 2014). For older immigrant students, learning English to access the curriculum is especially challenging.
The World-class Instructional Design and Assessment group (WIDA, n.d.), whose mission is to develop language skills and academic achievement among those with language deficits, agreed. Their 2011 research noted that older students required up to five years to acquire conversational English and seven years to access academic language.

Statistics that categorize students do not speak to the personal experiences and needs of these young adults (Rennie Center, 2014). In fact, there are myriad, underlying personal and social circumstances that leave disadvantaged youth feeling marginalized and disenfranchised (Barton, 2005; Becker & Luthar, 2002; Watson, 2011). Circumstances usually include one or more of the following: 1) lack of parental support; 2) inconsistent support and role-modeling from other adults, including teachers; 3) inadequate English and communication skills; 4) learning disabilities - some of which are undiagnosed or untreated; 5) having to care for an elderly grandparent or a younger sibling, working more than 20 hours a week to contribute to the family income; 6) family mobility and disruptions; 7) behavior challenges, court referrals, chronically poor school attendance, and/or underperformance and failing grades; 8) teen pregnancy or teen parenting, drugs, gangs; and 9) economic deprivation and instability (Anyon, 2005; Rennie Center, 2014; Rumberger, 2013). Any of these factors can lead to emotional stress, disengagement, failure, and eventual dropout (Kearns, 2011; National Dropout Prevention Center, 2010).

These factors - individually or in combination - make it difficult for disadvantaged students to acclimate to a traditional school structure and to meet its academic expectations (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Meier, 1995, 2007). Therefore, academic results are often disappointing, especially in the graduation rates for Latino, Native American, and Black students who lag 15 to 20 points behind their White and Asian contemporaries (American Council on
Regarding Asian students, many studies have been conducted to discover the reason for their academic success. They are a diverse group, from many countries. Not all are successful; some drop out of school. However, collectively, Asian students share some traits, values, and behaviors that are culturally different from mainstream American culture (Goyette & Xie, 1999). These characteristics include the desire to honor their elders, the drive and discipline to prove their worthiness and intellectual value, the will and work ethic to succeed, and the overarching intention to not bring dishonor to their families. While not unique to Asian people, these traits are inherent to Asian students and are both consistently honored and credited for the steady success and accomplishments of this ethnic group (Goyette & Xie).

Many individuals and experts in education are prolific in their research on the topic of disadvantaged students and other issues that impact education in the United States. Among the latter is the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, a non-profit institution located in Boston, MA, and founded in 2002 by Paul Reville, then Secretary of Education in Massachusetts. Committed to research and policy reforms that would improve public education for every child, the Rennie Center has earned the respect of leading education authorities, including Andy Hargreaves (Haywoode, 2015).

The needs of disadvantaged students evolved dramatically over the past half century. Disadvantaged students are not only more diversified, they require more individualized academic programs (Barton, 2005; Wolk, 2010). They also need daily personal attention and the confidence that comes from supportive, reliable adult relationships that might not be available at home (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Kozol, 2005; Randell, 2013). However, most traditional schools have not yet shifted pedagogy or expanded social services to help these students (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Mondale & Patton, 2001; Rumberger, 2011). Despite their best
intentions, traditional schools are not equipped with the staff, structure, or financial resources to provide intentional, individualized curriculum and a constant, affirming adult presence that disadvantaged students want and need (Barton, 2005; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Meier, 1995; Rumberger, 2011; Wolk, 2010). In other words, traditional schools are rooted in traditions and pedagogy that do not reflect today's economic and cultural realities (Kaplan & Owings, 2013) and the parallel needs of disadvantaged youth (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Wolk, 2010). The result is that disadvantaged students are increasingly at high risk of dropping out (American Psychological Association, 2012; NCES, 2010; Wolk, 2009).

**Traditional Schools**

Public schools have been the bastion of American society since the days of Horace Mann, who was an attorney, a Massachusetts legislator, and, in 1837, was appointed as secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education. At the time, as noted in Mondale and Patton (2001), schools were self-funded by their communities and, therefore, the quality of education was dependent on the degree of economic well-being in each community. In his capacity as education secretary, Mann visited every school in the state and concluded that there should be a universal approach to education that would be taught by professionally-trained teachers, and would provide educational equity for all communities and for all students. In addition, Mann proposed following the Prussian school model (Finkelstein, 1990); namely, 1) that schooling be focused on character-building and preparing students to become good citizens and capable workers through obedience and good attendance and 2) that reading and math be part of a compulsory, nationally prescribed curriculum for each grade. As a result of Mann's reforms, more children had access to education and the literacy rate in Massachusetts improved (Mondale & Patton, 2001). These were positive outcomes. The eventual implementation of the Prussian system throughout the United States
(Finkelstein, 1990), evolved into what became known as traditional schooling (Mondale & Patton, 2001).

Traditional schools are primarily teacher-directed with an academic culture that embraces disciplined learning of facts and skills that 1) insists on student passivity and 2) emphasize conformity rather than individuality (Deschenes et al., 2001; Wolk, 2009). This so-called factory model, which took hold at the beginning of the 20th century, was the work of Ellwood Patterson Cubberly, a school administrator and a contemporary of John Dewey, who promoted education to prepare students (in particular immigrant students) to be efficient and productive factory workers (Foster, 2001). Although Cubberly wanted to improve education and opportunities for the average person, his version of education reform held to the structure of teacher-directed learning (Cremin, 1965). Cubberly's views were challenged by Dewey, whose concept of experiential learning was considered extreme and was relegated to a few progressive school environments, including his own experimental laboratory school, housed at the University of Chicago (Phillips, 2014). Through the 1960s and 1970s, progressive schools that offered diverse alternative approaches to learning regularly emerged; some were precursors to the alternative schools of today (Phillips). Nevertheless, Cubberly's educational approach of the factory model was the accepted cultural tradition and prevailed past the middle of the 20th century (Mondale & Patton, 2001). This pedagogical environment persisted until 1983 and the publication of a pivotal federal report on the status of U.S. education.

Titled A Nation at Risk, the report, issued by the Department of Education, brought the programs, principles, and practices of traditional public schools under scrutiny and criticism, particularly with regard to student performance and achievement. Compared to other industrial countries, the academic performance of U.S. students was deemed to be "...a rising tide of
mediocrity” (p. 1) that threatened the future and well-being of the United States. The report stressed the need for two far-reaching reforms. First was the development of national educational goals and content. Second was the implementation of standardized goals and measurable assessments. These reforms were expanded under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Race to the Top initiative of 2009. During this period, education reforms and policies became further entrenched, and standardized the educational policies of the past at the Federal level (Ravitch, 2010; Rennie Center, 2014; Wolk, 2009). The resulting programs, enacted over the past 30 years, are especially challenging for disadvantaged students for reasons discussed earlier (Ravitch, 2010; Rumberger, 2011, 2013). Importantly, these students are part of a demographic change which has been quietly trending toward a more diverse population with multiple and differing needs (Martin & Fogel, 2006; Gruber, 2009; U. S. Census Bureau, 2011a). It is a trend that requires attention (Rumberger, 2011).

Traditional educators are mindful that many of their students have social-emotional and academic deficits that need to be addressed (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Murray & Malmgren, 2005). Immigrants have to adjust to a new culture and a new language. The poor are expected to achieve social and academic expectations that their life experiences leave them less prepared to meet than their more affluent peers (Anyon, 2005; Kozol, 2005). These barriers have to be overcome so that disadvantaged students can attain educational proficiency (Rennie Center, 2014; Rumberger, 2011). Most schools respond by adding school initiatives and staff to help students gain academic parity (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). However, because many of these initiatives are grant-funded and finite (Ravitch, 2010), the changes are not consistent; nor do they become systemic and intentional components of school culture (Watson, 2011). These circumstances are especially detrimental in schools with a high percentage of disadvantaged
students. For example, in more affluent areas the student teacher ratio is close to the ideal of 18 to one (Glossary of Education Reform, 2014), compared to large, urban schools, where the average student-teacher ratio is often as high as 30 to one. The result is less one-to-one assistance for students, and less time for building personal teacher-student relationships that can lead to student motivation and improved achievement (Meier, 1995). Thus, despite new initiatives, traditional schools with large numbers of disadvantaged youth face many obstacles in their efforts to achieve continued and steady academic growth among their students (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Quinn & Poirier, 2007; Rennie Center, 2014).

Traditional educational settings, such as those described in the preceding paragraphs, lack the resources to address the increased diversity and education gaps among their student populations. Moreover, their focus has shifted as well (Anyon, 2005; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Meier, 2007; Ravitch, 2010). Such schools have to be mindful of the federal government's insistence that they improve standardized test scores and the graduation rate or face the risk of 1) losing federal funds and 2) school closure (Ravitch, 2010; Rumberger, 2011). Accordingly, for many traditional schools, self-protection and survival of the institution take precedence over individual student's needs (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Wolk, 2009). As a result, these historical events and challenges have prompted forward-thinking educators to search for new and more effective methods to educate the growing numbers of children in need of alternatives to the traditional U.S. educational system. This search led to the emergence and rise of alternative forms of education (Meier, 1995; Sizer, 1984).

**Alternative Education**

Rawyid (1994) initially described alternative schools as educational settings designed to accommodate educational, behavioral, and/or the medical needs of children, which were not
adequately addressed in a traditional school environment. A more practical view is that alternative schools are conceived to educate students who have not been successful in traditional schools for many reasons, both personal and academic (Senge et al., 2012). Either way, according to Barton (2005), Campbell (2013), and Wolk (2009), alternative schools exist to provide optional paths to success for those who cannot or do not succeed in a one-size-fits-all, standardized environment.

**Types of Alternative Schools:**

For all their differences, alternative schools shared common ground in ways that matter to disadvantaged youth (Quinn & Poirier, 2007; Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Rennie Center, 2014). For example, most are small, with low student to teacher ratios. They offer flexible hours and programs of study. Teachers adjust their practices to accommodate their students. Students actively participate in their own goal planning (including how to meet high expectations for social, emotional, behavioral, and academic growth). Building supportive, one-to-one relationships is a primary objective (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Harris, Caldwell, & Longmuir, 2013; Rennie Center, 2014).

As Meier (2007) noted, alternative schools set social and academic standards, but eschew standardization. Instead, according to Raywid (1994), alternative schools present choices for any student who wants or needs a more customized educational experience. Alternative schools are especially beneficial for disadvantaged students who are not successful in a traditional setting and require a different educational approach - an alternative culture of learning - that is compatible with and supportive of their individual needs and ambitions (Barton, 2005; Murray & Malmgren, 2005; Rumberger, 2011; Wolk, 2009). In other words, alternative schools intentionally develop a culture of learning that has two constructs. First, an alternative culture of
learning builds on supportive student-teacher relationships to develop social efficacy which, according to Bandura (1977, 1978), is a person's confidence in his or her ability to self-motivate and to do what is required to achieve individual goals. Second, a culture of learning develops academic engagement through personalized learning, which includes a curriculum customized to meet the learning needs as well as the personal and professional interests of individual students (Gallagher, 2013; Wolk, 2010). Two examples of effective alternative schools are briefly described in the following paragraphs.

Mission Hill is an urban Boston neighborhood where most families are poor and minority. Yet the 300+ students at Codman Academy High School in Mission Hill are thriving (Mass DOE, 2016). The school's stated core principles included being curious about the world; having personal accountability; valuing and honoring friendships through empathy, collaboration, and inclusion; learning from failure as well as success; believing in self; and making time to reflect and share. In 2015 on the state standardized test, 10th grade students at Codman achieved proficiency scores in English and Math that were higher than the state average (Mass DOE, 2016). In 2016, Codman Academy posted a graduation rate of 84.5 percent and was listed as one of the nation's best high schools in U.S. News & World Report (2016). Thus, their mission and philosophy to promote knowledge through self-discovery via personalized learning through internships appears to be working.

Big Picture Learning (BPL) presents a different model. Founded in Providence, RI, in 1995, BPL is a network of more than 60 public and some charter schools throughout the U.S., as well as more than a dozen schools in other countries, including Australia, the Netherlands, Israel, and Canada (Arnold, Brown Soto, Methven, & Brown 2015). These schools operate independently and average 250 students who are encouraged to develop their career passions
through self-directed learning and real-world internships (Nasab & Bickel, 2015). The success of BPL and its educators is notable.

For example, Arnold et al. (2015) conducted a 10-year longitudinal study of 23 BPL schools. The study confirmed that: 1) 74 percent of BPL students were poor; 2) almost 60 percent cited English as a second language; 3) almost 20 percent had other learning disabilities; and 4) 80 percent would be the first in their families to earn a college degree. Yet, despite the challenges these students faced, the study also reported the following: 1) across the country, BPL's average graduation rate of 85 percent exceeded the average local district rates by 10 points or more and 2) on state standardized tests, BPL students’ proficiency rate exceeded the district rates by 7 to 20 points in English and 10 to 14 points in Math, except in one district (Nashville) where the math scores were equal. According to the study, BPL also encouraged its students to participate in civic engagement (93 percent), post-secondary preparation (78 percent), and personally meaningful work (88 percent), leading to self-fulfillment (66 percent). BPL is an example of an effective alternative school.

The two alternative organizations described above are different in structure, size, and intellectual content. Yet these schools share a commitment to a culture of learning that gives equal weight to social development and academic excellence. Intentionally and systemically, they operationalize a culture of learning that is designed to meet each student's personal, social, and academic needs. These tenets typify the priorities of the culture of learning at many alternative schools. However, scholars such as Foley and Pang (2006) and Poutiatine and Veeder (2011) note that, in addition to relationship-building and personalized learning, a culture of learning incorporates and is defined by other elements as well. These factors include trust, caring, safety and support, confidence, honesty, parental involvement, community partnerships,
project-based curriculum, real-world learning, and professional development for educators. Some of these components also emerged as influential in this study. As important as these elements are, research confirms a link between supportive teacher-student relationships and the academic success of personalized learning for disadvantaged students (Quinn & Poirier, 2007; Rumberger, 2011; Watson, 2011). Therefore, the social component of relationship-building and the academic component of personalized learning served as the two areas of focus for this qualitative investigation and are discussed in the following sections.

**The importance of teacher-student relationships.** Considerable research exists that supports the importance of teacher-student relationships in positive child development and well-being at the elementary and middle school levels (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Cataldi & KewalRamani, 2009; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Research further indicates that students who have safe and supportive relationships with their teachers are able to transfer their sense of well-being into their pursuit of academic success (Becker & Luthar, 2002). To date, however, there is minimal research on the relationships between teachers and high school students, specifically those who are disadvantaged. Likewise, there is little information in the literature on the direct impact of these relationships on academic outcomes (Harris et al., 2013; Murray & Malmgren, 2005).

Based on the evidence at the elementary and middle school levels, Murray and Malmgren (2005) conducted research in a high-poverty urban high school to explore whether similar links exist among students at the secondary level. The specific purpose of their study was to explore the effect of intentionally nurtured teacher-student relationships on students' academic outcomes. Positive results were evident in the improved G.P.A. (grade point average) for every participating student. Similar trends were indicated in studies by individual researchers, such as
Watson (2011), and in reports by research institutions, including the American Institutes for Research (2007) and the Rennie Center (2014). While their results seemed promising, Murray & Malmgren (2005) and Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) suggested that too little research has been conducted at the high school level to establish a definitive trend connecting personal social growth and academic achievement among disadvantaged students.

Bandura (1977, 1978) and other theorists suggest that students who have strong and positive relationships with their teachers will be motivated to achieve. For disadvantaged high school students, the development of self-esteem and confidence is thought to be especially beneficial in contributing to academic success (Murray & Malmgren, 2005). Further, some alternative schools, such as Codman Academy, demonstrate effectiveness in building the relationships that nurture social competence and self-esteem. The connection that these schools forge between relationship-building and personalized learning was one focus of this inquiry and research.

**The importance of personalized learning.** In 2002, Becker and Luthar reported that three decades of education reform, focused on improving the academic performance of disadvantaged students, had "...failed to meet the task" (p. 199). This failed objective was found to be equally true in traditional schools (Rennie Center, 2014; Rumberger, 2011). Yet, in alternative schools whose academic culture was predicated on personalized learning, disadvantaged students were succeeding at higher rates (Barton, 2005; Wolk, 2010).

In 2006, the National High School Center issued a report that evidenced the positive impact of personalized learning on student outcomes. The following year, in 2007, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) published a paper, authored by Quinn & Poirier, titled, "Are Personalized Learning Environments the Next Wave in K-12 Education Reform?" It is
noteworthy that AIR is a non-profit behavioral and social science organization whose mission is to improve lives, especially of those who were disadvantaged. The paper substantiated the primary benefits of personalized learning and its environments, benefits which are shared by other experts, such as Meier (1995) and Rumberger (2011). These benefits included: student choice of academic focus based on personal interests, real-world learning opportunities, and flexibility - all of which were found to be especially meaningful to disadvantaged students.

In other words, in content and setting, personalized learning offers academic experiences to engage students that most traditional schools seem unable to duplicate (Rennie Center, 2014). As Wolk (2010) noted, personalized learning is not a theory; it is an educational experience, intentionally nurtured in alternative schools "to match student diversity... and to serve those youngsters who are least-well served by the conventional system" (p. 18). The evidence indicates that this interconnection between social-emotional well-being and academic achievement through personalized learning appears to be mutually reinforcing with both components working together to develop positive outcomes for disadvantaged youth. These two components - social and academic - comprised the phenomenon of a culture of learning that was under investigation in this study.

**Purpose and Culture of Alternative Schools**

While some alternative schools are private institutions, public alternative schools emerged to fill the academic and social gaps for disadvantaged youth that traditional schools could not (Barton, 2005; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011; Rumberger, 2011; Watson, 2011; Wolk, 2009). The effectiveness of alternative schools derives from a belief system that children and their needs are paramount and are subject to change (Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Rennie Center, 2014; Wolk, 2010). For example, at Big Picture Learning, a nationwide network of alternative
schools, the mission statement is "The education of a nation, one student at a time" (Big Picture Learning, n.d.). Effectiveness is measured through social and academic individual growth, and is demonstrated through student presentations and daily interactions with peers, mentors, and teachers (Martin & Brand, 2006; Meier, 1995). Also, in public alternative schools, the required state standardized tests are not considered a judgment, but an opportunity to identify each student's strengths as well as those areas that need development (Littky & Grabelle, 2004).

In response to a growing need to support disadvantaged students (Rumberger, 2011), the rise of alternative schools is notable (Barton; 2005; Rennie Center, 2014). Specifically, in a report for the Educational Testing Service, Barton (2005) affirmed that the number of alternative schools had grown from an NCES estimate of 2,606 in 1993-1994 to a reported 10,900 by 2006. Yet, at that time, this number represented only about 11 percent of the total number of public schools in the U.S. (NCES, 2009-2010), and they served only 1.3 percent of the total number of students (Rennie Center, 2014). More recent data shows that among youth who are most at-risk of dropping out, only 10 to 20 percent are enrolled in alternative education (Rennie Center, 2014). Therefore, the need for alternative schooling continues to exist.

The evidence indicates that alternative schools provide disadvantaged students with a customized academic experience that is working (Barton, 2005; Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Quinn & Poirier, 2007). For example, the Positive Options Program in Pittsfield, MA, is a partnership between Berkshire Community College and high schools in Pittsfield and neighboring districts (Daniels, 2010). The program offers college courses and internships for credit to students who must maintain good grades in their required high school courses in order to stay in the program. To date, not only have all students graduated from high school, but a small starting base of 35 students has expanded to a waiting list at all four participating regional schools, and the program
is now a line item in their budgets. In Yarmouth on Cape Cod, flexibility is the key to success for those students who attend school for half a day and then work for the remaining half a day (Legere, 2013). These schools are but two examples where the individual academic needs and interests and the personal circumstances of students are paramount.

Moreover, alternative schools develop social confidence through intense relationship-building that most traditional schools were unable to offer (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Noddings, 2011). Bryk and Schneider (2002), Meier (1995), and Senge et al. (2012) argued that it was the inherent culture of learning at alternative schools that make them successful with disadvantaged youth. This culture appears to be an intentionally-developed environment with a social component that provides a foundation of trusting, supportive relationships (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, Noddings, 2005, 2011) and an academic component that features customized and personalized learning and inquiry (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Watson, 2011; Wolk, 2009).

The social component of a culture of learning provides caring relationships (Noddings, 2011). This component serves as a role-model for social behavior and includes interaction, accountability, self-confidence, and independence (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Meier, 1995). Authorities, such as Cataldi and KewalRamani (2009) described the rising evidence that relationship-building is of particular importance for disadvantaged high school youth who suffer from low self-esteem and a detachment from school (Murray & Malmgren, 2005; Harris et al., 2013).

The academic component of a culture of learning encourages the pursuit of personal interests (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Meier, 1995). In their respective research, Darling-Hammond, (2010), Hargreaves, (2002), and Senge et al. (2012) found that personalized learning (defined previously) also fosters student and teacher autonomy, which facilitates rather than dictates
learning. Further, Cataldi and KewalRamani (2009), Watson (2011), and Wolk (2010) noted that there is emerging evidence that these characteristics are especially critical to the academic development of disadvantaged youth. Together these academic and social elements contribute to an intentional culture of learning, which is altruistically student-focused and student-centered.

Research suggests that the culture of learning at alternative schools appears to be more conducive to the learning, achievement, and personal efficacy of disadvantaged students than what is offered at most traditional schools (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Watson, 2011; Wolk, 2009). In fact, according to Bryk and Schneider (2002) and Watson (2011), a culture of learning that embraces both social and academic schooling and is systemically intentional and inter-personally supported throughout the organization is the single leading reason for alternative school success with disadvantaged students. Evidence of this success is that in effective alternative schools, disadvantaged youth achieve and graduate at a rate that is equal to or higher than the national average (Barton, 2005; Foley & Pang, 2006; Rumberger, 2013; Swanson, 2012). That rate is currently reported as 81 percent (NCES, 2013). For example, as stated previously, Codman Academy, an alternative school in Boston, MA, with a disadvantaged student population, posted a graduation rate of 84.5 percent in 2014 (U.S. News & World Report, 2016). Also, as noted earlier, within alternative schools, effectiveness and efficacy are measured by individual growth and performance, with social confidence and academic success as the end goals.

The results of Codman Academy are not unique. In 2010, in a national survey conducted for the U.S. Department of Education, Carver, Lewis, and Tice found that relationship-building, learning that is relevant to students' experiences, and real world opportunities are linked to students' capacity to learn and succeed. More recently, the Rennie Center's (2014) study on alternative schooling in Massachusetts also confirms the positive academic outcomes in
alternative schools that are "keeping student needs in focus" (p. 11) through multi-service programs, including personal learning, student wellness, and relationship between students and teacher. To illustrate their findings, the Rennie Center cited several Massachusetts schools that are matching or exceeding the national graduation rate. In an environment where results on high-stakes tests often determine eligibility for a high school diploma, evidence increasingly shows that effective alternative school programs and educators can lead to high graduation rates (Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011).

Yet, little is known about alternative schools and their practices, especially through the use of qualitative approaches (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011). In particular, qualitative research on alternative schools is rare (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Thus, there is no definitive account of what these schools do and how that results in positive outcomes for disadvantaged youth, including their higher rates of graduation. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) acknowledge that "...the research on alternative schools is limited" (p. 106). According to Cataldi and KewalRamani (2009) and Murray and Malmgren (2005), there is minimal research on how student-teacher relationships and personalized learning at the high school level affect academic outcomes among disadvantaged students. Also absent from the literature are teacher views on the topic of alternative schools and their impact on disadvantaged high school students (Campbell, 2013; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011). Thus, investigating these schools and understanding what they are, what they do, and how they do it - while using a culture of learning (and its social and academic components) as the primary lens - became the focus of inquiry for this study.

**Conceptual Framework**

This section defines the concept of culture for the purpose and context of this study. It
also reiterates the term 'culture of learning' and its particular meaning and application in the study. The researcher identifies and explains four elements, which are of interest for their potential to inform the exploration of alternative schooling and alternative educators. Finally, the researcher assesses the two components which served as the primary lenses for the study's conceptual framework and for understanding the phenomenon of a culture of learning in alternative schooling.

Culture has myriad meanings and many interpretations. As Schein (1990) noted, "Organizational culture as a concept is fairly new, coming into popular lexicon in the mid-20th century" (p. 109). Some describe it as "the way we do things" (Sun, 2008, p. 137), and in each organization, culture is unique. For this study, culture is defined through Senge et al.'s (2012) theory, described in the book *Schools that Learn*; namely that schools do not need to be isolated entities, but instead can be learning organizations, defined as "an interconnected set of processes and practices, linked to the community...classrooms, and individual learning experiences within it" (p. 15). Senge et al. contend that two disparate goals can be mutually accomplished: 1) nurturing the individual's personal dreams and goals and 2) developing long-term improved academic outcomes.

According to Senge et al. (2012), achieving these goals reflects the social and academic components that together form a culture of learning in an alternative high school. Therefore, in this study, although culture was informed by values and by human expression, the construct of a culture of learning - with social and academic components - served as the focal point for the conceptual framework. Two other constructs were also inherent to the definition of organizational culture in this study. These are: 1) Schein's (2010) theory of values and basic assumptions and 2) the idea of being and becoming that reflects Smircich's (1983) concept of
root metaphor. How these constructs both impacted and were impacted by the culture of learning were in evidence during this research and in the analysis of the findings. They are both discussed briefly in the sections that follow.

**Culture of Values and Basic Assumptions**

There are many definitions of organizational culture, but Edgar Schein's (2010) has become the accepted benchmark. In his iconic book, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Schein (2010) defined culture as "...a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration... (p. 18). These tacit basic assumptions are designed and directed by the organization's leadership, who are responsible for driving the internal cultural values that move the organization forward. They are taught to new members because as Schein noted in a 2011 interview "...culture is a result of learning" (Moore, p. 1 of 2).

In his model, Schein (2010) identifies three levels of culture. The first level includes the observable artifacts that symbolically represent the organization - for example, a mission statement, physical displays, and traditional ceremonies and events. Stated values, norms, beliefs, and a vision - which establish the behavior of the organization - comprise the second level. In the third level are the deeply embedded and basic, underlying assumptions and patterns, which provide cognitive stability within the organization. Together the three levels of Schein's model define the organizational culture of values that make each organization unique and determine the role of the individual within it. During the process of data analysis in this study, explicit and implicit values emerged that impacted and were impacted by the culture of learning.

**Culture of Being and Becoming through Root Metaphor**

Some scholars believe that culture is learned (Brown, 1984; Davis, 1984; Schein, 2010).
Others contend that culture is intentional, establishing an environment for a learning organization (Meier, 1995; Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Senge et al., 2012). In a defining article, Smircich (1983) suggested that culture is neither an external nor an internal variable, but rather the intersection of culture theory and organization theory, which she calls 'root metaphor.'

According to Smircich, it is at this juncture that culture becomes what an organization is rather than what it has, and "attention shifts from...what organizations accomplish...to how is organization accomplished..." (p. 353). In this construct, human expression is vital to an organization's growth in a generative process that continuously and intentionally welcomes change through emerging ideas, actions, reflection, and sharing among organization members.

Smircich (1983) uses metaphor to illustrate the organic nature of her theory. For example, organization as machine indicates one in which parts are meshed to generate maximum performance and efficiency. Organization as organism suggests one in which members struggle to respond, adapt, and survive in an external world that is constantly changing. Culture as a system of shared norms, values, symbols, and understandings that connect to knowledge is represented by the metaphor of the organization as a bridge. Therefore, in root metaphor, culture is a reflection of the individual's emerging perspectives and how he/she continuously changes and rearranges cultural values and symbols to discover new meanings and evolve. How the culture of learning influences and is influenced by the concepts of values and root metaphor emerged throughout this research.

Evidence exists that effective alternative schools have an intentional culture of learning that manifests in social and academic components and produces positive academic outcomes among disadvantaged students. In this study, it was important to understand these components independently and the connections, if any, between them. It was also important to understand
other salient factors that emerged, including educators' views, in their own voices, about the practices and values of their alternative school settings. Therefore, the focus of this study was to understand the phenomenon of an intentional culture of learning by unpacking the alternative school culture. This research employed a conceptual lens containing both a social and an academic component, and interpreted if and how the culture's norms, values and human expression informed a culture of learning. Figure 1 below shows the potential interconnection of the four components.

**Figure 1: Interaction of Cultural Elements**

According to Fisher, Frey & Pumpian (2012) a positive culture of learning that is "purposefully developed and managed" (p. 1 of 8), encompasses both a culture of educational engagement and strong, caring relationships that produce cultural capital. These components were found to be especially important for empowering disadvantaged students to persist and succeed (Gallagher, 2013; Murray & Malmgren, 2005; Wolk, 2010). They are also rooted in Senge's (2006) concept of a learning organization as described in the next section, which
supports the focus of the study's conceptual lens on the social and academic components of learning as integral to an alternative culture of learning.

**Culture of Learning**

According to Senge (2006), the culture of an authentic learning organization facilitates the on-going learning of its members so that the organization can continuously and effectively transform itself. In order to create and sustain a culture that serves as both foundation and platform for a learning organization, individuals have to be willing to embrace "...a shift of mind - from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world" (p. 37). This paradigm relies on an interconnected way of thinking and acting that, in turn, depends on trust, honest communication, and cooperation between individuals and groups (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Senge, 2006).

In his seminal work, *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge (2006) states his premise that to be effective, an authentic learning organization also requires the acquisition of five disciplines. These include: 1) personal mastery, the discipline for developing personal mastery - both practical and spiritual - and a commitment to growth; 2) mental models, which reflect how we understand the world, react to it, and act within it, representing an individual's deeply held assumptions and values, and accompanied by a willingness to expose them to others; 3) shared vision, the beginning of exploring common ground and building capacity for a shared view; 4) dialogue, to continue the process of developing shared learning, shared meaning, and a shared vision; and 5) systems thinking, the discipline that integrates the others and fuses them into a cohesive whole.

In this construct, culture is both the result of and the genesis for learning, independent generative thinking, and continuous transformation and change for the individual, the group, and
the organization (Freire, 1970; Schon, 1983; Senge et al., 2012). An authentic and sustainable learning organization invokes a culture of learning that is marked by continuous evolution and change, and is forged through discourse and a collaboration of individual ideas that together expand capacity (Senge, 2006). These characteristics appear to epitomize best practice in many alternative schools. For example, at Codman Academy in Boston, the mission is "...to provide an outstanding, transformative education " (Codman Academy in Boston, n.d.) that prepares the whole student - mind, body, and character - so that the student is ready for success in school and in life. Likewise, other alternative schools, such as Big Picture Learning and the Coalition of Essential Schools, also focus on the habits of mind that build capacity in both social and academic skills. The goal of these schools is to nurture personal growth and academic improvement for each student. For these reasons, the construct of a two-fold culture of learning - social and academic - served as the conceptual lens for this research. This study's conceptual framework was derived from the empirical evidence that identifies both social and academic components as necessary and important to an effective culture of learning in alternative schooling. The process is both adaptive and generative and represents the symbiotic relationship of the social and academic culture of learning components and, in turn, their interconnected relationship to the culture of learning as a whole. The continuous interaction between the social and academic components of a culture of learning is at the heart of alternative schools and directly informs student learning (Raywid, 1994; Littky & Grabelle, 2004). It is the conceptual framework that informed this study and is represented in Figure 2 below:
Figure 2: Conceptual Framework: Dynamics of a Culture of Learning and Its Components

Research Problem Statement

Across the United States, disadvantaged youth are dropping out of traditional schools at a higher rate than students who are more advantaged. Disadvantaged students tend to be poor, minority, often with learning disabilities and/or poor English-speaking skills, as well as having a host of family issues to juggle. They fail and often drop out because traditional schools are not structured to meet their complex and multiple needs - needs that are both personal and academic.

Unfortunately, the number of disadvantaged youth is projected to grow dramatically through the middle of this century (Fix & Passel, 2003; Swanson, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011a). As a result, the dropout rate is quickly becoming a national crisis (Rumberger, 2011, 2013). This problem affects not only the individual student, but the greater community and the nation as well (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2012; Rennie Center, 2014; Rumberger, 2011).

Serious economic repercussions are a natural outgrowth of dropping out of school
Students' career options and earning potential are severely curtailed versus those for high school graduates (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce & Fox, 2013; Gruber, 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011c). Also, dropouts become a burden on taxpayers because federally-funded support programs cost billions of dollars per year (Martin & Fogel, 2006). These trends are projected to accelerate through 2050 (Fix & Passel, 2003). Moreover, traditional schools appear unable to consistently bridge the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and others or to reverse the dropout trend among these students (Rumberger, 2011; Wolk, 2009).

Alternative schools are emerging as effective learning environments for disadvantaged youth. Evidence in the literature suggests that a connection exists between relational trust and positive academic outcomes for disadvantaged youth (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Murray & Malmgren, 2005; Watson, 2011), a link which appears to be fundamental to the cultures of alternative schools (Quinn & Poirier, 2007; Watson, 2011). The intentional development of both social capacity and academic stamina appears to be conducive to learning for disadvantaged students (Barton, 2005; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Watson, 2011).

However, there is a lack of research on alternative high schools, its educators, the students they serve (Quinn & Poirier, 2007; Murray & Malmgren, 2005), and the culture of learning that impacts them all. No national data are available that articulate the specific methods and approaches underlying the success of these schools (Barton, 2005; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Despite many case studies, there remains "...a significant gap in the literature regarding outcomes for alternative school programs…” (Franklin, Streeter, Kim, & Tripodi, 2007, p. 134) beyond the elementary and middle school levels.

In fact, little qualitative research exists on the subject of alternative schools (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011). According to Schein (2010), in many
organizations, members are passive recipients of the vision, norms and values, and the tacit assumptions that comprise the culture, and they are required to assimilate them. Conversely, in alternative schools, it appears that educators and their students are active participants in the continual development of the culture of learning and its continuously evolving transformation. As such, they tend to embrace and embody the culture (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011; Watson, 2011).

Little is known about what these schools and their educators do and how they do it to effect positive academic achievement among disadvantaged students (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Still less is known definitively about the schools' cultures of learning and the influence of a culture's social component on students and educators alike (Watson, 2011). In large part, this lack of knowledge stems from a paucity of alternative teacher voice on the subject (Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011). This is a significant void because teachers are the ones who develop, implement, revise, and change the customized instruction that is designed to meet the personal needs of each student (Watson, 2011). It is teachers who are in a position to build relationships with students and to nurture their social competence (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Therefore, it was teachers' perspectives on the phenomenon of a culture of learning that guided and informed this research.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

Using narrative methodology, the purpose of this qualitative research was to explore deeply and understand the phenomenon of a culture of learning in alternative high schools and how educators transmitted that culture to empower disadvantaged students to achieve positive academic results and graduate. The study used the perspective of alternative teachers' voices, descriptions, and their lived experiences to understand 1) the nature of the culture of learning and its social and academic components, and how educators developed these components; 2) how
educators believed that the culture nurtured students' confidence and motivation that led to their
social and academic development; and 3) what specific methods and best practices educators
used to effect positive outcomes for disadvantaged youth, including graduation at a rate that was
higher than their peers in traditional schools and was at or above the national average. The
research findings were viewed through a conceptual lens with both social and academic
components to add texture, dimension, and deeper understanding to this study.

This objective was achieved through richly detailed educator descriptions of the culture
of learning at their respective alternative high schools and how - socially and academically - each
culture influenced disadvantaged students to strive, achieve, persist, thrive, succeed, and
graduate. In keeping with these intellectual goals, as well as with the conceptual framework and
its social and academic components, the overarching questions that guided this study were:

1) How do alternative high school educators describe the culture of learning at their
schools?

2) According to alternative high school educators, based on their respective cultures of
learning, how do teacher/student relationships help to build confidence and motivation in
disadvantaged students?

3) What student-centered best practices have alternative high school educators
experienced that resulted in academic success for disadvantaged students?

**Significance of the Research**

There is a need - identified in the literature - to understand the phenomenon of a culture
of learning in alternative schools and how such a culture is effective in motivating disadvantaged
high school students - at risk of dropping out - to persist and graduate (Franklin et al., 2007).
However, there is little information about alternative schools in the literature (Franklin et al.)
and no clear research that defines a culture of learning and its components (Franklin et al., 2007; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Also, according to Deschenes et al. (2003), there is also a lack of evidence that describes what these schools do and how that results in effective learning and graduation for disadvantaged students. Thus, the first significant contribution of this research was to identify the cultural characteristics of learning in alternative environments and how those traits influence disadvantaged students and their learning.

Second, it is important that the findings of this study were viewed through the personal narratives and perspectives of alternative educators because there is a paucity of educator voice in the literature (Campbell, 2013; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2001; Liefschitz, 2015; Watson, 2011). This gap was addressed in this study because educators, especially teachers, are the ones most likely to implement the social and academic elements that comprise an engaging, nurturing, and motivating culture of learning. Teachers articulated first-hand knowledge and experience of what inspired and empowered disadvantaged youth to strive, persist, and achieve graduation from high school (Bandura, 1977; Dewey, 1933; Mezirow, 1991; Senge et al., 2012). In so doing, the teachers identified the social and academic components of their school cultures and how these fostered student engagement and academic success.

The third area of significance in this study was to unpack and clarify the social and academic components that form a culture of learning in alternative settings. It is important to understand how these components led to positive academic outcomes for disadvantaged youth (Wolk, 2009). If these students achieve and graduate, they will have career and earning opportunities that allow them to become economically independent as well as productive and contributing citizens (Hargreaves, 2002). As a result, other stakeholders, such as parents, communities, society, and the U.S. economy may also benefit from the findings in this study.
(Fix & Passel, 2003; Rennie Center, 2014).

It is also significant that a specifically defined, intentional, and operationalized culture of learning has not yet been the object of study (Franklin, et al., 2007). Therefore, the findings of this study offer useful insights on effective learning for disadvantaged students and for educators in both alternative and traditional school environments (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). The goal of this study was to understand the phenomenon of a culture of learning in alternative schools and how this culture motivates disadvantaged and at-risk high school students to persist and graduate. From the vantage point of educator perspective, this research provides significance that reaches beyond the disadvantaged students that it sought to better understand.

**Positionality Statement**

In keeping with the structure and nature of qualitative research, I was the primary researcher in this study. I assumed the responsibility to interact with participants and to represent their stories, perspectives, and experiences with accuracy and sensitivity (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Seidman, 2006). In addition, I was the sole human instrument to examine documents, to collect, analyze, and interpret the data, and then to report the findings and develop conclusions (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006).

While making every effort to be an impartial human instrument, I was continuously mindful that researcher bias is an ever-present risk (Creswell, 2005). For example, I undertook this research based on my beliefs, experiences, and perspective as an educator that an effective culture of learning might be a positive influence on disadvantaged youth, and might also impact their ability to achieve and succeed academically. It was the goal of this study to explore and understand the phenomenon of a culture of learning through a two-fold conceptual lens (See Figure 2, p. 38). This lens indicated the path of exploration was neither a hypothesis nor a
predictor of outcome, but simply a conceptual focus that guided and informed the study.

In order to minimize researcher bias and, therefore maximize validity of outcomes, I identified and acknowledged my beliefs, experience, and knowledge, and actively practiced reflexive objectivity in order to maintain an honest and undistorted report of emerging data, its analysis, and interpretation (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Merriam, 2009). For example, during the interview process, questions were open-ended, and I, in all ways, tried to present a neutral and impartial posture in tone, facial expression, and body language (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006). Likewise, in collecting and analyzing the data, I used an inductive approach, allowing ideas and, later, themes to emerge (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Saldana, 2009). In moving from open to axial coding, I used a combination of inductive and deductive analyses. Both reflected the participants' words and perceptions interpretatively and objectively - further minimizing risk of researcher bias. Moreover, I engaged participants in member-checking as a control (Creswell, 2012; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Patton, 1990).

Finally, the research was conducted with teachers with whom I had no prior professional affiliation or relationships. During the recruitment process, as required under IRB protocol and procedures, I introduced myself as a doctoral candidate from Northeastern University who was conducting this research for my doctoral dissertation. Everything about the process and purpose of this research and my role as researcher was described forthrightly, with transparency, and subject to participants' questions (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1990).

**Definition of Terms**

**Alternative Schools:** Educational establishments with curriculum and methods that are designed to meet the educational, social, behavioral, and/or medical needs of children and adolescents that cannot be adequately addressed in a traditional school environment (Encyclopedia of Children’s

**At-Risk Youth:** Students who are vulnerable to dropping out due to environmental, social, and family conditions that hinder their personal and academic development (Kozol, 2005).

**Authentic Learning:** Learning that is integrated into "surrogate" real-world learning situations, such as projects, role-play, and inquiry (The Glossary of Education Reform, n.d.).

**Basic Tacit Assumptions:** Unspoken but understood norms and values that are intrinsic to an organization and contribute to its unique persona (Schein, 2010).

**Culture:** The shared beliefs, values, goals, customs, and practices of a particular society, group, place... **Organizational culture:** "A pattern of shared, basic assumptions that a group learns as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration..." (Schein, 2010, p. 18).

**Culture of Learning:** An educational environment of supportive relationships and personalized learning that leads to positive academic outcomes for students.

**Disadvantaged:** People who are socially or economically deprived or discriminated against (Collins English Dictionary, 2003).

**Disadvantaged youth:** Those who are: a) out of school or at-risk of dropping out, b) poor, c) minorities, d) of limited English proficiency, e) individuals with disabilities, f) homeless or runaways, and/or g) in or aging out of foster care (Gruber, 2007).

**Learning Organization:** An organization that facilitates the independent and collaborative learning of its members and continuously transforms itself (Senge, 2006).

**Marginalized:** A person or group treated as insignificant or peripheral, confined to the lower edges of society, and not included in the mainstream (Memidex Dictionary/Thesaurus, n.d.).

**Minorities:** A group of people, differing from others in race, religion, language, or political persuasion, commonly victims of discrimination (Oxford Dictionary - American).
**Personalized Learning:** Pursuit of personal and intellectual interest through observation, inquiry, interaction, personal involvement, reflection, conceptualization, and application (Andresen, Boud, & Cohen, 2000; Dewey, 2001).

**Real-World Learning:** An instructional approach that provides students with real world opportunities outside of the classroom and allows them to explore, discuss, and learn the skills to solve real-world problems that are of personal interest them (Wolk, 2010).

**Reflective Practice:** Reflecting on actions and experiences as they occur and, through personal meaning-making, engaging in the process of continuous learning (Schon, 1971).

**Systems Thinking:** The fifth discipline in a learning organization that integrates the other four disciplines (personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning) and fuses them into a cohesive and meaningful whole (Senge, 2006).

**Traditional Schooling:** Primarily teacher-directed instruction and learning - with an academic culture that embraces disciplined learning of facts and skills - that 1) insist on student passivity and 2) emphasize conformity rather than individuality (Deschenes et al., 2001; Dewey, 1933).

**Urban education:** Schools in metropolitan areas with large enrollments and class sizes, and with students who are usually culturally diverse, poor, and in need of different types of support to ensure their learning (wordpress.com.).
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore deeply the perspectives of educators from alternative high schools in order to understand their described culture of learning and how that culture influenced and empowered disadvantaged students to stay in school, achieve academic success and, ultimately, graduation. As discussed in Chapter One, three underlying factors support this purpose. First, in traditional high schools, among those disadvantaged students who are at the greatest risk, the dropout rate is significantly higher than it is for their more advantaged counterparts (NCES, 2011). Second, in some alternative schools, disadvantaged students graduate at the same rate as advantaged students in traditional settings (Foley & Pang, 2006), while in others, the graduation rate exceeds the national norm (Graham, 2013). Third, the importance of trusting relationships between students and teachers appears to be fundamental to that success. Thus, the focus of this study was to understand the explicit and implicit factors that contributed and were intrinsic to the phenomenon of an effective culture of learning and the academic and social components of that culture.

This research explored what educators in alternative high schools identified as the most effective and beneficial factors to empower disadvantaged students to achieve academic success. Accordingly, the overarching questions that guided and informed this study were:

1) How do alternative high school educators describe the culture of learning at their schools?

2) According to alternative high school educators, based on their respective cultures of learning, how do teacher/student relationships help to build confidence and motivation in disadvantaged students?
3) What student-centered best practices have alternative high school educators experienced that resulted in academic success for disadvantaged students?

**Scope and Organization of the Review**

This literature review is developed in four sections. After a short introduction, the first section recaps the concept of culture and a culture of learning that were defined and explored in Chapter One. In particular, this section begins to identify the scholarship that supports the two-fold lens - social and academic - through which culture was perceived in this study. In the second section the focus is on the contrasts between traditional and non-traditional learning environments. The third section features disadvantaged students who, through their own words, discuss their feelings, fears, and failures in traditional schools, their academic and social needs, and their successes in alternative learning environments. The fourth and final section explores alternative schools and what distinguishes their effectiveness with disadvantaged and high risk students. Experts, such as Bryk and Schneider (2002), Gallagher (2013), Murray and Malmgren (2005), Senge (2006), Watson (2011), and Wolk (2010) figure prominently as advocates for sustainable change that results from a child-centered culture of inquiry, open discourse, relational trust, flexibility, and an emphasis on both the social and academic components of learning in achieving successful outcomes for disadvantaged students.

Meaningful literature for this review is based on peer-reviewed books and articles, and seminal and current research that includes dissertations. In addition, this review references many case studies that underscore the importance of both relational trust and child-directed learning in developing positive outcomes for students. These findings are supported in issue papers and reports by research institutes whose focus is the social sciences and educational reform in particular. Key words used in the literature search included: alternative schools, culture
(including organizational and school cultures), disadvantaged youth, and learning organizations. Data base sources most often used comprised the following: Academic OneFile, Academic Search Premier, Education Journals, ERIC, JSTOR, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses @ Northeastern, Sage Reference Online, Social Sciences Premium Collection, Sociology, SpringerLink Journals, Taylor & Francis Online, and Wiley Online Library. Such a broad search was necessary and informative, first to develop a comprehensive understanding of culture and organizational culture, and second, to synthesize the information to a more focused view of school culture. This search provided the scope through which to identify and understand the role and culture of alternative schools and practices and their influence on disadvantaged students who were most at-risk of dropping out.

**Introduction**

An untapped and valuable opportunity exists to add to the empirical literature by exploring alternative school culture and its impact on positive academic outcomes for disadvantaged students. Many authorities agree that learning is both an academic and a social activity that demands a supportive environment, which guides and directs the acquisition of new knowledge about instruction (Anyon, 2005; Hargreaves, 2002; Meier, 1995; Noddings, 2011; Watson, 2011). Referencing best practices and empirical research, these experts - in the tradition of Dewey - acknowledge that alternative schools - which cultivate a culture of learning that is both social and academic - are succeeding with disadvantaged youth to a greater degree than traditional schools. Therefore, the focus of this study was to explore what alternative schools do and how their actions effect a positive influence on the academic performance of disadvantaged students.

The objective of traditional education is to teach content via classical methods of basic
skills development and standardized curriculum. In today's competitive environment, mastery is measured on high stakes standardized tests (Hargreaves, 2002; Ravitch, 2010). While the testing is outcome-oriented, this approach to learning is not designed to be student-focused (Hargreaves, 2002; Smith, 2003). As such, it is a strategy that is not always effective for disadvantaged, at-risk youth whose needs and learning styles do not always fit a standardized norm (Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Ravitch, 2010; Rumberger, 2011, 2013).

This is evident in Knesting's (2008) case study of a medium-sized traditional high school where the majority of students were disadvantaged and the dropout rate had ballooned to almost 25 percent. In this study, the principal's response to an increasing dropout rate was to increase academic rigor. He mandated that in English and math, a grade of 'B' was required for promotion. In addition, he decreed that student participation in after school activities was dependent on maintaining a 3.0 grade point average. Given this context, the purpose of Knesting's qualitative study was to discover the impact of the principal's vision for dealing with the dropout issue. Snowball sampling was used to select participants who included the principal, the vice-principal, two deans, four guidance counselors, two social workers (past and present), seven teachers, and 17 racially diverse, male and female students from grades nine to 12. All participants took part in one-on-one interviews.

Findings indicated that, by itself, the rigor of a strict academic approach was not a solution to dropout and that, when faced with obstacles that seemed insurmountable, many students did drop out (Knesting, 2008). Conversely, despite the adverse school conditions, students who enjoyed supportive relationships with their teachers were inspired to take control of their lives, develop self-determination, persist in school, and graduate (Knesting). Student behavior changed for the better when students felt part of a caring community. In other words,
"schools can positively influence students' ability to persist" (Knesting, p. 10) if they consider both social and academic needs. How to balance the social and academic components of education was a focal point explored both in this review and in the study itself.

Knesting's (2008) study substantiated that academic success for disadvantaged students improved when reinforced through trusting relationships, and that those relationships were possible to achieve in both traditional and alternative environments. This case also showed that relationship-building in traditional school settings is often serendipitous, left to individual teachers in individual classrooms (Watson, 2011). However, there is emerging evidence that many alternative schools and practices intentionally nurture both social and academic development to help their students to thrive, persist, and graduate (Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Meier, 1995). It is the intentionality and system-wide consistency of this approach that creates an important difference between alternative and traditional practices and that is key to the greater success that alternative schools realize with their disadvantaged students (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Te Riele, 2007; Wolk, 2009). These differences are detailed in section two of this chapter. It suffices here to note that the focus of this study was to understand the explicit and implicit factors that contribute and are intrinsic to the phenomenon of an effective culture of learning and the academic and social components of that culture.

**Section 1: The Role of a Culture of Learning**

**Historical Context**

Over the past three decades, traditional schools have struggled to meet the social and academic needs of a growing population of disadvantaged students (Rumberger, 2011). Traditional education followed the mandates of federal initiatives, such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, which required schools to deliver increased academic rigor, a standardized
curriculum, and improved scores of proficiency on state standardized tests in exchange for financial support (Barton, 2005; Rumberger, 2011). Despite the best efforts of these schools, achievement gaps persisted among disadvantaged youth (Quinn & Poirier, 2007; Rennie Center, 2014). Accordingly, the Rennie Center (2014) noted that funding alone was not a guarantee of academic outcomes.

Throughout the same thirty-year period, alternative schools emerged to provide a different approach to learning for disadvantaged youth (Barton, 2005; Rumberger, 2011; Wolk, 2009). This difference is rooted in an academic pedagogy that is child-centered and that adds a social component to teaching and learning - neither of which - as discussed in Chapter One - are typical characteristics of traditional schools (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Watson, 2011). Specifically, in alternative schools, an intentional culture of learning is an inherent and continually evolving part of the process, and is developed from two pillars: a social component that features nurturing relationships between teachers and students and personalized academics based on the needs and interests of each student (Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011; Rennie Center, 2014).

Although there were many facets of culture which might have been explored, this literature review focused on a culture of learning and its social and academic constructs. Therefore, the primary subject of inquiry was to explore how an intentional culture of learning (as found in effective alternative high schools) influenced disadvantaged students and their learning. Likewise, this review investigated gaps in the current literature that provided learning opportunities for this study. For example, a major gap was the minimal empirical evidence of the influences of relational trust and personalized learning among high school students in general, and disadvantaged youth in particular. These traits, which reflect some of the
attributes of a sustainable learning organization (Senge, 2006), are important to identify.

The next two sections explore the role of relationship-building and the role of personalized learning through 1) compendiums on these subjects from researchers in the field of education and child development; 2) reports from institutions noted for their work in K-12 education; and 3) a scholarly book that examines how traditional schools might adapt to broaden their ability to serve disadvantaged students. Specific case studies on this topic are discussed later in this review.

**The Role of Relationship-Building**

The role of supportive relationships between teachers and students has often been the object of educational research. Specifically, researchers tended to search for a link between strong, stable relationships and academic outcomes. Results were consistent. For example, in 2002, Becker and Luthar published an article that discussed how teacher-student social-emotional relationships impacted achievement among disadvantaged students. Although their research focused on middle school students, the many studies they reviewed had implications that may apply to students at the high school level as well.

Becker and Luthar (2002) compiled and analyzed several studies that explored the impact of social-emotional factors on the academic achievement among disadvantaged students in middle school. Two findings were common in all studies. First, student performance was linked to emotional well-being. Second, children who received reliable and caring support from teachers were better equipped to persist and achieve academically. The synthesis also suggests that the findings might be particularly applicable for disadvantaged high school youth as well for two reasons. One, the evidence indicated that positive relationships were especially important to adolescents who were socially vulnerable and in need of support they might not
receive at home. Two, the older students who lacked social capital were prone to be
disinterested, demotivated, and ultimately, disengaged from school. In summing up their review,
Becker and Luthar stated that "...programs that rely entirely on academic standards without
parallel attention to social-emotional factors...will be less likely to improve student achievement
outcomes" (p. 202).

Gallagher (2013) conducted a literature review about the same topic, but her summary
featured studies on disadvantaged students in both middle and high school. She noted that
despite the growing number of disadvantaged high school students, there continues to be
minimal substantive research on the effects of social-emotional relationships on students' academic performance. Two exceptions are the studies conducted by Dika and Singh (2002) and Murray and Malmgren (2005). These researchers substantiated the profound need for stable and supportive teacher-student relationships for older students in order to build personal and academic stamina and prepare them to be successful in the world. Despite the persuasive data presented by these researchers, Gallagher (2013) expressed concern that there was little current research on this subject. She also noted that researchers offer few practical suggestions and best practices to help schools and educators implement programs to effectively address the needs identified in the research concerning disadvantaged high school students.

As discussed in Chapter One, the role of trusting relationships between teachers and students and the resulting impact on academic outcomes is a global issue. For example, a 2013 report by Harris, Caldwell, and Longmuir titled, "Literature Review: A Culture of Trust that Enhances Performance," was sponsored by the Australian Institute for Teaching and Learning. The literature supported the Institute's premise that "...a culture of trust enhances performance" (p. 4) for reasons similar to those cited in Becker and Luthar (2002) and in Gallagher (2013).
The report stated that for disadvantaged students, trusting relationships are especially vital because they are directly connected to engagement and self-motivation. The report also noted that the absence of such relationships may lead to poor attendance, course failure, and dropout.

On a related topic, in 2014, the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, located in Boston, MA, issued a policy brief on alternative schools in 2014. The brief was based on a mixed methods study of alternative schools and programs in six public school districts and one charter school in Massachusetts. The study explored both the influence of social-emotional relationships and child-centered learning for disadvantaged youth, and their findings confirmed that both are contributing factors to improved student achievement.

The Rennie Center (2014) also added new information and recommendations for future research. First, they noted that the first and only national study on alternative schools and programs was conducted in 2000-2001. Second, they reported that alternative schools serve a student body that is disadvantaged to a "far greater" (p. 9) degree than the general state population. Third, the benefits of effective alternative programs indicate a direct link between positive teacher-student relationships and personal growth, which, in turn, lead to student experiences of "...academic success after years of struggling in traditionally-structured classrooms" (p. 10). The report concluded that there were not enough alternative schools to meet the rising need and demand. So, the Rennie Center (2014) proposed that school districts use alternative schools as "innovation labs" (p. 14) to try to bridge the educational divide between traditional and alternative learning. These findings align with the focus of investigation for this study, which included how to operationalize an intentional and transformative culture of learning both socially and academically, and is discussed in the next section.

**The Role of Personalized Learning**
Grounded in student interests and inquiry, personalized learning is a central component of alternative schools and has become part of the dialogue on education reform. Student-based learning had attracted the interest, study, and financial support of organizations as far-ranging as the American Institutes for Research (AIR), located in Washington, D.C., and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. AIR researchers Quinn and Poirier (2007) reported that because research that compares alternative and traditional education is a relatively new field, there is little empirical evidence from which to build a research protocol. However, in 2001, Quinn and Poirier began a five-year, mixed methods study to explore this topic for AIR.

Three alternative K-12 programs from 11 school sites were selected. High school youth were the primary focus of the study, which included 61 percent of the students from these schools. They participated in both quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups. Focus groups for parents were held separately. High school teachers and administrators were also invited to participate in both the survey and focus groups.

According to the combined survey results of educators, students, and parents, what follows are the findings relative to the perceived advantages of alternative schools, including: 1) student choice of curriculum; 2) flexible learning time based on students' schedules and availability; 3) interpersonal, caring relationships between teachers and students that encouraged students to succeed; 4) small class size (20 or fewer students per class); and 5) support and professional development for teachers. During the focus groups, parents praised their schools for "putting students first" (Quinn & Poirier, p. 30). Students spoke about new-found confidence and increased personal ambition. As one stated, "I feel like I have an opportunity to plan for the future" (p. 28).

Educators, primarily administrators, also contributed to the discussion, but their
comments were sparse. Administrators saw their role as listening to and supporting the teachers, as well as being flexible and responsive to teachers, students, and parents alike. One said, "I listen to them...I feel if they're coming to me with an issue, it's important to them" (p. 29).

Socialization was paramount. To describe how they developed relationships with their students, teachers used words and phrases, such as listening, being welcoming, and creating a calm classroom atmosphere. Educators emphasized the development of relationships and social well-being, but they offered little information about academic programs, student inquiry, and customized learning. Unfortunately, rich, deep descriptions of teacher and administrator insights on their school culture and how it influenced students were not included in the findings.

Nevertheless, the students and parents were happy with the school - especially in contrast with their former traditional setting - because they all felt supported. Teachers worked hard to support the students and parents, and administrators worked hard to support the teachers, parents and students. However, a democratic and open collaboration did not appear to be present among the members of these alternative communities (Quinn & Poirier, 2007). Rather, the schools functioned as benign hierarchies. Nor did these schools seem to have an intentional cultural purpose. One teacher summed up the tacit frustration of the staff when she said that there was a "...lack of evidence-based practices " (Quinn & Poirier, p. 45) to help teachers and administrators to identify what actually worked and how.

In the report's executive summary, Quinn and Poirier (2007) reported that only 39 percent of U.S. schools had at least one alternative program. Therefore, despite their comprehensive study, AIR's authors concluded that too little was known about alternative schools, "whom they serve,...how they function, the degree to which they are responsive to all children's educational needs, and the extent to which children...benefit..." (p. 2), and that more studies were needed.
In *Culture Re-Boot*, authors Kaplan and Owings (2013) stated that a positive school culture is dynamic and is continuously changing through positive interactions between people and through personal reflection. This was a scholarly "how-to work" book, which drew upon the principles and theories of such experts as Fullan, Hargreaves, Lewin, Schein, and Senge, among others. Indeed, Fullan, author of many articles and books including 2001's *Leading in a Culture of Change*, endorsed *Culture Re-Boot*. However, neither teachers or administrators were consulted or cited in this work to lend credibility to the authors' premise.

Kaplan and Owings (2013) suggested that effective culture is a process for all stakeholders and is founded on mutual respect, trust, self-awareness, and an openness to new ideas that lead to knowing that which is internal rather than knowledge that is primarily external. They emphasized that students should be nurtured by honoring who they are rather than by judging them against standardized norms. Finally, the authors subscribed to the idea that for a re-boot to be effective, school culture should include both cognitive and social-emotional aspects.

The importance of student-directed learning, especially for those students who are disadvantaged, was also substantiated in the Rennie Center's (2014) report on alternative schools, referenced earlier. In addition to the social confidence developed with their teachers, students who had learning choices were able "to meet critical educational milestones" (p. 14). However, the Rennie Center noted that, to date, the apparent success of alternative schooling culture and methods had not influenced traditional school practices.

**Section Summary**

There is mounting scholarly evidence that alternative schools offer a culture of learning that is effective with disadvantaged students for two reasons. First, the culture builds social
capital through nurturing relationships between teachers and students. Second, it develops academic capacity through personalized learning. Yet, as the literature suggests, there is still little known about the best practices in alternative environments that lead to student success and graduation (Quinn & Poirier, 2007; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Watson, 2011). Also, teacher perspective about how these practices are implemented effectively is scarce. Therefore, an objective of this study was to understand if emerging teacher views might offer significant insights to the research questions, and, thereby, provide a meaningful contribution to the literature on alternative schools.

**Section 2: Traditional and Alternative Learning**

In this section, the meaning of school culture in traditional learning is noted and contrasted with the concept of a culture of learning in alternative education. Specific contrasts are made between traditional and alternative teaching and learning along with their respective impact on disadvantaged youth. Also, the gaps in the effectiveness of traditional learning for disadvantaged students is explored through the literature.

Business organizations have long known the important and central role that culture plays in establishing a corporate identity and in building and sustaining a successful brand (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Jerald, 2006; Schein, 2010). In an organization, leadership is at the top and provides the vision, the norms, and, by extension, the culture, that bind members and goals together (Schein, 2010; Sergiovanni, 2006). The same classical model guides many traditional schools as well, and, in this type of school, organizational culture and school culture are alike. Both cultures have a foundation consisting of a history as well as norms, values, and underlying beliefs that are unique. Each requires its members to adapt to and assimilate these values (Schein, 2010; Senge, 2006). For both types of organizations, culture is the outcome of the
leader's beliefs, and in traditional schools, the culture, which epitomizes that belief, is most often synonymous with academic rigor (Ravitch, 2010).

Conversely, in effective alternative schools, culture is of, for, and by its constituents. Social relationships and personal growth are as important as academic achievement (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). In this model, there is a continual interaction and interdependence between the social and academic components of the culture (Murray & Naranjo, 2008; Watson, 2011). For alternative schools, culture is not a means to an end, but a process guided by its members (Sergiovanni, 2006; Watson, 2011; Wolk, 2010).

In both traditional and alternative schools, culture is an environment that encompasses many voices both internal - the leader - and external - the community and government (Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Meier, 1995). As a result, school culture is inherently more complex and messy than organizational culture (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Fullan, 2001; Littky & Grabelle, 2004). Yet, although traditional schools and alternative schools are equally complex, they have different primary objectives. Traditional learning is often shaped by a hierarchy of mandates and represents interests at federal, state, district, and local levels (Hinde, 2004; Meier, 2007). In these environments, the leader's primary objective is to build the reputation of the school through the achievement scores of its students on standardized tests (Ravitch, 2010; Wolk, 2009).

For alternative schools, the collective stakeholders' primary objective is the growth of student efficacy, which by extension reflects positively on the school (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Meier, 1995). This is accomplished by developing a social culture of learning, which becomes the underpinning of a sustainable academic culture of learning (Barton, 2005; Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Murray & Malmgren, 2005). Other characteristic differences between alternative and traditional learning practices are described in Table 1 below:
Table 1: A Contrast in Schooling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Learning</th>
<th>Alternative Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum begins with the parts of the whole; emphasis on basic skills.</td>
<td>Curriculum emphasizes big concepts, the whole, expanding to include the parts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strict adherence to fixed curriculum.</td>
<td>Pursuit of student inquiry and interests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials are primarily textbooks.</td>
<td>Materials are primary sources and manipulatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning is based on repetition and memorization.</td>
<td>Learning is interactive, based on what the students already knows.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers disseminate information to students who are recipients of knowledge.</td>
<td>Teachers dialogue with and help students to construct their own knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher's role is directive, rooted in authority.</td>
<td>Teacher's role is interactive, rooted in negotiation and facilitation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment is via testing, based on the desired product of correct answers.</td>
<td>Assessment includes student works, observations, and points of view, as well as tests, because process is as important as product.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge is static.</td>
<td>Knowledge is dynamic, changing with experiences and needs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Implicit in Table 1 above is the presence and importance of the social component in the activities and philosophical focus of the alternative school. What is implied is the positive influence of personal relationships on student motivation and success. Sociologists, including Deal and Peterson (2009) and Jerald (2006), first made the link between positive school culture and educational outcomes in the 1970s. There is also increasing evidence that a positive school culture is beneficial for its members (Fullan, 2001; Gallagher, 2013; Senge et al., 2012; Sergiovanni, 2006). The correlation between culture and academic performance led some organizational theorists to state that "...paying attention to culture is the most important action
that a leader [and all interested participants] can perform” (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009, p. 73). Accordingly, the culture in alternative learning settings is considered to be a potential catalyst for academic and social success among disadvantaged students.

Like many organizational cultures, school culture is constantly being shaped and remade through on-going human interactions (inside and outside school walls) and continuous, on-going reflection and transformation (Hinde, 2004; Meier, 1995; Schon, 1983). It is the human factor that renders school culture (and its sub-cultures) more dynamic. In this vein, the majority of studies on this topic identify relational trust (along with school leadership) as a pivotal force in determining student performance (Harris et al., 2013; Murray & Malmgren, 2005; Watson, 2011). What follows are two examples that provide evidence of positive results.

In 2011, Lance conducted a qualitative case study of two primary schools in England that offered insight into school cultures working on every level, starting with the head teachers (principals). Both schools were located in multi-ethnic, inner cities, with approximately 700 students. The majority of the children in these schools spoke English as a second language, and more than 50 percent were economically deprived. On a positive note, there was strong family support and involvement in the schools.

The head teachers emphasized the core value of "...putting the children's needs first..." (Lance, 2011, p. 120) as the foundation for a culture of engagement that is conducive to continuous reflection and reform. The study sought to explore the specifics of the educational programs and the dynamics among stakeholders. Data was collected from observations in the field, documents, one-on-one semi-structured interviews for adults and a series of focus groups for students. Participants included the head teacher of each school. Across both schools there were a total of 14 teachers and other personnel, 15 community members, and ten groups of sixth
grade students.

The findings revealed that both schools were child-centered, academically and personally. First, the schools rejected a standard curriculum and instead offered a range of projects and initiatives to enrich student learning and personal well-being. Second, they valued and cultivated relationships between teachers and students. As one student noted: "You always get a chance to say something, have your own viewpoint, say how you feel" (Lance, 2011, p. 120). The outcomes confirmed that children were valued, and that the staff and community were valued as well. Both schools nurtured cultures of inclusion, open communication, authentic learning, plus shared responsibility and accountability. Credit was given to the head teachers who encouraged and supported these principles. In these schools, some of the character traits of a positive school culture emerged. These included respectful, supportive relationships among constituents, making students the priority, and personalized learning.

In contrast to the principal as hero-leader, found in the Lance (2011) study, Bader, Horman, and Lapointe (2010) explored the power and effectiveness of partnership through shared leadership. Under the aegis of a program titled Democracy, Citizenship, and Community Involvement, Bader et al. conducted a qualitative case study at a multi-cultural, urban high school of 600 to 700 lower income students in Quebec. Its purpose was to explore the impact of adult support in helping to empower disadvantaged students to practice acts of responsible citizenship throughout the community. Adult stakeholders included teachers, administrators, parents, and community leaders.

Bader et al. (2010) involved volunteer student participants to evaluate the effectiveness of this unique educational approach. The study's goal was to understand how these schools engaged and empowered students by fostering supportive adult-student relationships and offering
students both the power and responsibility of academic choice. Findings indicated that the program helped to develop and nurture self-efficacy in students and to motivate them to act individually and collectively for the common good. During one-on-one interviews, students noted that when given the opportunity to speak their minds, to interact with adults, to partner in their own learning, and to choose projects based on their life experiences, they were enthusiastic and accepted accountability. They often mentioned that their school gave them hope for the future.

Because this was a pilot study designed to test the influence and efficacy of a particular program, gaps and opportunities for future research abound. First, of the three primary factors - students as partners, authentic community projects, and adult support and mentoring - none was identified as the linchpin; nor was there a discussion about any interplay among the factors. Second, the voices of educators and other stakeholders were silent, and any influence their views might have on future studies was lost. Conversely, in the narrative study conducted by this researcher, educator voice was a focal point, and educator perspectives offered insights about the three primary factors mentioned above. Despite the absence of expressed educator views in the Bader et al. (2010) study, both studies reinforced the importance and effectiveness of child-centered learning and the equal significance of trusting teacher-student relationships.

**Section Summary**

Education was - or should be - an intentional act (Smith, 2012). In particular, the evidence in this section shows that the intentional emphasis on social competence is a centerpiece of an effective culture of learning at alternative schools (Lagana-Riordan, 2011; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011). Indeed, relational trust is the potential genesis for a holistic environment that is socially interactive and open, and academically flexible and autonomous. In
addition, alternative schools practice personalized, child-centered learning, which appears to be equally important for successful academic outcomes among disadvantaged youth (Barton, 2005; Quinn & Poirier, 2007; Rennie Center, 2014). By contrast, the intentional and systemic development of relational trust is absent from most traditional schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Harris et al., 2013), and the academic focus is on teacher-directed instruction, which does not always meet student needs (Elbot & Fulton, 2008; Wolk, 2010). Quite simply, traditional schools are not structured to deliver either personalized learning or individual and on-going supportive relationships.

Experts such as Meier (1995) and Littky and Grabelle (2004) along with research institutions, including American Institutes for Research and the Rennie Center all found that effective education is a social as well as an academic endeavor. Those hallmarks of alternative education comprised the two-fold lens - social and academic - of a culture of learning that this study explored. The following section speaks directly to that objective. It describes how disadvantaged students think and feel about their experiences in traditional schools in contrast to their realities in alternative settings.

**Section 3: Disadvantaged Students**

In the previous section, a contrast was drawn between the pedagogical, social, and cultural differences of traditional and alternative schools. Using evidence from the literature, the section referenced the impact of these disparate educational approaches on disadvantaged students (Knesting, 2008; Lance, 2011). In this section, there is a shift. Rather than a focus on different school environments, the emphasis is on the perspectives of those most affected; namely, disadvantaged high school students.

As a result, this section explores the views of disadvantaged youth. Some studies give
voice to thoughts and feelings about learning and academic struggles in traditional school settings. Other studies demonstrate student reactions to the factors in alternative schools that encourage their success. Finally, a summary of the literature and its gaps is discussed. At the start is a brief review of the definition of disadvantaged students and how their educational success or failure impacts the economic and social structure of the United States.

As described in Chapter One and according to experts such as Anyon (2005) and Kozol (2005), disadvantaged people include those who are socially and/or economically deprived and who suffer chronic discrimination. Disadvantaged students, especially in urban areas, are more likely to be children of color, specifically Black or Hispanic (Rumberger, 2013). Whether they are victims of poverty, racial discrimination, illiteracy, or more - the plight of the disadvantaged is a cycle that is often hard to break (Kozol, 2005; Rumberger, 2011). Ramifications of these issues were detailed in Chapter One. To recap briefly, for those who drop out, career and earning options are curtailed along with the financial ability to contribute to their communities. Moreover, as the number of disadvantaged students increase so do the economic and social burdens on society (Diandra, 2008; Taylor & Cohn, 2011; National Dropout Prevention Center, 2011).

Because their lives are more complicated and challenging than those of their more advantaged peers, disadvantaged students do not always adapt to the norms of a traditional learning environment (Anyon, 2005; Murray & Malmgren, 2005; Rumberger, 2011). For those who do persist, academic proficiency that results in high school graduation and a diploma is difficult to achieve (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Murray & Naranjo, 2008; Rumberger, 2011). These students need to be heard to be understood. What follows are studies that pinpoint, in their own words, the difficulties that disadvantaged students face in traditional public schools
where they are "... forced to learn standardized content or to fail and ultimately drop out of the system" (Watson, 2011, p. 1501).

**Disadvantaged Students and Traditional Schools**

Some believe that public schools "...allow for the dissemination of knowledge and processes that maintain the existing social order" (McNulty & Roseboro, 2009, p. 412). This implies a teacher-directed, standardized approach to instruction (See Table 1, p. 61). It follows that students who do not fit the expectations of the cultural norm in a traditional learning environment are less likely to receive the academic and personal support they need, especially at the high school level (as discussed in Chapter One). As a result, these students experience feelings of exclusion and rising patterns of failure and dropout (Kearns, 2011; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Te Riele, 2007). These circumstances are often further complicated by the growing focus on standardized, high-stakes tests (Kearns, 2011; Meier, 2007).

In many countries, including the United States and Canada, high-stakes, standardized tests remain the benchmark by which individual student achievement is evaluated in traditional schools (Kearns, 2011; Meier, 2007). Moreover, passing these tests is a mandatory requirement for high school graduation (Hargreaves, 2002; Kearns, 2011). Students who do not pass often take review courses to prepare them to retake the tests. This process is repeated until the student passes, drops out, or opts to accept a certificate of completion in place of a high school diploma. As discussed earlier, for many disadvantaged students, the circumstances of their lives produce knowledge inequities and learning deficits that are impediments to success on standardized tests (Kearns, 2011; Meier, 2007). They are predisposed to fail and when they do, their self-confidence and will to succeed are undermined (Kearns, 2011; Meier, 2007; Rennie Center, 2014).
To better understand the individual ramifications of this conundrum, in 2011, Kearns conducted a qualitative narrative study in Toronto, Canada, on the impact of their high-stakes, standardized literacy test on disadvantaged, at-risk youth. Passing this test was a graduation requirement. The purpose of Kearns' study was to understand the thoughts and feelings of students who had failed the test at least once.

The students attended one of two urban high schools, which were racially and ethnically diverse and reported poverty rates of 50 percent as well as lower than average scores on the standardized literacy test. Participants were selected through snowball sampling. They included 11 boys and girls, ages 15 to 18, some of whom had a documented language disability. Each student engaged in a semi-structured, one-on-one interview. In addition, a group of five English language learners, ages 18 to 19, participated in a single focus group.

Kearns (2011) placed great importance on the narrative approach, and determined to understand student perspectives through their own voices - both individually and collectively. She was especially interested to learn how the students felt about themselves before the test, if and/or how the test results changed their self-image, and if the test was important to them. She discovered that before learning the results, most students were confident that they had done well. One stated, "I was shocked because...I felt confident... So, I wasn’t expecting to fail..." (p. 118). Students also confided that the test scores made them feel "humiliated...frustrated... degraded... insecure...a little less smart...and like a loser" (p. 119). One young man described feeling "...stressed out...[and noted]... it's degrading knowing that I didn't pass" (p. 119). As a result, students also reported a lack of confidence and self-esteem. They found it hard to believe that they could have failed the test after doing well in the class room.

Other students were angry. They believed that their language disabilities or lack of
English proficiency limited them, that they were smarter than their test results indicated, and that they had not been given the opportunity to demonstrate the real scope of their knowledge. By extension, they also believed that those in authority were indifferent to their well-being.

According to Kearns (2011), these students thought that the test was punitive and exclusionary, a stain on their lives and a barrier to future opportunities. Test failure was "...like taking...your life, your future" (p. 120), one young woman confessed. Another student summed up the experience this way: "It's not really good for teens to feel that low" (p. 121).

Despite their disappointment, Kearns (2011) found that these students believed that education was a pathway to a better life. So, they planned to repeat the test, hoping to pass, but uneasy about their prospects. One asked, "What was the point" (p. 122)? Yet, they wanted to persist because they presumed that "... in order to become someone or do something you have to get good marks in school and pass..." (p. 122).

The findings of Kearns' (2011) study has implications beyond the impact of high-stakes tests on disadvantaged youth. It revealed the incompatibility between the needs of these students and the academic expectations of a traditional school environment. In fact, Kearns concluded that the goal of education should be to help youth thrive socially and emotionally as well as academically. She also suggested that to do so would require an environment of well-being for students and an understanding among educators that equitable education did not mean treating everyone the same. Instead, she recommended that "...the approach to working with and for diverse and marginalized youth must be rethought" (p. 127).

The truth of Kearns' (2011) argument was evidenced in some traditional schools whose students were predominantly poor, minority, and disadvantaged. Some of these schools established a social culture of learning to which students responded, and subsequently, began to
make academic progress (Rennie Center, 2014; Wolk, 2009). Yet, academic progress may have been slowed not only due to students' learning deficits, but also to a lack of school resources that were necessary for building a successful academic culture of learning (Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011). As a result, when student scores on state standardized tests were, on average, below proficient, some of these schools were seen as failures and were closed before academic progress caught up to their social advances. This occurred because the mind set in traditional teaching and learning does not always acknowledge the significant correlation between social growth and academic achievement (Anyon, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Meier, 1995; Senge et al., 2012).

In such circumstances, when students fail to meet standardized expectations and their schools are closed, students are further demoralized and disenfranchised. One example is Jefferson High School (a pseudonym), which was closed in 2006. To better understand the dynamics of school closure and its impact on students in poor and minority districts, in 2006, (immediately after the district announced the closing) Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011) conducted an action research study of Jefferson High School.

Kirshner & Pozzoboni (2011) noted that ten years earlier, Jefferson was a model school for its district and for its African-American neighborhood. Due to court-ordered busing, Jefferson was also a diverse school with 42 percent African-Americans, 42 percent Whites, and 14 percent Latino students, among whom about 27 percent received free or reduced fee lunch. The researchers stated that Jefferson received its fair share of community, state, and federal resources, and that the school was known for its quality programs in academics, athletics, and vocational training. That all changed in 1996 when busing stopped and district lines were redrawn, leaving Jefferson High School enclosed in an economically depressed enclave of minorities who were increasingly poor and disadvantaged. As a result, economic resources,
school attendance, and performance began to decline.

To further explore the impact of the school's closure on those most affected, Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011) conducted one-on-one interviews and a survey to elicit student views about their former school. One hundred students took part. More than 95 percent of these students were either African-American or Latino, and more than 92 percent were disadvantaged. Many students believed that their school had multiple, solid strengths and that the decision to shut it down was premature, punitive, and showed a lack of concern and understanding for students of color.

According to Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011), students' comments focused on the accomplishments of the school and expressed their confidence that the teachers, students, and other community stakeholders could have built on Jefferson's accomplishments to help the school to become academically successful again. Among the schools' strengths, students cited the strong sense of community and identity. As one noted, "We might be ghetto, but we're proud of that" (p. 1648).

That pride stemmed, in part, from the deep connection to teachers that the students experienced. Kirshner & Pozzoboni (2011) found that because teachers were interested in students' lives, gave them room to grow and to make mistakes, many students shared the sentiments of one who said, "I loved my teachers...I trust them for everything" (p. 1656). Students expressed feelings of belonging, support, trust, and nurturing from teachers, adults, and the community. They described Jefferson as "...a friendly place filled with love...[where]...we felt like we belonged... [and] you could be yourself..." (p. 1655). In building social capital, Jefferson was a success.

Conversely, Kirshner & Pozzoboni (2011) reported that a lack of resources and a
dwindling number of advanced placement courses were deficits for which students blamed the authorities. As one student said when discussing college, "I just felt so unprepared" (p. 1640). All in all, the students felt that closing Jefferson High was "traumatic, upsetting, devastating, and painful" (p. 1650), and also unnecessary, which is why they advocated for investment in the school rather than closure. "The closure of Jefferson... made me feel like there was no hope for me to amount to something..." (p. 1648), said one. "You're putting barriers in front of us, rather than removing them" (p. 1648), said another. Unfortunately, in most traditional schools, building relational trust and social capital in order to fulfill academic promise are not the norm (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Franklin et al., 2011). Instead, the intentional and systemic focus and the only markers for success are academic performance and school rankings (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Rumberger, 2011; Rennie Center, 2014; Watson, 2011).

As the above studies confirm, the lives of disadvantaged students are "...messy, complex, inter-relational, highly contextual, and holistic" (Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011, p. 124). In the narratives described above and in their own words, students conveyed their disenchantment and disconnect with traditional schooling (Kearns, 2011; Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011). In the following segment, disadvantaged students describe their experiences in traditional schools and compare them to the alternative schools they subsequently attended.

**Disadvantaged Students and Alternative Schools**

According to Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011), alternative schools focus on the student not a test, on learning not drilling, on inclusion not alienation, on self-esteem not self-doubt. In alternative venues, many disadvantaged youth - who fail in traditional schools - are succeeding (Barth, 2002; Meier, 1995; Wolk, 2010). For these students, alternative schools present an opportunity for a culture of learning reality that is both more flexible and more compatible with
students’ social and academic needs (Quinn & Pourier, 2007; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011; Watson, 2011).

As noted in Chapter One, alternative schools are defined as environments that are student-focused and where learning is individualized both to meet each student's personal needs and to develop each student’s academic interests (Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011; Watson, 2011). These settings include flexibility of time, variety in educational and developmental programs, and an emphasis on social as well as academic growth (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). In the following studies, students discuss and compare their lived experiences in traditional schools and in alternative learning environments and show evidence of improved outcomes in two alternative schools.

In Spokane County, Washington, Poutiatine and Veeder (2011) conducted a qualitative study of disadvantaged students who were once "...standing on the fringes of society..." (p. 101). They had dropped out of at least one traditional high school, but were now enrolled in an alternative school. Participants were an ethnically diverse group, chosen selectively through snowball sampling. In total, 145 students participated in a survey, and 12 of these students (six male, six female) also took part in semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Through the lived experiences of students, the researchers wanted to identify both the risk factors that contributed to the likelihood of drop out and the protective factors that helped students to stay in school and persist to graduation (Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011). The findings were eagerly anticipated because in 2008, Spokane County was faced with a dropout rate of 33 percent, eight points above the national rate at that time (Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011).

There are many known risk factors that contribute to the disengagement and educational withdrawal that lead to dropout. They include family problems, poverty, feelings of social
isolation, and a lack of stable adult support (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011). In this study, students told the researchers about additional risk factors that led to dropout including the lack of 1) caring adult relationships; 2) emotional safety; 3) individualized attention; 4) respect; 5) accountability without judgment; and 6) hope and presumption of success. In addition, Poutiatine and Veeder (2011) noted that for students, the absence of any of these factors made them feel "disengaged" (p. 119), "discounted" (p. 119), and "disconnected" (p. 119), and always in the stressful position of trying to catch up to their peers.

Poutiatine and Veeder (2011) noted some positive reactions when students reported the protective factors which sustained them and which were especially effective for those most at-risk of dropping out. One or more stable relationships with a protective, caring adult - a teacher, family member, or both - topped the students' list. They talked about their desire for a culture that was "how a family ought to be" (p. 115). Also, students cited the importance of accessibility and positive relationships with teachers who believed in them and offered flexible schedules that eliminated the pressure of "catching up" (p. 115). Students also wanted a sense of belonging with peers. Protective factors were examples of acceptance, belonging, and community that were understood as one word: safety - a safety that was physical, emotional, and psychological. For the students, safety was synonymous with caring and was "...a significant factor in their re-engagement with school..." (p. 117). These socially-based factors appeared to be pre-requisites for potential academic success (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Murray & Malmgren, 2005; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011).

A significant finding of Poutiantine & Veeder's (2011) study was that students needed nurturing support to build the capacity necessary to undertake the demands of academic rigor. Likewise, students implied that the establishment of a safe, social environment was a prerequisite
to a culture of learning that would engage, motivate, and sustain them (2011). One student voiced the opinions of many in these words: "...a lot of stupid adults [are] not realizing that all they need to do is take the time to hear a kid's voice" (p. 101). Students in the Kearns (2011) study shared similar feelings of hurt and frustration. The next study further attests to the universal social needs that disadvantaged students voice about teaching and learning.

The purpose of the mixed-methods case study in Austin, Texas, was straightforward. Using qualitative, one-on-one interviews, Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) wanted to understand students' views about their current alternative school and the traditional school they had once attended. Researcher interest was based in two facts. First, as discussed in Chapter One, the number of students who were unsuccessful in traditional schools was rising sharply. Second, the number of alternative schools had accelerated at "astonishing" (p. 106) rates to keep up with the growing need for their services. Finally, although "...the research on alternative schools is limited" (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011, p. 106), what was available suggested that alternative schools were successfully meeting the needs of disadvantaged students (Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011). Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) wanted to hear the how and what directly from students.

Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) reported that students were explicit about their former schools. On one hand, they objected to the lack of available time with the teachers "...because they have to grade 500 pieces of paper" (p. 108). On the other hand, they felt judged, uncared for and stated that, "They only look at the bad things...not the good things that you do" (p. 108). As in the Kearns (2011) study, students were vocal about the loss of personal identity and individual needs. Said one, "Everyone has to fit into the [same] box" (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011, p. 109).
Similar to the findings in Poutiatine & Veeder (2011), students in this study expressed concerns about issues of safety in their former schools. In this case, the reference was about school violence, the ensuing tension, followed by the understatement: "Environment is a lot - I think it influences [us] a lot" (Lagana-Riordan et al. 2011, p. 109). Rigid authority was another complaint registered when a student remarked, "The principal is like a machine..." (Lagana-Riordan et al. 2011, p. 109).

By contrast, Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) reported that students praised their alternative schools for fostering good student-teacher relationships, demonstrating care and understanding of social issues, building maturity and responsibility, and encouraging better peer relationships. A supportive community inside and outside the school was credited for establishing a solid foundation from which students could grow. As one said, "When I was depressed...teachers like Mr. A. helped me out a lot" (p. 110). In short, students felt comfortable and valued in their alternative schools. Another noted, "...everyone's friendly...everyone just associates with everyone" (p. 110).

It is noteworthy that the top finding in both the Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) and the Poutiatine and Veeder (2011) studies was the importance of social relationships 1) between teachers and students and 2) between home and school and students' personal lives. In both studies, student perspectives validated the importance of social factors as integral to their academic success (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011).

The students spoke. The researchers spoke. Yet some gaps persist. To date, according to the literature, few alternative educators have been heard. They need a forum in which to voice their perspectives about the culture of learning in their schools and to discuss what works and how to help disadvantaged students, who had failed in traditional learning
environments, to succeed. Alternative educator voices are needed to address how and where social and academic factors interface to form an effective culture of learning and how that culture informs student engagement, motivation, and graduation. Their voices are needed to articulate how an intentional focus on both social well-being and academic engagement manifests into a culture of learning that promotes student success. Above all, alternative educator voices and views are needed to understand how these social and academic puzzle pieces worked separately and together for the benefit of disadvantaged students.

Section Summary

Through the studies in this section, disadvantaged students revealed their disaffection for and detachment from the practices and requisites of traditional learning. Conversely, these students also expressed their favorable opinions of alternative learning, its opportunities, and its benefits, as well as their enthusiasm for being valued as individuals (Watson, 2011). In studies by Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) and Poutiatine & Veeder (2011), students confirmed that alternative schools fit their individual needs and did not expect them to adapt to a structure and expectations that were pre-determined. As Te Riele (2007) noted, it is important to understand "...the variety of educational alternatives..." (p. 54) that are required to help disadvantaged students to achieve positive outcomes.

The studies also revealed that it is not enough to acknowledge the circumstances that lead disadvantaged students to frustration and failure in traditional schools. Instead, they suggested that, using effective alternative schools as role models, "...educators must look at factors within the schools and the possible interactions between schools and students" (Knesting, 2008, p. 3). In the students’ own words, the evidence indicates that positive academic outcomes are the result of a combination of academic rigor through individualized learning that enhances student
strengths, plus supportive and caring social relationships between students and adults (Anyon, 2005; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Knesting, 2008; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). These and other factors about the culture of learning in alternative schools are discussed in the following section.

Section 4: Alternative Schools and Practices

This section elaborates on the characteristics that define an alternative school and distinguish it as a learning environment. In addition, it discusses how alternative schools differ pedagogically and philosophically from traditional schools as evidenced in the literature. Further, the section explores how alternative schools impact disadvantaged youth, and attempts to understand what alternative schools do and how they do it to help these students to achieve success. Importantly, what is identified as not yet known served as the focus of this study.

To pinpoint the definition of an alternative school is as elusive as it is to determine a singular meaning for school culture or organizational culture. Multiple educational philosophies are represented in alternative learning environments. For example, Ted Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools was founded on habits of mind and portfolio assessments that demonstrate mastery in students' areas of interest. A.S. Neill's Summerhill and the Waldorf Schools also allow students to gain knowledge through the pursuit of personal interests. At Big Picture Learning schools, students learn through community service projects and real-world internships. What is common to all of these schools is the intentional approach to personalized learning through students' direct pursuit of their interests, and the teachers and other adults who mentor the students and facilitate their learning (Littky & Grabelle, 2004).

No two alternative schools are pedagogically alike. A base-line definition of alternative schools is that they are non-traditional and represent a departure from the teacher-directed, standardized methods and practices common in most traditional schools (Hargreaves, 2002;
Instead, alternative schools are designed to support individuals or groups whose diverse and particular needs are not optimally served by traditional schooling (Atkins, Hohnstein, & Roche, 2008).

Alternative schools are holistic (Senge et al., 2012), child-centered, and dedicated to serve students who are not able to be successful in traditional schools (Barton, 2005; Rennie Center, 2014). They are intentional cultures of learning in which (socially and academically) the whole child and his/her interests are paramount (Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Meier, 2004). These cultures foster both academic and social development. Alternative schools change the educational paradigm from the concrete reality and single pedagogy of traditional schools to the subjective reality of personalized learning that evolves from trustworthy social relationships (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011; Watson, 2011).

Academically, these schools practice personalized instruction and center on each student's interests and individual growth (Meier, 1995; Rumberger, 2011). Socially, they build relational trust and encourage an open, interactive environment that validates and welcomes student voice (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Watson, 2011). The goal is to help students develop the capacity to persist and achieve success (Atkins et al., 2008). Prime candidates for alternative schools and their services are those who are disadvantaged and at highest risk for dropping out of school for reasons that can often be traced to academic and social needs that exceed the structure and scope of the traditional school environment (Atkins et al., 2008; Watson, 2011).

Effective learning strategies that have a personal component are a mainstay of alternative schools, which have long been championed by educational scholars, including Dewey (1933), Littky & Grabelle (2004), Meier (1995), Van Ryzin (2011), and Watson (2011). Considered by her peers to be an expert on alternative learning, Raywid (1994) identified three types of
alternative schools. Type I are full-time schools for students who needed more individualized programs, a different curriculum, or a pathway to graduation after dropping out. Type II are short-term programs focused on helping students to manage their behavior problems. Type III programs are also short-term, offering therapeutic coping strategies for social/emotional problems. In this study, the focus was on Type I alternative schools that fostered both social relationships and child-centered curriculum as the dual paths to academic success.

Senge, et al. (2012) argued that in order to sustain success, schools should reject "...habitual approaches to chronic problems" (p. 129). Many alternative schools adhere to this view. Yet, according to the AIR (2007) study, still to be determined is how to harness the successes of alternative schools and adapt them for traditional school models. As Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) indicated, "...the research on alternative schools is limited" (p. 106). For example, at that point, there had been no definitive study that identified the specifics of what an intentional culture of learning did and how it had proven to be consistently effective with disadvantaged students (Quinn & Poirier, 2007; Rennie Center, 2014; Watson, 2011).

What the evidence did show was that by being child-centered and learner-directed, alternative schools are at once flexible, open, and inclusive of student diversity (Atkins, et al., 2008; Rennie Center, 2014; Wolk, 2010). This approach allows more variety in educational and developmental programs. For example, alternative schools often have curriculum elements that focus on improving student self-esteem, fostering growth of individuality, as well as enhancing social skills (Meier, 1995; Murray & Naranjo, 2008; Sizer, 1984). Therefore, although teacher voice is absent, what follows is a review of some alternative schools and practices that showed promise. These schools create cultures of learning that develop both social competence and academic capacity among disadvantaged students and educators alike (Barth, 2002).
Continuing the principles of Dewey (2001), Freire (1970), and Sizer (1984), in the three schools that she founded, Meier (1995) emphasized the importance of both social and academic accountability in the development and growth of children. For this reason, she placed equal emphasis on socially-responsible habits of mind and student-created academic portfolios as indicators of personal growth and student readiness for becoming responsible citizens. As confirmed by Bryk and Schneider (2002) and Noddings (2011), interpersonal relationships appear to be a key component in student success in Meier's schools. Specifically, it appears that the collaborative give-and-take of the student-teacher relationship creates an effective and stable transition to academic responsibility (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Meier, 1995; Noddings, 2011).

Similarly, in a case study by Bader et al. (2010) about "citizenship education" (p. 36), the researchers found a correlation between student involvement with personally relevant social activities outside and improved academic performance inside their school. This study sought to understand the roles of social and academic development, the balance between them, and the degree to which each contributed to student performance.

To create an effective culture of learning in which students who fail in traditional venues might succeed is an ambitious undertaking, and role models do exist. For example, more than 30 years ago, Finland had a national educational system and a teacher-directed curriculum, which, by their own admission, marginalized students with diverse needs and measured student achievement through standardized tests (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Sahlberg, 2011). As their dropout rate persisted and grew, Finland determined that it needed to overhaul its approach to teaching and learning. So began an odyssey of transformational change that evolved during more than two decades. In Sahlberg's 2011 book, Finnish Lesson: What Can the World Learn from educational change in Finland?, the Director General of Finland's Ministry of Education
and Culture documented his country's educational transformation.

Finland's goal was constant and two-fold: to improve graduation rates by overcoming student disengagement and to produce engaged critical thinkers and conscientious citizens who would realize productive academic outcomes (Hargreaves, 2002; Sahlberg, 2011). To accomplish its goal, Finland was willing to change its norms, values, and culture of learning. The country moved from a traditional reliance on the outcomes of standardized tests as predictors of success to a child-centered concentration on real-world learning and problem-solving (Sahlberg, 2011). As a result of their intentional efforts as a nation to change the educational focus from teachers and instruction to children and learning, Finland rose to the top tier of all international testing measures (PISA, 2012).

Because Finland is a small, homogeneous country, some believe that its educational strategies cannot be applied to a country that is considerably larger and more diverse, such as the United States. However, according to Sahlberg (2011), the size and demographic composition of a country are not determinants of a successful educational approach. Rather educational achievement - for students who are disadvantaged and for those who are not - is predicated on a balance between trusting social relationships and relevant, motivating child-centered learning (Fullan, 2001, Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Sahlberg, 2011).

Evidence of the positive influence of this philosophy was found in a year-long ethnographic study conducted by Watson (2011) at an alternative U.S. high school in a Midwestern city. Its goal was to forge a program that addressed the real life circumstances and needs of its students. The study explored the impact of a school culture that began with the cultivation of strong relationships and partnerships between students and teachers and then developed through an intentional, collaborative, and flexible culture of learning community.
The school had one-room for its 70 students and five staff and was kept separate from the traditional high school on the same grounds. Most of its students were disadvantaged. Many had prior behavioral problems. All had dropped out or been expelled from the local traditional high school. Yet the alternative high school was enjoying "significant success" (Watson, 2011, p. 1503) in graduating these students. This was true in part because students were encouraged to give voice to their ideas and contribute to their own learning. One teacher noted, "We give them choices, and we're not the enemy anymore...suddenly the [behavioral] problems go away" (Watson, 2011, p. 1507).

As researcher, Watson (2011) presumed that curriculum choice was not the only factor in student success. She wanted to understand all of the characteristics of the school's culture of learning and its impact on disadvantaged students. The primary sources of data were focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews of 10 students, the principal, and four staff members.

Findings spoke of a culture that was 1) a student-centered, collaborative learning community, jointly conceived and respected by students and teachers; 2) imbued with on-going dialogue, flexibility, creativity, and fun; 3) committed to personalized learning (at each student's pace) rather than standardized teaching; and 4) small, intimate, nurturing, and motivating for students and teachers alike. The study confirmed that in this alternative high school, a successful and intentional culture of learning encompassed both social and academic factors that resulted in student persistence and graduation. Watson (2011) cited one student who commented that the school "...doesn't hold you down" (p. 1507). Another student summed up his experience by stating: "Basically, you make your own rules...and you meet your own expectations" (p. 1508). Others spoke of the opportunities to have a supportive relationship with an adult "who really
cared" (p. 1513). Perhaps the definitive student comment was that at this "...best school...the teachers give you a lot of attention...[and] you get a lot of choice" (Watson, 2011, p. 1509).

Watson (2011) concluded in part that in order to meet society's future needs, schools had to provide "...a more equitable and effective learning environment..." (p. 1520) for diverse and disadvantaged learners. She also cited gaps in her study for future research to address. In particular, she suggested explorations on the perspectives of both parents and teachers - both of which are absent in the literature. Watson confirmed the need for social as well as academic learning as a means to engage and sustain those who are disadvantaged and marginalized and, as a result, to prevent dropout. Her study and others in this review revealed that dropout was ubiquitous.

Te Riele (2007) also noted that the large number of dropouts among disadvantaged, at-risk youth was a global problem that might require universal strategies to ameliorate the issue. To that point, in their book *The Global Fourth Way: The Quest for Educational Excellence*, Hargreaves and Shirley (2012) explored schools in Singapore, England, and Canada to study methods for addressing the problem of student disengagement. In these diverse academic venues, it appeared that the reasons for student discontent and/or dropout spanned similar social, economic, cultural, and academic issues. One example follows.

In 2012, McGregor and Mills published a paper that summarized how social and academic factors influenced student learning in five schools in Queensland, Australia. The paper referenced several studies that cited flexible learning in alternative schools as effective in meeting the needs of disadvantaged students who had dropped out of Queensland's mainstream, traditional schools. The focus of the paper was not on changing the students, but on changing the teaching and learning. Therefore, the purpose of the paper was to identify some of the
specific practices that engaged students.

As a deterrent to dropout and to support student persistence, educators in these five schools were determined to understand and respond to student needs with "flexible alternatives" (McGregor & Mills, 2012, p. 848). One of the schools focused on students with serious family problems, including abuse and pregnancy. A second school was regional and offered a variety of programs to meet its students’ needs. A third school emphasized work experience and student preparation for a career in one of the trades, such as mechanics. A fourth school, the smallest of the four, catered to the social/emotional problems of students up to the age of 16. The last was an inner-city school, enrolling students, ages 15 to 25, who had dropped out or were at-risk for doing so. Some students were homeless. Many students traveled long distances to attend their school of choice. Funding and support for the schools came from community groups and churches.

Across the five schools, data was gathered through observation, documents, focus groups, and on-on-one interviews. Participants included one parent, 26 teachers and staff, three former students, and 41 current students. Despite the differences in the schools and their student populations, all educators offered a personalized learning program and flexible attendance schedules; a supportive, welcoming environment; and interactive student-teacher collaborations. The goal was to engage students rather than to manage them within a pre-determined curriculum. In response, students demonstrated commitment, a strong work ethic, and a resolve to achieve their personal ambitions. Due to flexible scheduling and curriculum that incorporated their personal interests, students were motivated to persist, to pursue their goals, and to graduate on their own timetables (McGregor & Mills, 2012).

One student represented the sentiments of the many when she stated, "There needs to be
more schools like these" (McGregor & Mills, 2012, p. 844). The sincerity of her words was indisputable. Also beyond question was the commitment of the schools and educators to building positive teacher-student relationships. Of the six teachers cited in this study, every one noted the importance of "relationships first" (McGregor & Mills, 2012, p. 855) and trust. What these studies and the paper failed to articulate were teachers' views about which academic factors were indispensable for student success, how academic engagement was supported, and how the balance between trusting relationships and academic achievement promoted positive student outcomes.

There are a few studies that explored how educators and stakeholders in more traditional schools collaborated to consolidate their views into a single vision and then created a culture of personal support that nurtured students. In the following example, adult support proved to be pivotal in the success of the participating students who achieved against the odds of their daily lived experiences.

In 2008, Murray and Naranjo conducted a qualitative case study at an urban Chicago high school whose students were exposed daily to gangs, violent crime, poverty, and chronic dropout. Eleven graduating seniors, all African Americans with learning disabilities, were chosen as participants because they were succeeding despite their disabilities and the other risk factors cited above. The purpose of the study was to understand what elements contributed to their resilience, persistence, and accomplishments. Data was collected from researcher field notes and a series of semi-structured interviews with participants.

Murray and Naranjo (2008) discovered that these students had an informal, but substantial support system of parents and teachers who separately and together created a culture of trust, hope, and motivation that bolstered student self-determination and academic success. In
this case, the strength of personal support and caring relationships with adults - including parents and teachers - seemed to deflect the negative influences of the general school setting, as well as pressure from less successful peers. Moreover, these relationships appeared to be the catalyst for improved persistence and academic achievement among the students. This study, like others in this review, substantiated the importance of an intentional social component that is inherent to the culture of an effective school. However, once again teacher voice was not directly heard. Even in the McGregor and Mills (2012) study where teachers were research participants, only four of the 26 teachers were cited and then, only briefly.

Evidence continues to emerge about the positive influence of alternative school culture on student outcomes (Gallagher, 2013, Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011). In study after study, in this country and in others, student voice and/or researcher observations and analysis confirms that relationship-building, trust, honest dialogue, interactive collaboration, as well as academic flexibility and curriculum choice all feature in student success (Atkins et al., 2008; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Meier, 1995; Noddings, 2005, 2011). In the United States, effective alternative schools include the Coalition for Essential Schools (Sizer, 1984), Central Park East (Meier, 1995), High Tech High (Clark, 2002), and Big Picture Learning (Littky & Grabelle, 2004), among others. What follows is an exemplar of the alternative school.

Under the stewardship of its co-founders, Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor, Big Picture Learning (BPL) schools were designed according to the ideals of Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools. Although 75 percent are district public schools and 25 percent are charters, the academic culture of learning in all of these schools supports students' academic interests through community projects and business internships outside of the school. Employers work with teacher/facilitators to mentor students and to encourage them to apply real world learning
experiences to improve their academic skills. The social culture of learning is the thread that connects the communal relationships cultivated within the schools to the wider relationships developed in the outside community and on the job.

Among BPL students, a 90 percent majority are urban and 59 percent of the racially diverse student population are Latino and Black (Big Picture Learning, n.d.). Each student takes part in designing his or her personalized learning program, and the school motto of "one student at a time" (Littky and Grabelle, 2004, p. 73) seems to pay dividends. For example, in a 2009 report, according to the Stuart Foundation, on average 92 percent of BPL seniors met state and district requirements and earned high school diplomas versus a 74 percent rate for equivalent districts. Of the BPL graduates, about 75 percent continued their education in colleges and universities, and the retention from freshman to sophomore years was approximately 89 percent.

BPL's alternative approach is so successful that it is replicated throughout the U.S. and the world. For example, in the U.S., there are 56 BPL schools in 15 states from coast to coast (Big Picture Learning, n.d.). Internationally, many schools have adopted BPL's principles and practices in Canada, Italy, Australia, the Netherlands, and Israel (Big Picture Learning, n.d.).

Big Picture Learning is an example of an alternative school network that cultivates an intentional culture of learning that is both social and academic (Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Meier, 2007). According to the literature, like BPL, an authentic culture of learning is student-centered and often manifests through inquiry, discovery, discourse, relationship-building, trust, and personalized learning (Anyon, 2005; Dewey, 2001; Meier, 1995; Wolk, 2009).

A number of other alternative high schools achieved student progress similar to BPL's. As noted earlier, the reported graduation rate for Codman Academy, in Boston, MA, was 84.5 percent in 2014 (U.S. News & World Report, 2016). That same 2016 report cited that, in
Worcester, MA, students at the Technical High School posted an impressive 95 percent graduation rate in 2014. More recently, in the 2017 U.S. News & World Report, River Cities High School in rural Wisconsin reported an 84.5 percent graduation rate - just three points below the state average. It is significant that these public schools all serve disadvantaged student populations and subscribe to the principles of alternative schooling described in this review and throughout this study.

Based on the evidence, it is fair to infer that, to best serve students, the culture of learning in effective alternative schools is flexible. Such a culture is willing to adapt learning to accommodate the lifestyle, social, and academic needs of its disadvantaged students so that they might achieve well-being and success (McGregor & Mills, 2012; Te Riele, 2007; Watson, 2011). Continuous development and change in these schools are fostered by and among all members of the school community.

Unfortunately, the long-term success of effective alternative learning institutions, such as the Coalition of Essential Schools (Meier, 1995; Sizer, 1984) and Big Picture Learning (Littky & Grabelle, 2004) has been documented yet not replicated by mainstream educators and school systems (Quinn & Poirier, 2007; Rennie Center, 2014). This may be true because alternative schools are able to put into practice what traditional schools appear unable to do; namely, to adjust curriculum and support services to fit the child (Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Te Riele, 2007). It might also be true that the implementation of pedagogy and practice in alternative schools is not understood by mainstream educators (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011).

Alternative school teacher voice, which may be helpful, is also largely absent in the literature (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Liefshitz, 2015; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011). According to Watson (2011), the absence of teacher views is a critical missing link because alternative
teachers have first-hand perspective and experience on what is effective in motivating disadvantaged students to persist and achieve. These educators are integral to nurturing the culture of learning and transmitting it to students (Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011). They can also contribute to the understanding of the key success factors, best practices, and strategies that support this student population, an understanding that traditional schools seem to lack.

Empirical evidence suggests that effective culture drives organizational achievement (Barth, 2002; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; MacNeil et al., 2009). Consequently, savvy schools intentionally build a culture of learning - meaningful to both students and educators - into any planned strategic effort for developing and sustaining student performance (Fisher et al., 2012; Quinn & Poirier, 2007; Rennie Center, 2014). Efforts in this direction are starting to emerge. For example, in their book, Building an Intentional School Culture, Elbot and Fulton (2008) described the specifics of an intentional culture of learning that was conceived, developed, and implemented by all constituents in a composite school. In the process, the culture evolved into a learning organization that honored both the social and academic aspects of student education.

For Elbot and Fulton (2008), the composite school represented both authors' combined experiences at several schools and the efforts of those schools to improve academic outcomes through education reform. In their book, they cited teaching approaches and problems consistent with all the schools, including the hiring of a consultant to identify the issues and to propose solutions. At this juncture, the authors synthesized the data and used it as a foundation for both the composite school and their proposed culture of learning model, described below.

Using traditional methods and practices, the composite school was relatively successful in driving academic progress, but then progress reached a plateau and halted. To help identify the problem(s), the school hired an outside educational consultant who administered several
cultural surveys to staff, students, and parents. The synthesized data revealed six critical concerns: 1) among faculty members, the lowest scores were in the areas of trust and collaborative decision-making; 2) the majority of the instruction was teacher-directed, fostering dependence among students; 3) learning and mastery were not customized to meet students' needs and wants; 4) the school environment lacked warmth and symbols of students' interests and accomplishments; 5) parental involvement was low; and 6) although the school had a mission statement about what it would do, "how things were done varied enormously" (Elbot & Fulton, 2008, p. 6). In other words, there was a lack of intentional culture throughout the school.

Therefore, for their composite school, Elbot and Fulton (2008) designed an intentional culture of learning model that depicted a system of possibilities for student and school success. The key words underlying their model were: caring, courageous conversation, community, and trust. These traits were the essence of their mission, called the touchstone. Elbot and Fulton thoughtfully and specifically described how to accomplish and evolve common goals through the use of four tools. The first was the touchstone. The second was an active partnership among all stakeholders that gave voice to students and parents as well as faculty and administration. The third was the practice of four mind sets: dependence, independence, interdependence, and integration, and learning how and when they apply. The fourth were eight ways for shaping a school, including: 1) leadership; 2) teaching, learning, and assessment; 3) relationships; 4) problem-solving; 5) expectations, trust, and accountability; 6) voice; 7) physical environment; and 8) markers, rituals, and transitions. These generic goals became meaningful only when the other tools were in active use.

In Elbot's and Fulton's (2008) model, the starting point for every school is a self-assessment survey of school strengths and weaknesses, taken by all stakeholders. From there the
touchstone and the other components of the model are created. Central to this model are the children and the belief among adult stakeholders that a school’s culture affects everything and everyone associated with the school. The model - in all of its interactive parts - is predicated on a communal willingness and commitment to continuous and intentional re-evaluation and adaptation of practice to meet student and educator needs.

Alternative schools exhibit significant differences from traditional schools. One difference between traditional and alternative schools and practices is the latter's personalized curriculum content. Another is their student-centered approach to teaching and learning. A third is the intentional nurturing of social relationships, which become intrinsic and fundamental to alternative schools. With their composite school, Elbot and Fulton (2011) presented a prototype of their ideal school. The potential practicality and benefits of their model can be summed up in the central idea of Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) seminal work: Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement. In this culmination of almost 10 years of research in Chicago schools, Bryk and Schneider argue that relational trust is predictive of academic success and that the absence of it almost guarantees no improvement. Together, the elements described here appear to be foundational for best practices in alternative schools.

The phenomenon of alternative schools and their success with disadvantaged students has not yet been fully explored (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). In the numerous studies and reports included in this literature review, the voices and views of alternative educators have scarcely been heard (Campbell, 2013). Emerging evidence suggests that there is a deeper need to understand alternative schools and their practices. It is especially important to explore an intentional culture of learning that has both social and academic components because, as evidenced in the literature, such a culture may facilitate authentic and sustainable learning for
disadvantaged youth (Senge et al., 2012).

Section Summary

Alternative schools are dedicated to helping students, especially disadvantaged youth who have failed to achieve and succeed in traditional school environments (Barton, 2005; Wolk, 2009). Mounting evidence indicates that these schools prove more effective overall because they are philosophically and culturally disposed to make the school fit students' needs rather than expect students to adapt to the structure and expectations of the school (Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011). Specifically, alternative schools embody an intentional culture of learning with two components - social and academic. According to Bryk and Schneider (2002), the social component develops personal confidence and motivation through teacher-student relationships. Wolk (2010) added that the academic component uses personalized learning to cultivate inquiry and persistence. The result of this deliberate cultural approach appears to be improved academic performance among disadvantaged students (Quinn & Poirier, 2007). These ideas and associated practices have been proven effective globally (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Sahlberg, 2011) and across the United States (Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Rennie Center, 2014).

The evidence indicates that both social and academic components are necessary to produce positive achievement among disadvantaged youth (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Harris et al., 2013). What the literature does not show is how alternative schools operationalize their practices (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Teacher voice is also minimally represented (Liefshitz, 2015; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011). Therefore, the focus of this study was to listen to the voices of alternative high school educators to better understand how an intentional culture of learning and its social and academic components impact disadvantaged students.

Chapter Summary
The goal of education has been to consistently and continually build capacity for success among students, and to equip and empower them to thrive in a 21st century world that is increasingly global as well as local (Hargreaves, 2002). This is especially noteworthy for the United States because the immigrant population growth has been primarily from third world countries where students are poor and have zero, little, or interrupted formal education. (Fix & Passell, 2003). This fact foreshadows a significant rise in the number of disadvantaged high school students who are at-risk of dropping out (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2011; Taylor & Cohn, 2012; U. S. Census Bureau, 2011a), limiting their career and earning options as well as their financial ability to contribute to their respective communities. The effects of increasing student dropouts are forecast to be socially and economically devastating in the years to come (Balfanz et al., 2012; National Dropout Prevention Center, 2011; Rennie Center, 2014).

Given the projected future educational crisis, it is imperative to identify and address the best practices that are most effective in closing learning gaps that have long persisted for disadvantaged students (Watson, 2011; Wolk, 2009). Throughout the literature review that informed this study, there was recurring evidence suggesting that 1) continuing supportive relationships between teachers and students are connected to positive student academic outcomes and 2) student engagement through personalized learning also contributes to academic improvements (Barton, 2005; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Lagana-Riordan et al, 2011; Rennie Center, 2014; Wolk, 2010). The evidence also suggests that academic success manifests through an intentional culture of learning, with both social and academic components as important requisites for the achievement of disadvantaged youth (Quinn & Poirier, 2007; Watson, 2011). The academic and social elements that make up an effective culture of learning are clear. Yet how the pieces fit and work together to produce
successful outcomes for disadvantaged students is still elusive.

According to Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011), Wolk (2009), and other authorities, there are four primary limitations in the current literature. First, there has been little empirical research on alternative high schools and what they do to help disadvantaged students consistently achieve academic success. (Lagana-Riordan, et al., 2011). Second, there has been no empirical research that describes how an effective culture of learning - with social and academic components - is implemented (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011; Wolk, 2009). Third, the voices of alternative educators are largely absent from scholarly studies (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011; Watson, 2011). Fourth, the voices of disadvantaged youth and their experiences in alternative high schools are also scarce in the literature (Kearns, 2011; Watson, 2010).

This study was designed to build on and contribute to current research and it was informed by the rich narratives and lived experiences of alternative educators who have not yet been a major voice in the literature. It was important to understand 1) how alternative educators defined their culture of learning; 2) how they developed trusting relationships that fostered effective learning experiences and improved student achievement; and 3) how these elements coalesced to create an intentional culture of learning that led to positive outcomes for disadvantaged students. Their voices helped to clarify the role and impact of the social and academic components on disadvantaged youth (Lagana-Riordan, et al., 2011; Poutiatine & Veeder, 2011). Additionally, through alternative educator voices, the values, assumptions, and the role of human expression in their schools' cultures emerged to add meaning to the findings. This researcher sought to discover what works, how it works, and how an intentional culture of learning influences disadvantaged students to learn, to grow, and to achieve social and academic
success (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Deal & Peterson, 2009; Elbot & Fulton, 2008; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Senge et al., 2012). Accordingly, the next chapter provides an overview of methodologies that were used in the study.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

Using narrative methodology, the purpose of this qualitative research was to explore deeply the cultures of learning at alternative high schools through the voices and perspectives of educators in order to understand a) the culture of learning (and its social and academic elements) at their respective alternative high schools and b) how these cultures influenced disadvantaged students. In accordance with these goals, and based on the conceptual framework and its two-fold lens - of both social and academic components - the overarching questions for this study were:

1) How do alternative high school educators describe the culture of learning at their schools?

2) According to alternative high school educators, based on their respective cultures of learning, how do teacher/student relationships help to build confidence and motivation in disadvantaged students?

3) What student-centered best practices have alternative high school educators experienced that resulted in academic success for disadvantaged students?

Having restated the research questions, this chapter addresses several topics. First, it cites the reasons that qualitative research was chosen, and, in particular, details why the narrative approach was the selected methodology. Second, it delineated the sites selected, the recruitment of participants (including the sampling method) and criteria for selection. Third, this chapter describes the interview process, data collection, analysis, and storage. Fourth, the issues of mitigating researcher bias, the criteria for safeguarding the validity and trustworthiness of the study, as well as its limitations are reviewed. Finally, it explains the ethics and regulations
required for protecting human participants in a research study.

**Rationale for a Qualitative Design**

The nature of qualitative research is to explore and understand how people make sense of their lives, to delineate the process, and to accurately and honestly describe how individuals interpret their experiences (Creswell, 2005; Merriam, 2009; Mezirow, 1991; Patton, 2005). The goal of such research is to develop a deep understanding of a phenomenon, particularly through interviews in which participants tell the stories of their lived experiences and offer their insights and interpretations on the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2012). As Merriam (2009) noted, qualitative researchers are interested "...in understanding the meaning people have constructed..." (p. 13) of their world and experiences.

Qualitative research is inductive, building toward theory from a combination of communication, observation, reflection, and intuitive comprehension (Creswell, 2005, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Riessman, 2003). It allows for more than one perspective, more than one reality, and more than one truth to emerge naturally and holistically through inquiry (Riessman, 1993). As key instrument and interpreter, this researcher was charged with being responsive and adaptable to ideas as participants express them - even if these ideas were unusual and unexpected (Creswell, 2012; Heracleous, 2004; Merriam, 2009). In this way, the conceptual framework was informed - perhaps confirmed or changed - by the data as it emerged (Heracleous, 2004; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1990). In short, qualitative research is both inductive and interpretative, often simultaneously (Creswell, 2005, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Riessman, 1993). The challenge for this researcher was to understand and interpret the participants' perspectives - not her own - (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002) through the qualitative art and science of interpretivism.

**Interpretivism**
Interpretivists see the world as emerging and changing in a continuous process of becoming (Heracleous, 2004; Merriam, 2009). Such a process is inherently an inquiry into "...the subjective experience of the individual" (Mahler, 2008, p. 178) so that the phenomenon might be envisioned and understood from each participant's vantage point. In this study, it became the researcher's responsibility to analyze, interpret, and make meaning from the totality of the participants' views, expressed within the context of his or her experience (Merriam, 2009; Riessman, 1993).

According to Heracleous (2004), there are several theoretical approaches that are deemed interpretivist. These include hermeneutics (which focuses on interpretation); rhetoric, metaphor and symbolic interactionism (which are applied in social contexts); and critical discourse (which is concerned with the link between discourse and the power of action). Yet one idea was common to all interpretivist theories. Weber (1922) and others called it achieving a meaningful understanding of the participants' views. Such understanding is sociological, aiming for a "...shared, intersubjective and verifiable reality" (Heracleous, 2004, p. 173).

This study sought to identify, understand, analyze, and interpret a culture of learning that was nurturing and effective for disadvantaged youth. Moreover, it did so through the voices of alternative educators who have been largely ignored in the literature to date. To best serve this goal, it was important to go beyond general qualitative and interpretive research to the rich, deep insights found in narrative study.

**Rationale for a Narrative Research Design**

Polkinghorne (1988) stated, "The study of humans requires focus on meaning in general, and narrative meaning in particular" (p. 9). As a result, over the years, there had been a decided increase in the use of narratives for qualitative research (Elliott, 2005; Polkinghorne, 1995).
In particular, the narrative interview has become a tool of inquiry for the collection, exploration, and analysis of the stories and vantage points of participants (Elliott, 2005; Josselson, 2006; Riessman, 2003). Narrative is the story, sometimes told in sequence, of an individual's unique lived experiences (personal, social, and historical) perspectives, realities, and truths, and the actions and behaviors that result (Creswell, 2012; Josselson, 2006; Polkinghorne, 1995).

Furthermore, narrative is an "all about me" opportunity which invites honest disclosure because it encourages people to speak their minds and hearts (Merriam, 2009; Riessman, 2000). For that reason, narrative research is dependent on the development of trust between the interviewer and the respondent (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1990). This mutual trust leads to new levels of understanding and meaning for both individuals (Riessman, 2003).

Because narrative research "...strives to preserve the complexity of what it means to be human" (Josselson, 2006, p. 3), it may be considered the quintessential form of qualitative research (Riessman, 2003; Seidman, 2006). It was a particularly relevant methodology for this study because it provided a forum for alternative educators - who have little voice in the current literature (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011) - to speak and make meaning of their lived experiences in an alternative school environment and to communicate their perspectives on how their school's culture of learning developed and influenced disadvantaged students.

Due to its focus on individual stories, narrative research does not result in a singular, fact-based truth or reality. What qualitative narrative study can produce is understanding and the illumination of multiple perspectives (Patton, 1990; Riessman, 2003). It can reveal patterns and themes (Josselson, 2006; Merriam, 2009), relationships and clusters of patterns and themes, and finally, connected understandings that bridge different narratives and lead to conceptual theories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2003). Although narrative findings should not be
presented as facts, narrative research offers the rich combination of inductively emerging knowledge and deductively merging ideas that might coalesce into connected understandings (Josselson, 2006; Riessman, 2003), and in this study, a better understanding of the phenomenon of a culture of learning.

For this study, the narrative approach encouraged participants to dig deep, reflect, and find new insights and meaning in their stories, which is the psychological view. The narrative format also allowed participants to reflect and perceive how they were connected to their colleagues, students, and school, and to understand their role in this dynamic (Chase, 2011), which was sociological. Ultimately, this effort used the rich, detailed narratives of participants to understand the factors that contributed to a comprehensive story. By connecting individual perceptions to the collective environment, this story, in turn, reflected the phenomenon of a culture of learning. The conceptual lens with its social and academic components (See Figure 2, p. 39) was the research tool through which this researcher analyzed and interpreted participants' stories to identify 1) emerging patterns and themes; 2) groupings of similar patterns and themes; and 3) conceptual ideas across different narrative stories.

A weakness with narrative, as with any form of qualitative research, is that individuals view their experiences and offer their insights and understandings through the window of their own lived experiences (Chase, 2011; Riessman, 2003). Also, each researcher may view the same emerging data differently than others and might draw different conclusions (Josselson, 2006; Riessman, 1993). This was a caution to the researcher. Yet Riessman (1993) noted that through analysis of multiple personal narratives, the researcher can shed light on the actions and social processes that underscore, define, and sometimes change human relationships. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) summed up the case for narrative research when they stated that through the
collaboration between researcher and participants, narrative study provides a way to understand and inquire into experience, and then "to study the complexity of the relational composition of people's lived experiences...as well as to imagine the future possibilities..." (p. 20).

**Research Site**

Schools were selected purposefully contingent on the criteria established for the study (Seidman, 2006). These criteria aligned with the purpose of the study including: 1) that the schools were alternative learning environments; 2) that the majority of the students were disadvantaged and had previously failed in traditional school settings; 3) that the faculty was diverse; 4) that educator participants had experience working with disadvantaged youth; 5) that relational trust between teachers and students and personalized learning were pillars of the school culture; and 6) that the graduation rate was equal to or higher than the national average. Neither geography (urban, suburban, or rural) or school size were factors. The interview setting for the research was either in a private room at the schools where the participants worked or in a separate setting off the school premises. In either case, the physical settings chosen for the interviews were environments where the participants felt at ease and comfortable (Patton, 1990; Seidman, 2006).

**Participants**

Ten teachers at alternative high schools were the primary participants in this study. Seven taught in one of two schools in Massachusetts, and three taught at a school in Rhode Island. Three of the participants also had administrative responsibilities as well. This researcher's original intention was to use snowball sampling, a form of purposeful sampling, from which a base of potential participants is developed through the recommendations of a gatekeeper in an administrative position at each alternative school location (Creswell, 2012;
Merriam, 2009). However, early in the effort to recruit participants, the researcher discovered that snowball sampling was not productive, and the sampling process evolved into criterion sampling, which is "to review and study all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance" (Patton, 1990, p. 176). Accordingly, with the permission of the gatekeepers, this researcher sent a recruitment letter to the faculties of each school, followed by a Confidential Informational Questionnaire to those who expressed interest in the study. The final group of participants was drawn from those who met the criteria detailed below.

According to Patton (1990), "The point of criterion sampling is to be sure to understand cases that are likely to be information-rich..." (176-177). In this spirit, the researcher listened to educators from three alternative schools, then interpreted their stories, lived experiences, and insights about the circumstances and environments of their schools, and sought to understand how they created a culture of learning that empowered students to achieve success and graduate. Within this small group of respondents, the goal was to achieve diversity in the following areas: 1) the number of years each participant had worked as an alternative educator and 2) the number of years of teaching experience at their current school. Other personal information that might inform the selection process was retrieved from the Confidential Informational Questionnaire (See Appendix B). Diversity in gender, race, marital status, and the participants' level of education were not criteria, but the final group of participants was indeed diverse in these areas, a fact that is delineated further in Chapter Four (See Table 4, p. 128). Finally, it was important that all participants had experience teaching disadvantaged students. However, this requirement was predetermined because a key criterion for the study was that a majority of the students in each school had to be disadvantaged youth, according to the definition of "disadvantaged" established in Chapter One.
Recruitment Process

The criteria for the selection of participants and their schools was detailed earlier. The researcher did not know the potential participants for this study and conducted interviews at the participants' schools or in an environment convenient to the participant. For these reasons, for professional courtesy, and to earn the trust and support of the school administration and faculty, the researcher contacted gatekeepers at each school site and obtained their permission both to contact potential participants and to conduct the research on school premises (Seidman, 2006). In one Massachusetts school, a vice-principal was the gatekeeper. In a second Massachusetts school, the academic dean was the gatekeeper. Third, in Rhode Island, the co-director of the school was the gatekeeper.

Accordingly, a Gatekeeper Recruitment Letter (See Appendix A) and a Confidential Informational Questionnaire (See Appendix B) were sent via the U.S. Postal Service and emailed to the three gatekeepers. As well as requesting formal approval to conduct the research, the researcher also sought permission to solicit participation by contacting faculty and administrators directly. Based on the gatekeepers' permission, this researcher contacted potential participants via the Participant Recruitment Letter (See Appendix C), which explained the nature and purpose of the study, the criteria for schools and participants, possible activities in addition to the interviews, time planned for each interview, assurances of confidentiality, and an explanation of how participants' privacy would be safe-guarded and how findings would be reported (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1990; Seidman, 2006). In addition, the Confidential Informational Questionnaire solicited basic personal and professional information, including the criteria outlined above (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Both the recruitment letter and the questionnaire also included the researcher's contact information, and requested that individuals interested in participating
should return the questionnaires (and any questions they might have) to an email address used exclusively for this research. For those who did not respond to the initial recruitment letter, a follow up letter was sent via email (See Appendix D).

As well as requesting formal approval to conduct the research, the researcher also sought the gatekeepers' permission to solicit participation by contacting faculty directly and, if responses were inadequate, to conduct a follow up mailing after two weeks time. After reviewing the questionnaire responses and screening them based on the criteria, the researcher contacted all respondents to thank them, and to invite the most likely participants to a brief meeting via phone, Skype, or in person (if possible). The objectives for the meeting were: 1) to review the purpose of the study, the interview process, how participants' confidentiality would be protected, and what they could expect; 2) to address all participants' questions and concerns; and 3) to ascertain what setting might be appropriate and comfortable for participants during an interview that was planned to last from 60 to 90 minutes (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006). After this meeting, the final selection of participants was based on their meeting the research criteria, their expressed degree of interest, and the rapport and comfort between them and the researcher. Participants were notified by phone or email of their selection along with a list of suggested dates for the interview and the request that they select from this list or propose other dates that were more convenient.

The goal of these interviews was to record, listen, comprehend, analyze, and interpret the stories of a diverse group of alternative educators who interacted daily with disadvantaged youth. A larger goal was to understand, from their own stories, how educators - who have a variety of experiences, histories, and world views - worked to develop a culture of learning, how they described it, and how they imparted its ethos (meaning) to students.
Relationship to Participants

The relationship that the researcher fostered with participants was integral to the success of the interviews, especially because the narratives of the participants were the focal points of the study and at the heart of the research questions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2003). Therefore, the researcher, as the sole instrument of this study, had to create an environment and an interactive relationship of trust that made participants feel safe, at ease, and willing to divulge the deep, richly textured stories of their personal and professional lived experiences (Seidman, 2006; Riessman, 2003). According to Creswell (2012) there are several steps the researcher takes to ensure relational trust. These include sharing a transparent and complete description of the research, as noted earlier, and discussing the protection of the participants’ words and privacy rights. In particular, participants were assured 1) that interview notes, transcripts, emails, executive summaries, and all other communications between researcher and participants would be stored in a secure, locked filing cabinet for researcher reference only and 2) that all communication and notes would be held in strict confidence and destroyed once the research was completed. Finally, prior to the interview, each participant received the Informed Consent Form (See Appendix E) for review. The researcher answered any questions raised, advised participants that their participation was voluntary and could be ended at any time without consequences, and obtained the participants’ signatures so that the research might proceed.

Data Collection

As discussed earlier, initial data that documented participants’ personal demographics and professional backgrounds was collected during the recruitment phase of the study, both in the Participant Recruitment Letter (See Appendix C) and in the short Confidential Informational Questionnaire (See Appendix B), as well as in the brief meeting or phone conversation that the
researcher had with each respondent before making a final selection of participants.

**Informed Consent**

In the interests of transparency, ethical respect, and trust, Seidman (2006) suggests that prior to the start of an interview, the researcher should provide participants with the following information and reassurances on:

- the purpose of the study,
- the length of the interview,
- that the interview would be recorded (and some notes taken) to ensure the accuracy of the participant's words and meaning,
- that the participant as well as the school and its location would be given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality,
- that the interview would be transcribed immediately,
- that the interview would be kept in secure storage - paper transcript and notes would be kept in private storage with the researcher possessing the only key; electronic versions will be password protected.

Thereafter, one-by-one, each participant was informed that participation was voluntary and that he or she could withdraw from the interview and the study at any time. After reviewing the particulars of the study, the interview, and the protection of the participant's privacy, the researcher answered any questions that remained. Lastly, individual participants were asked to sign an Informed Consent Form (See Appendix E). At that point the interview proceeded.

**Rationale for the In-Depth Interview**

The primary source of information for this study was the one-on-one, semi-structured interview, approximately 60 to 90 minutes long, conducted in a convenient and comfortable
setting that was agreeable to both the participant and the researcher (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1990; Seidman, 2006). Interviews were grounded in an Interview Guide (See Appendix F), designed to cover salient topics for all respondents. This format was flexible and allowed adaptations and follow up questions based on the respondent's reactions (Clandinnen & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). The interview format was a balance between open-ended questions and structured questions (Patton, 1990). It was the model chosen for this study because, as Merriam (2009) and Seidman (2006) attest, it is a reliable and engaging strategy to discover what people think, feel, perceive, and intend. However, this approach is only as good as the interview's skill (Seidman, 2006). Thus, for the interview to be high-quality, rich, and evaluative, the interviewer has to be well-prepared, disciplined, attuned to participants, and able to establish a comfortable, open atmosphere that puts the participant at ease (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006). As Riessman (1993) notes, a relaxed atmosphere encourages the open, rich, and in-depth conversation that is important to narrative inquiry.

Initial warm-up questions were neutral and conversational (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006). Thereafter, questions stemmed from the study's overarching research questions and an Interview Guide (See Appendix F) that followed the tenets of Merriam (2009), Patton (1990), and Seidman (2006). Namely, questions were open-ended to encourage deep exploration and reflective responses (Patton, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 2003). For example, one question was, "Will you tell me about your experience in education before you came to this school?"

Prompts and follow-up questions flowed naturally from participants' responses (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006), and, at the same time, encouraged participants to express their feelings, experiences, and beliefs based on the questions (Creswell, 2012). For example, one prompt was
simply, "Tell me a little more about that." Questions and interviews continued until it was clear that answers and ideas were repeating and, therefore, that saturation was achieved (Merriam, 2009). During the interviews, the researcher also wrote brief notes to document body language, facial expressions, tone, and other non-verbal responses in order to enhance and enrich the recorded narratives.

Interviews were audio-taped on an iPad and transcribed immediately following each interview byRev.com, an accredited and secure online transcription service. The recordings were stored on a flash drive and kept in a locked drawer in the researcher's home office. Tapes and transcripts were reviewed several times to help the researcher to internalize and understand their meaning. Transcripts were compared to the recorded interviews to assure accuracy. In the analysis phase, member-checking - asking participants to read and verify the transcripts - was also used to verify accuracy. Any identifiable pieces of information, such as names and places, were redacted from the transcripts, each of which was assigned a pseudonym - as were the participants and their schools - to protect confidentiality. Further, respondents' interviews and words were used only to address the research questions in this study. They will not be used in any future research.

In addition to notes taken during the interviews, the researcher wrote analytic memos to document the thoughts and impressions of participants, other stakeholders, and the schools. Writing analytic memos allowed for adjustment, adaptation, revision, or change to prior insights as the data's revelations and implications emerged (Merriam, 2009). Likewise, by reflecting in action (Schon, 1983), an audit trail was created (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). The analysis and interpretations along with findings, conclusions, and recommendations that followed were deep, richly detailed, and sought to make meaning that revealed individual
perspectives - some of which emerged to form collective views. Those, in turn, provided insights about the culture of learning being explored and the alternative schools in which it persisted and thrived.

The primary source of data for this study were the interviews and the subsequent emergence of participants' perspectives based on their narrative stories of lived experiences. When appropriate, the researcher also reviewed documents, such as mission statements, and observed participants from the sidelines. The purpose was to illuminate the participants' stories and perspectives and to better understand and interpret their meanings (Riessman, 2008).

In keeping with the structure and nature of qualitative research, the researcher assumed the responsibility to interact with participants and represent their stories, perspectives, and experiences with accuracy and sensitivity (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Seidman, 2006). In addition, when examining any documents, such as student work and school mission statements, the researcher was the sole human instrument who collected, analyzed, and interpreted the data, and then reported the findings and any relationships among them (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006).

While making every effort to be an impartial human instrument, the researcher was continuously mindful that researcher bias is an ever-present risk and a threat to trustworthiness (Creswell, 2007). For example, the research was undertaken based on the researcher's beliefs, experiences, and perspective that an effective culture of learning might be a positive influence on disadvantaged youth, and might impact their ability to achieve and succeed academically. It was the goal of this study to explore and understand the phenomenon of a culture of learning. The Conceptual Framework (See Figure 2, p. 39) indicated the path of exploration. It was neither a hypothesis nor a predictor of outcome. Nor was it a comparison with traditional schools. It was
the conceptual lens that guided and informed the study.

In order to minimize researcher bias and, therefore maximize validity of outcomes, this researcher identified and acknowledged personal beliefs, experience, and knowledge, and actively practiced reflexive objectivity in order to maintain an honest and undistorted report of emerging data, its analysis, and interpretation (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Merriam, 2009). For example, during the interview process, questions were both open-ended and semi-structured, and the researcher, in all ways, tried to present a neutral and impartial posture in tone, facial expression, and body language (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006). To this end, prior to the formal research and using the Interview Guide (See Appendix F), a pilot interview was conducted with experienced educators.

**Pilot Study**

The goal of the pilot study was to practice and refine the researcher's interviewing skills, to receive feedback assessing the clarity, relevance, and productivity of the questions, and then to make any necessary revisions to sharpen the focus of the Interview Guide (See Appendix F) to reflect the overarching research questions and the purpose of the study. A pilot study was conducted with four educators who were each asked to respond to the questions in the Interview Guide. Based on their comments and questions, some questions were revised or clarified to produce a guide that was at once more specific and penetrating and, also, easier to understand.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis is a process consisting of many actions, all of which will be identified and briefly described in this section. In this narrative study, the first step was tracking and organizing the different forms of data that emerged from various sources. These included the one-on-one interviews and transcriptions, observation notes and memos made during each
interview, and the analytic memos and summaries made during reflection. Second was coding and identifying the themes and conceptual ideas that emerged from the data. To be fully immersed in the data and to support understanding, the researcher manually analyzed all data as it was collected, using the open and axial-coding approach implemented by Saldana (2009), and ensured, accepting the premise of Merriam (2009) and Riessman (2008), that data collection and analysis happened concurrently from the beginning of the collection process. Also included in this section is a description of the protocol for safeguarding the security and storage of the data. There is a brief discussion for evaluating the trustworthiness of the study, another on its limitations, and an evaluation of the requisite ethical considerations for protecting participants.

**Data Tracking**

Because this was a narrative study, the semi-structured interview served as the primary source of data collection. Interviews were transcribed on the day they took place and were securely stored throughout the analysis process and the completion of this research. In addition to the interview, other sources of information were used as appropriate. These included observation notes taken during the course of the interviews, and analytic memos that described the researcher's initial thoughts, reactions, and reflections. All served as useful tools for gaining insights, for developing potential interpretations, and for the preliminary organization of emerging ideas into possible patterns and themes (Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Riessman, 1993; Saldana, 2009). These secondary data were dated and labeled to reference the interview(s) that prompted them. Like the interviews, secondary data were coded according to Saldana's (2009) methodology. Throughout all phases of the analysis, as codes, categories, themes, and conceptual ideas emerged, the researcher was mindful of and informed by the conceptual framework and the research questions(s).
Knowledge is fluid and must be negotiated and reconciled to absorb and make new and plausible meaning out of multiple perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Riessman, 1993). As such, a narrative cannot be purely subjective (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 1993). If it were, there would be limitless interpretations to emerging data; nothing would be learned; no recommendations for future research could be made; and there would be no reliability or trustworthiness to the results (Heracleous, 2004; Riessman, 2003). Narrative is interpretative and, therefore, the analysis of this narrative study was also interpretive (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 1993). In fact, Merriam (2009) and Riessman (2008) among others suggest that data collection and rudimentary analysis occur simultaneously. To facilitate this occurrence effectively, Merriam (2009) offers suggestions for the researcher, including the following: 1) to write notes, memos, and observations to document in the moment what is being learned and to reflect upon it; 2) to review data daily in order to pursue recurring leads and ideas in subsequent interviews; 3) to try out emerging ideas, themes, and/or patterns on participants if/as the occasion naturally presents itself; and 4) to look for analogies in the literature that might help to clarify thinking or to add depth and detail to description.

In analyzing the data, this researcher initially used an inductive approach, allowing codes, categories, and, later, themes and conceptual ideas to emerge (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Saldana, 2009). Moving from open (first cycle) to axial (second cycle) coding, a combination of inductive and deductive analyses was conducted. Both analyses reflected the participants’ words and perceptions interpretatively and objectively, further minimizing risk of researcher bias.

**Coding**

A code is a word, short phrase, or sentence that summarizes the primary topic(s) of an excerpt or passage of text (Saldana, 2009). Coding is labeling. As such, coding was inherently
part of the interpretative process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Riessman, 1993). Coding was also a way of linking impressions and interpretations that emerged from the views of one participant or across the perspectives of many. Prior to coding, it was important that the researcher read and re-read every participant's transcript to understand it viscerally as well as intellectually.

Many qualitative theorists have similar approaches to coding. For example, Creswell (2012), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Miles and Huberman (1994), all suggested a process that begins with an initial step of first impressions that leads to codes. This first cycle, known as open coding, represents the initial organization of data into codes. Constant comparison (Merriam, 2009) was part of the coding process during the first cycle of data analysis in this study. Here the researcher coded, reconsidered, revised, and re-coded until some codes were eliminated and others were synthesized into core categories. During the second cycle, called axial coding, the constant comparison method helped the researcher to revise, interconnect, recombine, and further reduce the data into themes and concepts that were distinct from each other.

In narrative research, identifying themes within and across narrative stories can be the end of the process. However, if ideas, concepts, and patterns continued to emerge, they were funneled down until a large number of initial possibilities were honed to the few that appeared to be most credible. The process was both iterative and inductive and was repeated until there were no new, emerging insights, and saturation was achieved (Creswell, 2012).

Other data analysis approaches also informed this study. In Saldana's (2009) approach, coding was typically divided into first cycle and second cycle coding. In the first cycle, codes were assigned to specific topics, and then codes that had commonalities were clustered into
categories. Those codes and categories were revised and regrouped continually during the first cycle. In the second cycle, categories were synthesized into more abstract themes and patterns, and sometimes, into conceptual ideas and theories. Thus, this approach shared commonalities with the other methods discussed earlier. In the end, Saldana's (2009) approach was the guiding force for coding and data analysis in this study for three reasons. First, in his initial cycle, Saldana (2009) offered myriad coding strategies that helped to identify the nuances and subtle meanings of narrative stories. These ranged from In Vivo coding, which used the participant's words to suggest codes and categories to Emotion and Values coding, which interpreted feelings and principles. Second, the detailed process that Saldana described ensured a disciplined and structured method that kept the researcher focused, reflective, and open to data that emerged in multiple ways. Third, such a mindful and detailed approach led to a story or theory that credibly connected the categories and themes, and, therefore, contributed to the trustworthiness of the findings. Many of Saldana's (2009) coding techniques are mainstays of any qualitative research. Others are especially appropriate for narrative inquiry, as described next in Table 2 and Table 3.

**Coding Methods**

Table 2: First Cycle Coding Methods, Good for Narrative Research Applications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Method</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial</td>
<td>A starting point. Codes can range from descriptive to conceptual to theoretical.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Vivo</td>
<td>Uses direct quotes of participants to discern what they think and feel and how they act and respond. Helps the researcher and readers to understand what is important to individual participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>Reveals intra- and inter-personal relationships and stakeholders' views about educational issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>Exploration of cultural values and relationships, including constructs such as relational trust and academic success.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Process: Considers on-going actions, interactions, emotions engaged to address problems and purpose in striving for a goal.

Versus: Exploration of contrasting values in culture, relationships, pedagogy, mission, et al., between alternative and traditional schools.

Dramaturgical: Story as social drama. Life performances with individuals as actors in their own anecdotes, vignettes, and histories.

Motif: Evocative of universal human conditions and reactions.

Verbal Exchange: Communication of cultural patterns, attitudes, beliefs, and emotions, leading to a deeper level of understanding.

Table 3: First Cycle Coding Methods, Good for All Qualitative Research Applications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Method</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attribute</td>
<td>Basic demographic information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magnitude</td>
<td>Assesses degree of intensity or frequency in a given interview or across interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Using nouns only to help the reader to 'see' what the researcher sees.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each of the coding methods noted in Tables 2 and 3 are reflected in Saldana's (2009) Narrative Coding Method, in which the goal is "to understand the human condition through story, which was a legitimate way of knowing" (p. 109). By using some of these coding strategies during the first cycle of data analysis in this study, codes emerged, which reflected multiple perspectives and helped the researcher identify initial codes, some of which had overlapping characteristics. As the process continued and new data was analyzed, new interpretations emerged. Then, via constant comparison, codes were revised and synthesized into distinct categories, each of which contained codes that were uniquely applicable. Moving toward the second cycle, categories were further reduced into a few key themes as the process evolved from concrete descriptions to more theoretical patterns and ideas. According to
Riessman (2008), at every step of data analysis, codes, categories, themes, and conceptual ideas should address the research question(s). Also, emerging and interpreted ideas were revisited until no new ideas emerged, and saturation was reached (Merriam, 2009). Finally, the inductive approach was joined by the deductive process with which independent and merged interpretative findings and gaps were rooted in and contributed to the literature.

Data Storage

As discussed earlier, an iPad, which was password-protected, served as the recording device for the interviews. Recorded transcripts were immediately uploaded to and transcribed by Rev.com, an established, reputable third-party service. Rev.com offered the following services and protections: 1) a non-disclosure agreement; 2) secure protection of the files to be transcribed; 3) encrypted files; 4) reputable clients and reviews; 5) fast turn-around; and 6) return of digital documents and transcriptions in Microsoft Word format.

Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant, school, and transcription, and the data was stored in a Dropbox account specifically opened for this purpose and housed on a computer that only the researcher can access. Back-up copies of the transcripts (and the informed consent forms) were stored and locked in a file cabinet set aside for this express purpose in the researcher's home office. Except for the informed consent forms, all identifiable information gathered for this research will be shredded or otherwise destroyed within one year of the completion of this study. The informed consent forms will be held in a secured, locked file cabinet in the researcher's office for three years after the study's completion after which time, these forms will be destroyed as well.

Reliability and Trustworthiness

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry is in a continual state of
development and, therefore, criteria such as validity and generalizability are difficult to assess. Moreover, Riessman (1993) noted that historical truths might differ from one individual to another and in the retelling of a story by the same individual. In other words, in qualitative research, and especially in narrative inquiry, facts are interpretative and multiple, and alternative truths are not only possible, but inevitable. Therefore, for this research, which was inductive and subjective in nature, evaluative words that are applicable and meaningful include trustworthiness, plausibility, credibility, and transferability. Interpretations might not be definitive and absolute. However, if interpretations and findings are honest, and if their connections are believable, they are able to provide foundations for future research.

Merriam (2009) agreed that qualitative research should be measured by how credibly interpretations and findings reflect reality. For her and for other qualitative researchers, *triangulation* is a common method for establishing credibility because it uses three sources to verify interpretations, including 1) multiple sources of data; 2) multiple methods; 3) multiple investigators; and 4) multiple theories to support emerging findings. It was equally important to continue interviewing until the stories repeated the same thoughts and ideas, indicating that saturation had been achieved. In this study, triangulation was achieved through corroboration of evidence from different participants, through the use of observational notes as well as interviews, and through the use of analytic memos and reflections, mission statements from participants' schools, the pilot study, and the constant comparison coding process - all of which contributed to a multiplicity of data sources and methods (Creswell, 2012).

Several other strategies for trustworthiness and reliability are used in qualitative research, and were employed in this study. First, through *analytic memos*, the researcher was able to reflect personally on how she related to codes and interpreted emerging data. Empathic free
association allowed the researcher to deeply explore the meanings of stories and to freely interpret them by being open to all possibilities (Merriam, 2009; Saldana, 2009). Embedded in the process of writing analytic memos is the idea of reflexivity (Merriam, 2009). Reflexivity held the researcher accountable to be honest, aware, and transparent about biases and to be self-critical about interpretations and assumptions by carefully explaining how each was reached.

Second, logs of daily events known as audit trails were also used to establish trustworthiness. Audit trails included researcher reflections accompanied by detailed descriptions about process, how categories were determined, and how decisions were made (Merriam, 2009, Riessman, 2008). Third, member checking, also called respondent validation, was used as a control (Creswell, 2012; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Patton, 1990). It occurred when participants were asked to review executive summaries of their interviews to establish if their intent corresponded to the researcher's interpretations.

Fourth, peer review was used in the early stages of coding to provide a comparative point of view to the researcher's perspective. It reminded the researcher to be aware of all multiple views as the analysis progressed. In addition, peer review was used so that objective and knowledgeable individuals could determine whether the findings were credible based on the evidence in the raw data. The peer reviewers' lack of personal involvement lent believability to their views, and their comments helped this researcher stay focused and clear.

Fifth, thick, rich narrative descriptions showed the coherence of a narrative perspective, demonstrating an alignment between story, research questions and purpose, and emerging themes.

To this list, Riessman (1993) added two more potential approaches which this researcher observed. One was Persuasiveness, a method enhanced when the researcher reads and re-reads the narrative story transcripts to uncover repeated codes and categories, leading to repeated
theoretical claims that appear to have greater merit than alternative accounts. Another was
researcher transparency through sharing information about how interpretations were produced,
thereby indicating pragmatic usefulness for other researchers and future studies.

It is clear that research scholars use different approaches to build plausibility. It is also
apparent that many of these methods overlap and reinforce each other. As a result, this
researcher used a variety of methods to establish reliability, trustworthiness and plausibility for
the findings in this study.

Finally, this research was conducted with teachers and other educators with whom the
researcher had no prior affiliation or relationship. Moreover, as required under IRB protocol and
procedures, during the recruitment process, this researcher introduced herself as a doctoral
candidate from Northeastern University who was conducting original research for her doctoral
degree. In short, everything about the process and purpose of this research, including the role of
the researcher, was described forthrightly, with transparency, and subject to participants'
questions (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1990).

**Limitations of the Research**

A primary limitation of narrative inquiry is that the detail and attention required
preclude large numbers of participants. This was a limitation that became more apparent as this
study evolved. In particular, only teachers in the Northeast participated in this research. As a
result, there is no way to know whether the findings are particular to this region or would be
replicated in other areas of the United States. In order to gather more comprehensive data in
response to the research questions, additional studies should be conducted.

Also, the intention of this study was to give voice to alternative high school teachers who
are predominantly absent from the literature. However, as the research unfolded, it was clear
that administrator perspective would have added another dimension to the findings. Specifically, teachers appeared to be committed to their students. They also noted that they felt valued and appreciated. Administrators might be able to describe how their schools' cultures produce teacher satisfaction and how that satisfaction may influence student behavior and outcomes.

The research also indicated that student perspective would have provided a unique and meaningful vantage point to the findings. In the literature it appears that in effective alternative high schools, disadvantaged students achieved at a higher rate than their traditional school counterparts. At the schools described in this study, the majority of students were Black and Hispanic. Given the importance of culture and race in education, a diversity of students from both learning environments might be able to describe their experiences and how their respective learning environments impacted personal and academic growth.

Furthermore, in narrative research, the analysis is slow because every nuance of speech and body language must be deciphered. Therefore, substantive connections across stories are difficult to establish, and generalizability may be diminished. Because of these challenges, the researcher had to be especially mindful.

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry requires the researcher to be aware of and sensitive to the authenticity that emerges from searching and re-searching, and following each narrative story where it leads. For Riessman (1993), personal narratives are not scientific truths, but the truth that an individual observes based on his or her lived experiences. When individual truths are repeated in a given story or similarly in the stories of others, these truths acquire credibility. In the end, to minimize limitations, transferability may be plausible, based on the rich, thick descriptions of each narrative story, as well as the inferences that can be interpreted within and across stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 1993).
Protection of Human Participants

Every researcher, including this one, must pass an on-line course on the protection of human subjects, and must submit this certification along with his/her dissertation proposal for approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Northeastern University before contacting potential participants. To ensure the protection of all human participants in this study, this researcher followed rigorously Northeastern University's IRB guidelines. Although discussed earlier in the sections on Interviewing and Data Collection, the guidelines are recapped here. First, prior to the start of the interview, each participant reviewed the research process, as well as protections and assurances, with the researcher. These comprised confidentiality, including the use of pseudonyms, the locked and secure safekeeping of all transcripts, and the consent form (which had to be signed before the interview could proceed). Second, the researcher advised that participation in the study was voluntary, and that participants had the right to leave the study at any time. Third, additional protections for all participants included their right to ask any questions and to review the researcher's responses.

After completion of the interviews, each participant also had the right to review an executive summary of his/her transcript and to provide feedback on the researcher's interpretations. Fourth, other methods were used to safeguard the trustworthiness of the data and the researcher's interpretations. When the research was completed, all identifiable information was shredded, except for the consent forms, which will be held in a locked, secure place for three years and then destroyed as well. These practices will be used to minimize any risk and to maximize protection for the communication and well-being of all study participants.

Chapter Summary

Because it is inductive, qualitative research was appropriate for this study which sought
to explore multiple perspectives about the culture of learning in alternative high schools. The qualitative theory of interpretivism epitomizes the idea of continuous change through the subjective and unique experiences of each participant. Narrative inquiry is the quintessential method for deeply exploring and analyzing the subjective life experiences of individuals, and how they connected. For this reason, it was the method chosen for this study. As Riessman (2000) stated: "Narratives are a particularly significant genre for representing and analyzing identity in its multiple guises in different contexts... [They] provide windows into lives that confront the constraints of circumstances" (p. 374).

Educator participants were chosen via criterion sampling to assure both a solid level of experience and interest. They shared their stories and life experiences predominantly through the open, conversational environment of the semi-structured interview. Following IRB requirements, before, during, and after the research was completed, participants' anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy were rigorously protected via secure devices and locations described in the Informed Consent Form (See Appendix F). Transcripts of interviews will be destroyed one year after the research has been concluded, and the Informed Consent Forms will be destroyed three years thereafter.

For data analysis, Saldana's (2009) approach was the primary method because it provided multiple coding strategies that were particularly pertinent for narrative study. These strategies included In Vivo, Emotion, Values, and Descriptive coding. During the data collection process, the researcher took observational notes, wrote analytic memos, and created audit trails to aid in the interpretive process and, at the same time, to lay a foundation for trustworthiness of the findings. Other methods used to establish trustworthiness and plausibility included triangulation, member-checking, peer review, and thick, rich descriptions.
Making meaning requires analysis which starts inductively and interpretively and concludes with concepts and generative thinking that are believable and actionable within the boundaries of the phenomenon. Conclusions can also imply deductively - through connectedness - what might be possible in other situations and organizations (Josselson, 2006). Through the lived experiences and perspectives of its educators, this narrative study sought to better understand an intentional culture of learning in alternative high schools and its impact on disadvantaged youth. Based on an analysis of the data, the findings that emerged are presented in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

Using narrative methodology, the purpose of this qualitative research was to explore deeply the cultures of learning at alternative high schools through the voices and perspectives of their educators in order to understand a) the culture of learning (including both social and academic elements) at their respective non-traditional high schools and b) how these cultures influenced disadvantaged students. In accordance with these goals and based on the conceptual framework and its two-fold lens (of both social and academic components), what follows are the three questions that guided and informed this study:

1) How do alternative high school educators describe the culture of learning at their schools?

2) According to alternative high school educators, based on their respective cultures of learning, how do teacher/student relationships help to build confidence and motivation in disadvantaged students?

3) What student-centered best practices have alternative high school educators experienced that resulted in academic success for disadvantaged students?

This chapter starts with a recap of the narrative approach used in this research. Second, to provide context for the learning environments of the educators, Table 4 (See p. 128) delineates salient information for each of their schools. Next, Table 5 (See p. 129) presents demographic information about the participants followed by more detailed personal profiles. Finally, Table 6 (See p. 141) offers a summary of key findings that is followed by an analysis and discussion of the same.

The Narrative Approach
Like other qualitative research, narrative research is interpretative and subjective (Creswell, 2005), holding the possibility of many truths. So, the purpose of narrative research is not to find truth to a logical certainty, but rather to find meaning that is credible and plausible (Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 2008). As the stories of participants unfolded, there were many elements - both direct and nuanced - that contributed to the texture and deeper meaning of narratives and the themes that emerged. In addition, Riessman (2008) identified several narrative genres, including topic-centered narratives. This genre might highlight moments of past events that were linked thematically "in a single interview" (Riessman, 1993, p. 25). For example, in this study, participants linked stories of students to illustrate different aspects of constructs, such as relationship-building, high expectations, and trust, which emerged later into themes.

Riessman (1993, 2008) also affirmed the importance of context, cautioning that it might be overlooked or minimized in thematic analysis. One element of context that was germane to the narrative form was not just what was said, but how it was said (Riessman, 1993). To explain, a participant who referred to something as disappointing might have implied either discouragement and helplessness or determination and resolve. Tone of voice and the body language observed during the interview could have illuminated the participant's meaning. In addition, a follow up question, such as, "What do you mean by that?" could have clarified the participant's thoughts and emotions. These views informed the analysis of the stories of human experience described in this research. In the end, Josselson (2006, p. 5) states: "Each individual is unique, yet what we seek in narrative research is some understanding of the patterns that cohere among individuals and the aspects of lived experiences that differentiate."

Accordingly, the findings begin with a brief overview of the three alternative high
schools to establish the learning focus of each school as detailed in Table 4 that follows.

Table 4: School Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Pseudonym</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th># of Students</th>
<th>Teacher to Student Ratio</th>
<th>Learning Focus</th>
<th>Graduation Rate, 2016*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASC High School</td>
<td>Eastern MA</td>
<td>446 Approx.</td>
<td>1:25 approx.</td>
<td>Performing Arts</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity Middle/High School</td>
<td>Eastern MA</td>
<td>400 approx.</td>
<td>1:20 approx.</td>
<td>Scholarship</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pioneer High School</td>
<td>Eastern RI</td>
<td>130 approx. in each of 6 schools on campus</td>
<td>1:16 approx.</td>
<td>Internships, Community Service</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Based on reported data from Departments of Education in Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

To summarize, the ten men and women interviewed for this study represent three unique alternative schools, each of which emphasizes a distinct learning focus (See Table 4). All have high academic and social expectations. All believe in real-world learning. However, ASC has a performing arts focus. At Opportunity, the emphasis is on scholarship. Pioneer champions community service and real world learning. According to published data, including school web sites and state department of education information, in these schools, a majority of the students are children of color and are disadvantaged economically or socially. Yet, all three schools demonstrate graduation success that exceeds the national average of 81 percent (NCES, 2013), the most recently compiled report on this subject. Importantly, disadvantaged and. This information about the participants’ schools is noted here as a backdrop for the individuals who shared their experiences and perspectives in this narrative study.

Study Participants

During this qualitative research, 10 teachers, who were faculty members at one of three alternative schools, participated in one-on-one interviews, each of which lasted between 60 and
90 minutes. The stories of their experiences and perceptions of the culture and workings of their respective schools became the window through which the research questions were viewed and analyzed. What follows in Table 5 are pertinent demographic data about the participants, who are listed in alphabetical order by pseudonym. The data was sourced from 1) a questionnaire each participant submitted prior to the interview; 2) information that participants gave during their interviews; and 3) researcher observation during the interview process. Although age, gender, and ethnicity were not criteria for participation in this study, the participants were, coincidentally, a diverse group. Among the seven women and three men, three were Black, two, Hispanic, and five, White. Two participants were in their twenties, four were in their thirties, three were in their forties, and one participant was in the fifty year age range. Three participants were also department chairs. Finally, five participants had experience working in a traditional school environment, and five had worked only in alternative school settings. Among the latter, three had worked in corporate institutions before coming to their present positions in education.

Table 5: Participants' Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Alternative School Pseudonym</th>
<th># Years at the School</th>
<th>Traditional School Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alexis</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>ASC</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>ASC</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabrielle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Pioneer</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Pioneer</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margot</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>ASC</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaghan</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>ASC</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Pioneer</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant Profiles

As noted earlier, the ten men and women interviewed for this study represents three
alternative high schools, each of which emphasizes a particular learning focus, each of which has experienced graduation success that exceeds the national rate of 82 percent reported earlier (See Table 4, p. 128) even though a majority of their students were disadvantaged. Likewise, the study participants were themselves distinctly individual. Their profiles include contextual issues and a brief explanation of what each perceived is his or her purpose as an educator. Profiles are organized based on the order in which the interviews took place.

**Participant 1: Alexis**

Upon graduation from a university in Eastern MA, Alexis, who is about 30 years old and married, joined ASC, a performing arts high school, as a member of the STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) faculty. That was eight years ago. As she noted with a smile: "I spent my twenties in this school." She shared that ASC is a good fit for her because the school is committed to infusing the arts into all of its academic courses. She expressed the belief that combining science (especially engineering) and math with the artistic point of view may be a new approach for some schools, but it is historically relevant. "The greatest scientists and mathematicians were artists years ago," she stated, and vice-versa if one thinks of da Vinci. Alexis noted that ASC is at a crossroads with some pushing for a more rigorous arts program and focus, and others advocating for more options and pathways for students to explore, using the arts and the artistic lens as foundational. She favors the second perspective and appreciates having the intellectual freedom to explore this pathway. In fact, members of the STEAM team are also working on updating some of the norms and values that have been in place since the ASC's inception in 1998. Alexis summed up by affirming that "...art can add so much value to science and math, technology and engineering...The way artists think...approach problems...solve a problem or communicate a message...That's what the
STEAM team is pushing for in our school.”

Participant 2: Ruth

Now in her mid-twenties, Ruth started her career at Opportunity School as a student in its first graduating class of 2008. The school, whose 400 students are in grades 6 through 12, is located in Eastern MA. Ruth recalled that the school always set high academic expectations, but struggled to develop a curriculum that was not only rigorous but relevant to its ethnically diverse, poor, minority students. She credits the original founder and headmaster with the vision that relationships were "how we're going to get there." Ruth cited her own relationship with her then advisor as instrumental in helping her apply for and win a Posse scholarship, which "...was an opportunity...and the support that I needed..." Her high school advisor was also a reference for her first job as a math teacher at a charter school in Brooklyn, NY. The school championed academic success for its diverse and disadvantaged students, but Ruth missed the supportive relationships and sense of community that were hallmarks of Opportunity. As she told her former advisor. ..."it's really hard because there is very little trust." She stayed for two years to build her "strengths" and "experience" and to "celebrate" her students. Then she applied at Opportunity and demonstrated a lesson. When her interviewer told her she was "an awesome teacher," Ruth felt like she was "coming home." Now a faculty member, she said she is "lucky" to be part of the school's success in developing "scholar citizens," 93 percent of whom graduated and were accepted to college in 2016. From her new vantage point as teacher, but with the historical perspective of a student, she can see and understand how the school has evolved to "intentionally combine personal and academic values" and to do so consistently. What Ruth wants for herself and her students is to appreciate "just being a community" and to pay it forward. She reflected that at Opportunity, "I know that I can reach out to anybody. I want to be
someone that others can reach out to, too.”

**Participant 3: Meaghan**

Based on information that she provided, Meaghan is probably in her early thirties. Her affiliation with ASC began serendipitously. She and a friend attended a student performance at the school, and she was impressed with the quality of the students' work, their seeming confidence and happiness. She wanted to learn more, and her research revealed a school whose beliefs appeared to parallel her own. Specifically, Meaghan learned that ASC is "a strength-based school and an empowerment-focused school" that believes in using the arts "to validate and educate the whole child." She was interested, but was employed as a community-based social worker who was not assigned to a particular school, and ASC was not looking for a social worker. Several months later they were looking. Meaghan applied and got the job. Since joining the Health and Wellness team, she has experienced the intentional focus and value that ASC places on discipline, responsibility, passion, honesty, relationships, and emotional well-being. She noted "...when students are happier and healthier overall, they're just more successful overall...” She had to make adjustments and take on the role of "teacher" for a reading/writing seminar - even though she felt "unqualified" - because at ASC, everyone is a "generalist.” Although she was more at ease teaching a class of 11th and 12th grade students how to cope with social-emotional issues, Meaghan learned to step out of her comfort zone. She became not only an observer of the arts, but is a participant in arts-based activities. She acknowledged that the arts play an important role in students' personal and academic growth, saying, "I honestly think the arts...really forces our students to learn about themselves, to look at themselves and reflect...The arts demand introspection...that builds motivation...sparks different curiosities... helps them know what they want to get out of this world..."
Participant 4: Margot

In 1998, Margot was a founding faculty member of ASC. During the 19 years since, she had held a variety of artistic positions at the school and currently serves as one of its Deans. In addition to her administrative responsibilities, and like all members of the ASC staff, she still teaches and mentors a group of advisees throughout their high school years. Prior to her career at ASC, Margot worked for a year as the art teacher for a large urban high school outside of Boston, MA. She taught 700 students per week in 45 minute classes. As she noted: "...It was intense...there's only so much you can do in 45 minutes a week." Margot had studied voice and had contemplated a career as an operatic soprano. She also held a degree in visual arts. Her background and training made her a natural for ASC. Margot realized how difficult it would be to break down the defensive walls that ACS's tough, untrusting, underprivileged students had built because they had been taught that "they have to be mean to survive... [but] they can't bring those behaviors into our community." She knew that for students to commit to a passion and to succeed would require discipline, training, support and accountability, and the willingness to be vulnerable: "You can't be a fully-developed human being...and you can't make art...without being vulnerable." She stated that she and her colleagues at ASC are dedicated to making the time, to being there for students, to "their whole selves...until they can sort out the ...issues that can overwhelm and depress them." Margot explained that nurturing students to trust, be vulnerable, and persist is an intentional commitment, a structure that offers stability and safety. Once students know that the support will always be there, they are expected to “step-up” and own their art, their independence, and their capacity for success. Margot, who is watching her daughter go through this process as an ASC student, noted that "really, a lot of teaching is clearing the path...[saying] you got this. Let me just move these branches out of the way...keep walking."
Participant 5: Daniel

Daniel is both the science Department Chair and an AP biology teacher at Opportunity. He has been at the school for four years. He stated, "I wanted to teach...and was lucky enough to get hired." Before becoming an educator, Daniel, who earned his PhD, worked as a scientist for several years, but he was unhappy because, in his words, "there's so much competition and conflict...It was a miserable existence...and it's not true here." He also recognized that at Opportunity, he is "less tense" and "not fighting with everyone." He cited the "real relationship" he has with his evaluator, and welcomes the "opportunities to meet with [her]...and talk through things." Likewise, Daniel discussed his efforts to nurture positive, supportive relationships with his students. He spoke of the benefits of "mentoring," "listening," and "creating a stable environment...a place of safety" for students, many of whose "home lives may be disruptive." When talking about students, Daniel prefers to identify them as "underserved" rather than "disadvantaged," but he did acknowledge how much he had learned at Opportunity about racial issues, the circumstances of poverty, and other personal problems that his students face. He also noted the importance of striking a balance between personal empathy and academic expectations when he said: "Holding students accountable for what they do and how they act is part of what caring is." Yet, he tempers accountability with persistence and humor. Daniel's approach to connect with students who are feeling poorly or behaving badly is a teasing humor coupled with persistence in reaching out even though "persistence is hard." The end result, he reflected, is "they begin to trust" and then "you can have a conversation about their feelings and their grades as well as their shirts."

Participant 6: Robert

On many levels, Robert's story runs parallel to Ruth's. He, too, is in his mid-twenties,
is a graduate of Opportunity, and worked for two years in a Brooklyn, NY, charter school where he liked the students and his colleagues, but "didn't feel super supported...[or] appreciated." He returned to Opportunity two years ago as a member of its humanities faculty. He stated that he now felt "very supported from the top down," to the extent that "even on my sick days, I come here." He was reflective and expressed his keen appreciation for the education and life lessons that helped to shape his character and beliefs. In particular, he cited his relationship with his advisor and the role she played in his life and career. "When I was a student, I did some knuckle-headed things, but my advisor always had my back...She knew...my strengths and weaknesses, wrote my college recommendations, ...took me to [my school of choice] three to four times. She's the reason I went to that school." For Robert, that relationship represents the values that make him successful and that he tries to emulate with his students. Specifically, he cited honesty and care as fundamental to relationships and motivation. He also spoke of expectations and balance and mentioned that teachers are loving and caring and provide supports for each child so that students know "there's not really an excuse for them not to do the work." Finally, Robert spoke of his future plans. He said that he intends to stay at Opportunity and would one day like to be the Dean of Students or the Dean of Academics so that he would have more time to develop relationships with students. He concluded by saying: "I don't think I can leave this place."

**Participant 7: Gabrielle**

Before becoming an educator, Gabrielle worked in corporate America for a number of years. She admitted that joining the team at Pioneer High School required some adjustments in her approach to problem-solving. She told her new colleagues, "This is how we do this," and they replied, "No. Relax, lady." So, she learned to be more patient, more flexible, and "I learned how to...give up control." Adapting, she believed, helped her to succeed in her first job at
Pioneer as an internship coordinator, responsible for building relationships with local businesses and community leaders that could become part of the network of internship opportunities for students. It is, she noted, "critically important" work because the real-world experience of internships are a key learning component at Pioneer. A few years later, Gabrielle became an advisor at one of the six schools on the Pioneer campus. She explained that advisors do not call themselves teachers. Rather, they are mentors, facilitators, guides, working as adult collaborators with their students. She emphasized that "everything starts with relationships" because they allow the advisor to push, to motivate. She talked about showing her students how to prioritize and to accept that not everything gets finished. The hard part, she said, is to "step-back” and give her students "the responsibility to fail, not fail, succeed.” As she looked back at her 14 years at Pioneer, Gabrielle reflected:

There are those times when the work is hard. The work is challenging. I'm not going to say that it's not. But I think for me over the time that I've been here, it's through the connection with the students, and being involved, doing something that you're really truly passionate about you can see is working, that's what kind of keeps you going.

Participant 8: Faith

In her fifties, Faith is the oldest participant in the study. She grew up in a minority community on the outskirts of Boston, MA, many of whose residents lived in poverty and on welfare. Her family enjoyed better financial circumstances, and as a young adult, Faith attended a local university, well-known for its communications studies, including the performing arts. After college, she married, had a daughter, divorced, and then hit hard times. She lost her job, and then a fire destroyed their belongings. She and her teenage daughter found themselves on welfare, living in Section 8 housing. She had to start over. Faith went to graduate school to
study education and then, found a job at a middle school in a wealthy suburb west of Boston. She thought she was hired as a substitute teacher, but they needed a theater teacher, and she fit the job description. She was 38 years old. After one year, she wanted to leave. She disliked the lack of support for teachers and for students. She also knew that her passion is to bring the arts to inner city students who cannot otherwise afford the training. She found ASC and 17 years later, Faith is a department chair, teacher, and advisor. Because she experienced first-hand what many of her students live every day, Faith uses both her personal experiences and cultural pride in her Haitian-Bajan heritage to establish "common ground" with her students. She relates; she gives support; and she demands accountability. "If they don't respect you, they won't trust you. And you need the trust in order to grow the relationship and help them grow." For Faith, relationships start when people are "authentic," "honest," and "real." She tells students stories about their "Haitian mama," and talks about the hardships of racial and economic injustices, but there is no self pity, no excuses. "I say to kids that I'm hard on them because I know how society views you. I tell them they have a choice: to live up to societal stereotypes or...[to] decide...to prove who you are."

Participant 9: Michael

Now in his forties, Michael was an upper middle class child from California who "always wanted to work with youth in a social justice setting." In pursuit of his goal, he obtained a teaching degree and went to work as a social studies teacher in a lower socio-economic school district in northern California. He was disturbed by a structure that allowed no time for collaboration with colleagues and students, no room for creativity, and no flexibility or relevance in the scripted curriculum. After three years he left and thought he would never teach again. He still wanted to work with underprivileged and disadvantaged youth. So, he ran a community
center, took students on field trips, ran a homework club, and wrote grants. When, for personal reasons, he and his family moved to eastern Rhode Island, he ran non-violence programs for a non-profit company. Later, he became a supervisor for an organization with a grant to help local schools prepare their students for college. One of those schools was Pioneer. "It was a completely different type of education. I was comfortable there right away." When the grant was up, he applied for a job at Pioneer. That was 14 years ago. For Michael, the combination of personal relationships, community service, real world experience for students, and "constant collaboration" continue to resonate even as the school evolves and changes. The learning focus is still very much on student voice and student interests, but the clarified message, "build your own path," emphasizes student responsibility and activism. Michael expressed pride that community service is a big part of that statement and is fundamental to Pioneer's culture, giving purpose to its students, the majority of whom are poor and troubled because "even if...you have no money or a difficult home life, you can still contribute." He stated that the school provides every support the students need so "there's really no reason for these kids to fail." His goal is that his students become confident, productive, and happy, good people. "I tell my kids I love them, and I also tell them that love is not the same thing as approval," and that if they want something, it is up to them to "step it up." Michael reflected that he and his colleagues "are very happy at the job, but we're never satisfied with the work..."what is cool about it is we're never finished...that's a metaphor for life, too."

Participant 10: Jennifer

A 10 year veteran at Pioneer High School, Jennifer joined the faculty directly after she graduated from college. Now in her early thirties, Jennifer grew and evolved with the school. She reflected that she had always wanted a career which would allow her to help people,
especially teenagers. While she had other career options, education is the career path she prefers because of the opportunity "to cultivate meaningful relationships with the students and the families." From the start, she believed in the core principles of Pioneer High School, especially the commitment to personalized, student-centered learning to help students grow as individuals, through community service projects and internships in local businesses and institutions. Jennifer explained that student projects and real-world experiences are often the source for academic assignments. For example, she shared that in helping her 16 advisee students to research and develop their own interests, she becomes "a learner as well as a teacher." She noted that her one-to-one experiences with students makes her a more effective mentor for each of them, adding that students need to know that "you have their best interests at heart," and that you "genuinely care" and want to know them. She declared that "trust is the most important thing that you have." Working with her advisees throughout their four years in high school, she enjoys the many facets of her role, describing herself (and other advisors) as academic coach, psychologist, social worker, priest. When she reflected on where she might be in another 10 years, Jennifer admitted, "I don't know what I see for myself...[but] I would love to still be connected, still be in a classroom."

**Data Analysis Overview**

A brief recap of the analysis process is provided here prior to a review and discussion of the themes that were found. Using the constant comparison method, each of the 10 interviews were coded immediately after their transcription. During this systematic process, this researcher became intimately familiar with the words and units of information in each transcript. Data bits were compared, assembled, and then reassembled into groups, based on their patterns and similarities, and then named as a category.
The researcher repeated this process with each transcript, and then cross-compared bits of information, including quotes, as well as patterns and codes from one interview to the next. As part of the constant comparison process, some codes were regrouped and overarching categories were established that captured the critical elements across all interviews. Nine themes developed inductively as the "outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection" (Saldana, 2009, p. 139). A more detailed description of the methodology used in this data analysis is found in Chapter Three. A discussion of the nine emergent themes and their core elements are discussed in the section that follows.

Key Themes

The nine themes that emerged from the participants' narratives provided the perspectives for this analysis. Although there is overlap and interaction between them, the themes are grouped based on the research questions that prompted their emergence and are summarized in Table 6 (See p. 141). They and key sub-themes evolved organically from participants' experiences, stories, and perspectives about the cultural components and best practices of their respective schools.

Based on the analysis of the data, the first three themes were perceived through teachers' views of the culture of learning at their particular alternative high school. These themes are: Relationships Are Foundations of Student Learning, Community Provides Holistic Support, and The Purposeful Use of Time. The influence of teacher/student relationships on social and academic development among disadvantaged students resulted in three more themes: Trust Leads to What Is Possible, The Positivity of High Expectations, and The Power of Student Voice. The last three themes emerged from the educators' experiences and reflections on what they believe to be the best practices responsible for academic success among disadvantaged students.
They are: Team Collaboration Includes Students, Relevance Sparks Student Engagement, and Learning through Real World Experience. The nine themes, and their sub-themes, are outlined in Table 6 below and are described in the section that follows:

Table 6: Summary of Findings

1. Participants' views of the culture of learning at their schools:

   **Relationships Are Foundations of Student Learning**
   - establishing teacher/student relationships
   - relationships among colleagues
   - finding common ground

   **Community Provides Holistic Support**
   - family and friends
   - activism

   **The Purposeful Use of Time**
   - making time
   - prioritizing time

2. The influence of teacher/student relationships on social and academic development among disadvantaged students:

   **Trust Leads to What Is Possible**
   - authenticity
   - the structure of advisory

   **The Positivity of High Expectations**
   - personal growth
   - academic growth

   **The Power of Student Voice**

3. Student-centered best practices that resulted in academic success for disadvantaged students:

   **Team Collaboration Includes Students**
   **Relevance Sparks Student Engagement**
   **Learning through Real World Experience**
   - assessments and growth
   - personal interests

When asked to describe the culture of learning at their respective schools, educators cited the significance of relationships - with their colleagues, as well as with their students - as
paramount. They described relationships as "family." ASC's Faith spoke for all, stating with conviction that "you can't do anything effective without relationships." Relationships also manifest in groups, in this case, in a community of educators who collaborate together for the health and well-being of the whole child. These concepts must be nurtured and allowed to develop in the fullness of time, and all three are fundamental to a culture of learning. The first theme is *Relationships Are Foundations of Student Learning*, discussed next.

**Relationships Are Foundations of Student Learning**

*Relationships Are Foundations of Student Learning* is the first theme that educators identified as characteristic of a culture of learning. Educators stated that establishing individual relationships with their students is both an intentional and a fundamental trait of their schools' cultures and is also the central core value without which, as Pioneer's Gabrielle said, "nothing else would be possible." Through their stories, three sub-themes of relationships emerged that teachers identified as integral to the culture of learning at their schools: 1) establishing teacher/student relationships, 2) relationships among colleagues, and 3) finding common ground.

**Establishing Teacher/Student Relationships**

From their inception, at Pioneer and ASC, relationship-building was paramount to the respective school cultures. At Opportunity, this core value evolved later. Ruth explained that educators at Opportunity Middle and High School were committed to developing "scholars, not students," which is part of its mission statement, prominently on display in the school's reception area. In the early years of the school, teachers believed that something integral to that mission was absent in their culture. The founder and first head of school - who had extensive experience as a former principal of a large urban school - identified the missing link as a lack of purposeful and intentional personal relationships, which, she thought, could be the catalyst for engaging and
motivating students. Ruth reflected,

_The original headmaster did a really good job pin-pointing that this was our issue...and how we were going to get there. I...remember teachers re-evaluating and thinking whether this was the school for them...My first year...a teacher was asked to leave because the expectation was set, but...wasn’t reached._

Since then, Ruth reported "we intentionally build relationships with our students and with each other." Along with their first headmaster, Opportunity's educators believe that individual relationships between teachers and students are fundamental for creating an environment in which scholarship and scholars can flourish and grow. Relationships also set the tone and foster social awareness. According to Ruth, "Relationships here start with a purpose... [Students need] to learn the behavior system, the consequences for different actions, and what is appropriate behavior," and she told the story of the girl who cried.

The girl was new to Opportunity and did not understand the way the school ran, or the consequences that were levied for inappropriate behavior. "I specifically remember," Ruth said, "her struggling with getting feedback." During one class, students were invited to participate in a chalk board activity and write what they were thinking on the board. "We were sharing our answers," Ruth recalled, and instead of following the rule and raising her hand "the girl got so excited she started calling out, 'Oh, I want to go now!’ repeatedly." Ruth reminded her, "No more calling out...just raise a silent hand.” Because the girl persisted, Ruth changed strategies, and drew students' names out of a hat. "When her name didn't get called," Ruth reported, "the girl became frustrated and muttered something inappropriate under her breath...I gave her a demerit,” which was a warning without penalty. After class, Ruth reviewed the class rule about waiting her turn, and the girl responded by "rolling her eyes,...and then had to stay after school...
and write a reflection about what she thought happened in class and if her behavior was acceptable or unacceptable.” The girl "was really disappointed and began to cry.." Ruth remembered that her first instinct was to console the girl, but she did not want to give her a mixed message.

A few weeks later, the girl was able to speak to Ruth about the event and her confusion. Ruth told her, "I really care about you being a stronger woman...You're going to be awesome...a better person...having a better character." Ruth saw the situation as an opportunity for the girl to grow as a person. Since then, Ruth reported, the girl finds her, and they "hang out.” For Ruth, relationships had many facets and multiple dividends, one of which was to help her students to embrace the motto of the school "Success is a choice," as proudly stated on the school's website. While this was not the maxim at ASC, Faith and her colleagues shared the belief that good habits and respect for appropriate behavior were integral to strong relationships that led to positive student outcomes. Like Opportunity’s Ruth, Faith believed that before relationships could be developed, class norms had to be established so students would respond and focus. "The first two weeks in any class are instrumental," she stated, and she tells her students, "I don't always want to be yelling at you guys...It ruins my day and it ruins your day.” Instead Faith created an impersonal, non-confrontational mnemonic called T1. "Whenever I want to get your attention," she says, "I'm going to say T1; you're going to say T unit, ...and then, totally silent." She commented that sometimes they giggle, but they know what is expected. In Faith's opinion, respect for class norms leads to respect for each other and for the relationships that were beginning to form, both of which are pre-requisites for learning. She noted:

The subject matter is important, but what we're really teaching ...are the skill sets that one needs...to become effective men and women...In order to really teach those things, to
make them effective, you have to have a relationship...It's about retraining.

Faith's colleague, Margot, underscored the conviction of all the teachers that strong relationships start with good and positive behavior. She noted, "They come, some of them, from really tough middle school cultures... [where] they are required to be mean in order to survive. They brought those behaviors...into our community...and we say, 'No,' we don't do that here."

Jennifer and her colleagues at Pioneer taught their students to act respectfully and professionally at all times because, starting in freshman year, students are developing and managing community projects under the tutelage of a community partner, as well as their school advisor. From these experiences, students learn first-hand the personal benefits and professional satisfaction that derive from protecting their relationships inside and outside of the school. "You help the student learn how to be professional," Jennifer mused, "...and ask the right questions to really get to the depth of learning, and you help them [honor] the relationship." For example, one of her students wanted to find an internship working in a hospital, helping patients, but she was too young to qualify. So she prompted her to ask questions, such as "Is medicine the only way that I can help people?" and "Who else might need help beside people in a hospital?" Through inquiry and conversation, Jennifer and her student figured out that working with children was appealing and that an internship in a daycare was a good opportunity to provide care. Jennifer reflected, "You help them figure out what is at the root of [their interest] and how...to get as close as possible to it...taking a different track."

She concluded "...connecting with [students] on a person-to-person level...I definitely think that impacts their work in a positive way," whether the work is academic or professional.

Among these educators, there was a ubiquitous belief that, with time and care, trust - leading to personal and academic growth - would naturally emerge from strong, supportive
relationships. To these teachers, good behavior establishes the values, boundaries, security, and tone of a caring relationship. Teacher availability and awareness help effective relationships to blossom.

What follows next is a discussion of those times when teachers realized that a little understanding and flexibility had value in supporting and deepening teacher/student relationships. As Alexis from ASC stated: "The student/teacher relationship is key to learning," [because] "when you have personal relationships with students,...you can still have a conversation" even if they are having a bad day. She noted the value of seeing things from the student's perspective. For example, Alexis commented that if a student has a "snippy attitude," she might say, "I noticed that you seem a little frustrated today...do you need a few minutes to go take a walk?" She reported that the students usually came back feeling better. She concluded, "instead of taking personal offense, I dig a little deeper." Giving students the respect, time, and space to work through a problem was a strategy that all of the teachers used if they believed it would benefit the student. Such understanding also enhanced the relationship between teacher and student. Pioneer's Gabrielle said, "I can tell the difference when they walk in. If they're not as bubbly as they usually are, I'll tell them to take a walk, take a friend...I give them that space and that time."

Regarding learning, Alexis from ASC said that she makes it her business to know what "their life is like outside of school, what they're passionate about..." Then she can incorporate concepts relevant to her students into the curriculum. Alexis' personal concern for her students as people and her decision to incorporate relevance into her classroom marked the holistic approaches that all other teachers in this study used as well.

Educators voiced that it was also personally gratifying and professionally rewarding to
have caring relationships with peers and administrators. They suggested that productive relationships among colleagues contributed to student success. Their perspectives and experiences are described in the next section.

**Relationships among Colleagues**

Educators emphasized repeatedly that having supportive relationships with their peers and also with their administrators and evaluators were vital and intrinsic to their respective cultures of learning and to their own well-being. Several spoke of their appreciation for the autonomy and validation they received and how that respect had a positive impact on their work. For example, Alexis said, "I love the freedom...I really love being valued, having my professional opinions valued." An example of that freedom is the autonomy that Alexis and the STEAM team had to "reinvent norms." She stated that she and other STEAM teachers "...started really thinking about the commonalities between art and science and math and technology and engineering and how we can really bring [in] our students' passion...to make it engaging...” To address this goal, the team developed five skills for STEAM learning: exploring, creating, analyzing, critiquing information, and communicating, which they believed were more salient and specific for STEAM learning than the school's original RICO norms (Refine, Invent, Create, and Own). "We're in the process right now of developing...what it looks like to be excellent at communicating, analyzing, and critiquing information..." so students can develop "strong 21st century STEAM skills” using both creativity and art "to solve a problem or to communicate a message.” Alexis and the STEAM team plan to present their ideas to administration and hope to win their approval to move forward.

In addition to having academic autonomy, educators affirmed that being valued for their contributions played a strong part in their own well-being and their ability to persist even
through tough times. In speaking of the demands of their commitment to their students, Michael remarked: "We really appreciate that we are seen as people, too." His sentiment reflected the collaborative relationships teachers and their administrators shared. For example, Michael spoke of the easy relationship he enjoyed with the social worker, special education teacher, and his school principal at Pioneer who dropped by every day to chat and offer help. About the principal, he remarked, "Sometimes she's observing me to give me feedback. Sometimes she's just coming in to say 'hi' or tell me a silly story...or to come help the kids and see what they're doing..." About the principal and his peers, he said, "It's great to have other adults in the room both to support me and just [to share] a laugh." Teachers transmitted to their students the strong, caring relationships they enjoyed with their evaluators and administrators and with each other.

Teachers' strong relationships with their evaluators and administrators became living role models for the relationships they nurtured with their students. The three educators at Opportunity spoke glowingly of their evaluator/mentors. Daniel from Opportunity shared that he had "a real relationship with my evaluator." He continued, "I think that when you meet with them so often...I see her every week...that's where the relationship comes from...it's comfortable for me just to talk to her." Equally important to Daniel was his chance to develop a similarly supportive, collegial, and non-threatening experience with the science teachers who reported to him. As science chair, he tells his teachers, "Evaluation can be intimidating, and I get that, but I think you should look at it as an opportunity to grow as a teacher." In his own role as mentor, Daniel concluded, "I think that people embrace that."

The two youngest participants, who had been students at Opportunity before becoming teachers there, fondly recalled relationships with a former advisor. For example, Ruth noted that
the head of her school had been her mentor when she was a student and that she knew that she could seek his counsel whenever she needed it. "even if it's not work-related, if it's personal, I can chat with him...It's important to have that connectedness." Robert, too, had fond memories of his advisor. "My advisor wrote my college recommendations, ” he mused, "...took me to Boston College...She's the reason that I went to that school.” He spoke of the many meetings they had before and after school to discuss his goals and how to reach them. Robert concluded by noting that his advisor knew his strengths and weaknesses and always "...had my back regardless of [the] not so great decisions I made.” With his unique perspective and experience as a former student and now as a teacher, Robert clearly knew "...how important it is to build a really good relationship with your advisor.” He also understood that his responsibility as an advisor is "to be the person that advocates for...advisees."

Her voice filled with emotion, Faith spoke what others had expressed:

*I work with a group of teachers who care...who bring their professionalism to the children...[and] colleagues. We're really like a family...They have a commitment to teaching in an urban setting as difficult...and as heart-wrenching as it can be sometimes. But, also, I think that the main reason they stay is because of the relationships that we have with each other.

With clarity and specificity, teachers acknowledged that relationships (with and among all stakeholders) were an intentional focus of the culture of learning at their schools. In particular, they held the unanimous belief that relationships were foundational for future student success - both social and academic. In addition, Daniel, Michael, Margot (from Opportunity, Pioneer, and ASC, respectively) reported that “having a conversation” - when people spoke openly, honestly, and listened respectfully - was essential for forming a strong bond with
students. Margot put it simply: "I think it's just more satisfying as a teacher to have relationships with your kids. You're going to get more learning." Teachers also credited their relationships with each other as powerful role models which they could emulate with their students. They also stated that to be effective and long-lasting, nurturing and supportive relationships with their students had to be rooted in authenticity and common interests.

They also affirmed that sharing common interests made conversations easier and more natural. "When you start there," Pioneer's Jennifer remarked, "and you're willing to be a little transparent yourself, that opens the door for communication." How finding common ground and sharing common interests influence teacher/student relationships are described next.

**Finding Common Ground**

According to the teachers, relationships started with conversations, and honesty was a key attribute of a good and productive conversation. Having a mutual interest was another. Participants in this study described a variety of experiences in which they and their students found common ground through shared interests that developed through honest communication in the safety of caring and stable environments.

"You try to find those common denominators," Pioneer's Jennifer offered. For example, "If you talk to 100 people about their relationships with their parents, everyone will have something to share." Personal bits of information were also effective in class to bring relevance to a topic or a discussion. "I think you have to be willing to share something about your life, a personal experience," Jennifer reflected, "if you want to ask kids about their personal lives." She went on,

*I'm comfortable sharing...some stories about my brother, who is a freshman in college,... where they get to know that I'm a real person, and I have a life...That makes them
connect with me and tell me that they're a real person, and they have a life, and not just what's happening in school.

Sometimes a connection was made through cultural identity. For ASC's Faith and her students, their mutual passion for the arts was a powerful connection. She reflected that when her students were unhappy or discouraged, she could speak with authenticity and authority about their common upbringing. She reminded them that,

*I was inner city, a poor kid with an alcoholic father. Life ___ sometimes. The thing about it is...when I was going through what I was going through...my art, theater... was where I could run to...where for that moment in time, all that crap I was going through didn't matter. It disappeared.*

As a girl, Faith had run to the theater for emotional healing. She urged her students to let their own art, "...a gift that not everybody has..." be a healing source as well. This was a conversation they could return to and explore together.

Then, there was out-of-class time. Gabrielle from Pioneer spoke of taking students to lunch for one-on-one time so that they could discover common interests and develop a personal bond. "*I do that a lot with my students, she said, [because] sometimes a kid really needs your full attention.*" She and others believed that time spent with students outside the classroom was valuable in adding a different perspective to a growing relationship. At Opportunity, Ruth noted that coaching a sport or mentoring an after-school club, such as cooking or photography, were good opportunities to know students outside of the classroom and to build common ground together. In addition, she and her colleagues, Robert and Daniel both facilitated mentoring clubs where students chose discussion topics that were relevant to them and to their community, including race and immigration. These experiences and their contribution to relationship-
building will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Human imperfection was also an area for common ground. For example, Robert prided himself on being "transparent." He explained, "...sometimes I'll give instructions and kids give me that confused look." When that happens, he said, "I'll pause and ask, 'What could I have done better?'" Robert then asks the students to "give a better explanation of what I said," and then he praises their response: "Okay, cool...you should come and teach this class for me." In the end, he acknowledged his mistake by saying, "You know what? That was my fault. I wasn't clear with instructions." Robert's honesty shows his students that mistakes are how we learn, that asking for help is a good thing, that he respects their voices and abilities, and that being authentic makes their relationship stronger. As his colleague Daniel noted, "They know if you're fake." The elements of honesty and transparency were cited by several of the teachers as crucial underpinnings of their relationships with students.

Experiencing common interests together helped to build and strengthen the developing relationships between students and teachers. For these participants, finding common ground meant being authentic, sensitive to students' feelings, and sincerely interested in knowing more about them and their interests in order to help them develop their passions. ASC's Alexis stated that "nurturing their passions" was of primary importance, and continued, "...student voice and choice really comes in..." As an example, she noted that several students had asked ASC to consider adding a fashion career path. "Based on multiple requests," she reported, "we have a new fashion major that we're starting next year that comes from student interest in fashion."

Honoring student passions was the common interest and bond between student and teacher. Sharing interests, in general, allowed students and teachers to see each other on a more personal level and to appreciate each other as individuals. Finding common ground added
dimension, perspective, memories, and a sense of humanity that made individual relationships what Pioneer's Michael called "well-rounded, enduring, and rewarding" over time. The importance of managing time to support students is addressed later in this chapter in the theme *The Purposeful Use of Time*. Sometimes educator stories about finding common ground to support students went beyond the teacher/student relationship either inside or outside of the classroom. At those times, when common ground occurred within a group, the theme *Community Provides Holistic Support* emerged and is discussed next.

**Community Provides Holistic Support**

*Community Provides Holistic Support* is the second theme educators identified as a core characteristic of a culture of learning. For these teachers, community is about acceptance, belonging and the sense of security and well-being that ensue. It is intentionally nurtured in the classroom, throughout the school, and extended to the greater community. Adding to the foundational support established previously in *Relationships are Foundations of Student Learning*, this second theme was described from two perspectives. First is the community within the school setting, which includes faculty, staff, students, and sometimes family members. Second is the greater community outside the school premises, such as community leaders, institutional partnerships, and organizations that support and befriend a school and its students. Teachers believe that guiding youth to appreciate their place within the community is vital to their growth as students and as citizens. They posit that the safety of and responsibility to community will help prepare students to take their place in the real world. Giving to and taking from the community provide additional opportunities for students to cultivate and establish enduring relationships, which are discussed in the two sub-themes of: 1) family and 2) activism that follow.
Family

Teachers all expressed their belief that the community ethos in their schools could best be described as “family.” More specifically, within every school building, the sense of community provides what Margot of ASC called "a safe love nest" in which students are nurtured and grow until they are ready to fly. She explained that at her school the academic faculty and the arts faculty - both with many veteran teachers - "have this knowledge of what it is to be an artist, what it is to be a scholar, what it is to be a human being...” and together weave their combined wisdom and knowledge into a nest that envelopes and protects the students.

This philosophy, which Margot called "an implicit understanding” is deeply rooted in ASC's culture of learning, protecting students as they try to find themselves. For example, Margot mentioned a girl who had a tough background and is "trying out something new, trying to be a scholar, trying to think of herself as...really strong that way, and gaining those [academic]skills." Margot explained that the girl was "anxious to be regarded as a serious student," which for her at that time meant concentrating on her studies and "...saying 'no' to some social stuff.” So for this student, teachers filled the "safe love nest" with academic skills and, for the moment, helped her "to resist the temptation to jump into juicy gossip” By honoring this girl's desire to "find a new path" for herself, Margot and her colleagues are supporting this student in her effort "to cope [and succeed] at a more mature level." Margot concluded by saying, "She got an 'A' in math. She hasn't gotten an 'A' in math all year long. She doesn't want to let go of that."

Daniel from Opportunity expressed a similar sentiment when he spoke of giving students "a place of safety where they know they are going to be protected.” He reflected that there were many ways to create a sense of community safety and stability. One is teacher continuity.
Daniel stated that because the students at Opportunity are poor, "sometimes homeless," or leading "disruptive lives," they "can be affected by good teachers leaving." He suggested that his five year tenure made him a "known quantity" to students, a "reassuring presence" whose teasing manner was known to be an expression of care. As Daniel acknowledged, "I care about my students."

Shared humor also establishes a sense of belonging and community. Daniel revealed that he often teases his students in a good-natured way. For example, he recalled stopping a boy and saying, "Why is your shirt untucked for like the tenth time today? Like what is going on? You need to staple that shirt to your body." Daniel added two points about that little anecdote: 1) the student and he knew each other and 2) his light-hearted teasing made his comment non-confrontational and something a family member might say. That is why, Daniel reported, the boy grinned while he tucked in his shirt, and then gave Daniel a 'thumbs-up' sign. The exchange they shared made the boy feel that he belonged, and that he and Daniel are members of the same community.

At both ASC and Pioneer, maintaining continuity was not an issue. The longevity of teachers in both schools provided a strong and reliable presence for students. Daniel's strategy of humor was one that many of them used as well. For example, Faith of ASC often relied on cultural humor to draw students into her "family." Regarding the teachers at her school, she reflected that "...a lot of us are people of color, and a lot of us who aren't...are aware." But she noted that as a black woman, the students see "someone who looks like them." So, "What I can say to students, they get it because I can say it from a cultural place." She offered two examples. "If a student is acting up," she said,...I can say, 'Oh, my God, why are you acting as if you just lost your mind right now?''' This causes them both to laugh. Or, if they were not paying
attention, she might say, "You guys are going to cause the black Haitian version of mama to come out...You know what I mean?" And she reported, "they laugh because they know what that means." For both Daniel (Opportunity), Faith (ASC), and their students, laughter deepens the ties of community and their personal relationships as well.

In addition to what community means to participants, a picture of how community develops also emerged. For example, every participant mentioned three supportive and strategic structures that reinforce the feeling of community, safety, and stability among students. One is circle practice, which is a structured forum students used to address issues, air differences, or simply give their voice to different points of view. Students sit in a circle to share thoughts, ideas, and opinions, and to listen to each other respectfully. Meaghan of ASC explained that "the democracy of circle practice" is an opportunity for "students to have more voice" within the safety of the group.

Teachers reported that because circle practice is a non-threatening, communal activity, it often empowers students to speak out. For example, Opportunity's Ruth recalled one student who found the courage to question Opportunity's "no-hat" policy because "wearing a head scarf was part of her culture." Subsequently, the student was allowed to wear the scarf and "respect her culture." Margot and Faith both mentioned that when students at ASC found that being an artist was "too hard," and not what they expected, they often discussed their feelings and looked for advice at circle practice before seeking the counsel of teachers and advisors. The formal venue of circle practice was not intended to solve problems, but it was a reminder, said ASC's Alexis, that "students' voices will be heard and respected."

The second structure, called advisory, is implemented differently in the teachers' respective schools and will be described in detail in a later section of this chapter. However, the
purpose of advisory is the same for all the educators and their schools. It is a time and a place for a group of students and one advisor to bond and form relationships that evolve during the four years of high school, or, in the case of Opportunity, throughout the combined six years of middle school and high school. The mutual care that is nurtured in such long-term relationships evokes familial pride. Pioneer's Gabrielle spoke for all the teachers when she remarked, "We're together for four years...and [then]I graduate them and walk them across the stage."

The third structure is the team of school-based health and wellness professionals who are a support system for students in each of the three learning communities in which the teachers work. All educators agreed that it is preferable for frustrated or anxious students to work through their emotional issues and remain in the classroom, learning. For example, Ruth at Opportunity, has a "restart table" where students can quietly reflect and regroup. Her colleague, Robert, and Alexis from ASC, favor talking one-on-one with students to help resolve issues and to get students "back to learning." Pioneer's Gabrielle encourages her students to "take a walk with a friend," to talk and then return to class. However, teachers also agreed that if students' problems persist, their respective health professionals should be contacted immediately. For example, Robert from Opportunity described a student who was "having a bad day, and asked to see a social worker." Robert remembered asking the boy "to try and finish your work...then if you still need to see the social worker, I'll make the call." For Robert, the optimum was "to keep the student in class and learning." His experience was that sometimes students can "work through their problems." In this instance, when the boy's agitation persisted, Robert immediately called the social worker to help his student.

ASC's Meaghan shared one story that illustrates the level of commitment and care that these community members provide to their students. She noted that one of her students who
suffers from "extreme anxiety" received a related diagnosis of an eating disorder. She reflected,

...he's missed a number of classes recently because of the...varying symptoms that he's experiencing...So, I'm working with the teachers...and the student's family...[about] how we can work together to make sure that [the boy] catches up on learning in his classes...

He has to take care of himself in ways that he can learn.

Meaghan continued her story by explaining that if the student needs a gradual re-entry into classes, he will work in "the Bridge Program...a space in our [Health and Wellness] office...staffed by a clinical social worker...[with] tutoring available." The community will support whatever effort is necessary, she affirmed because "if we're unhealthy, we can't work. If we're unhealthy, we can't learn." Likewise, Ruth at Opportunity and Gabrielle at Pioneer corroborated that their schools also have wellness programs so that students with social-emotional and health issues can be "eased back" into the school community until they are ready to return to their classes full time.

For these educators, acceptance and belonging, comfort and support are inherent in community, and, as ASC's Meaghan noted, students with difficult lives "might not have had this sense of community before." So, teachers universally agreed that social-emotional health and wellness are paramount personally and academically because they believe that a child who is well child is a child who can learn. Educators also acknowledged the singular importance and effectiveness of the greater community outside of the school whose members also offer students mutually caring, supportive relationships. The following story illustrates the power and goodness of community as family.

The full meaning of community, recounted by Margot, is the story of a teenage girl, an American citizen whose parents were illegal immigrants from Central America. They had been
living and working in the United States for 15 years. Margot recalled, "She came home from school one day, and they were gone." She learned that "they were deported back to Colombia," but she did not know how to reach her parents, when she would see them again, or where she would live. "It's a tear-jerker," commented Margot. "It's a hard story." She went on to say that the girl was "scared" and asked the head of her school: "Can I stay?" The answer was, "Of course. We'll figure it out together." And they did. Margot continued, "She went to live with her best friend's family...she made it work, but can you imagine? She was only 14. She was young. Yeah, it was rough." Eventually, the girl located her parents, and today she enjoys a successful career and a happy life in New York. With pride, Margot reported that, "Now she's received some acclaim. She's a two-time SAG (Screen Actors Guild) award winner. She's still very young, but she is now paying it forward...She's an advocate for illegal immigrants, and...we really need that right now."

Many teachers gratefully acknowledged the benefits that community partnerships provide to their students. For example, because Opportunity has no gym, neighboring universities and private institutions offered the use of their facilities for sports and other school activities. According to Ruth, students enjoy "power walking" to and from their workouts or cheering for their basketball team at a famous nearby university.

The underlying strength of external community partnerships is that they are intentionally cultivated relationships, coordinated and managed by a school contact person and by teachers as well who serve as role models for students. When students witness first-hand what it means to be a responsible community member, they are also learning what it means to be a responsible and pro-active citizen. As Pioneer's Michael and Opportunity's Ruth both stated, "We are building citizens..." Thus, community activism as a life-long goal is a practice that all these
educators encouraged their students to pursue. Activism, discussed next, provides an opportunity for students to contribute to and pay back the community.

**Activism**

As noted above, for these educators, activism is a tenet of citizenship. According to the teachers in this study, getting involved and being proactive in service of the community were elemental to the culture of learning in each of their three schools. Activism, therefore, remains a point of pride. So, in addition to receiving from the community, teachers from all three schools noted that part of their school's culture is to give back. By so doing, students have the opportunity to pursue their interests through community service projects. For example, one of Michael's students at Pioneer, who wanted to become a veterinarian, developed a project designed to keep a local dog park clean and beautiful. Michael remembered fondly that his student "wanted local citizens to share his love of animals...and knew that neighbors near the park were angry because dog owners were not cleaning up after their pets...They wanted them banned." So, the student created "colorful and eye-catching signs, citing the park rules" for dog owners and their pets. He also enlisted the help of a Pioneer community partner "who generously paid for boldly decorated animal waste containers." This student is "so committed to his project," Michael reported, "that he already has a plan to create a park beautification contest" for the local community. Details, prizes, and sponsorships have yet to be determined. But, smiled Michael, "with his flair for marketing, and his passion for dogs, I have no doubt that he'll get it done."

As Opportunity's Robert pointed out, the unique relationship of outside partnerships showed students "what it means to be a good member of the community." Individuals, as well as organizations, from the community can develop partnerships with students. This lesson is
reinforced when graduates return to mentor students, and all the educators reported this occurrence. "They always come back," noted Jennifer from Pioneer. "A lot of times...they come back and they show the students..., 'Hey, this is what an exhibition should look like.'" She continued,

Right now, I have a kid who graduated three years ago. She's here for her college work study...[helping my students with community projects]...Now she has this relationship with my current students...and it's funny because sometimes I'll talk to a kid...and she’ll say, 'This is the same thing she told me'...They build the culture.

In this way, graduates are regular and relevant mentors from the extended community. They work with students on their projects, support them during the senior internships, and become role-models and new connections to the adult world.

According to the teachers, the concept of community has many manifestations. Within the school, it provides opportunities for students to build relationships with each other by working on projects together, listening to each other, voicing their own feelings and beliefs, participating in groups based on personal interests, and by respecting each other. This was a crucial concept among all educators.

Michael noted that at Pioneer teachers sometimes facilitate cooperative activities between students who might not know each other, but have common interests and projects they can pursue together to serve the community. For example, he and a colleague introduced two students who were interested in park preservation. One was "an intern at an engineering firm... Another kid was interested in architecture..." Together they tackled the problem of building a toilet and storage facility on one of the park's islands so that researchers could house their "equipment and do water testing and experiments" there over time.
"We do a lot of team-building here," concluded Michael's colleague, Jennifer, "We build that kind of culture," which helps students make new friends as they contribute together to the community. In other words, whether the collaboration is teacher-prompted or student-initiated, activism is developed both through student collaboration with outside partners and with each other. Both are daily community experiences, which represents the culture and values of the educators' individual learning environments.

Outside of the school, community support adds opportunities where students take on more independent and active roles of leadership and ownership, adding a critical component that informs the second theme, Community Provides Holistic Support, and creates a more holistic perspective on how study participants described a culture of learning. Teachers expressed that the lessons and habits formed within the community do more than provide touchstones for students. These intentional opportunities help students to become more confident and sensitive to others. "The kids know that what they're doing is valuable," said Pioneer's Michael, "To have pride in your work and investment in your work is huge..."

Specific examples of activism and community membership are further explored and discussed later in this chapter as part of the theme Learning through Real World Experience. Next, the construct of time is discussed because it creates the space in which relationships and community support can flourish. The Purposeful Use of Time is the third theme that defines a culture of learning for these educators.

The Purposeful Use of Time

The teachers in this study voiced unanimous endorsement that time be used for more than structured academic learning. They believed that time should also be intentionally allocated for unstructured conversations that allow students to discuss issues of individual importance -
whether those interests are personal, emotional, or academic, serious or casual. In other words, time is a meaningful and purposeful commodity whether it is used for building relationships, nurturing student confidence, helping with homework, or simply providing the space and security in which students and their ideas can evolve and grow.

ASC's Meaghan, Pioneer's Jennifer, and Opportunity's Daniel spoke with one voice for all the teachers when they stated, "We make the time." These educators deliberately arrange or adapt time to meet their students' individual needs. When necessary, using time for relationship-building and personal growth takes precedence over time spent in academic development. The sub-themes of 1) making time and 2) prioritizing time are discussed in the following sections.

**Making Time**

In this study, time was found to be a real and significant factor in nurturing strong relationships and in the personal and academic growth of students. Verbalizing what every other educator also noted, ASC's Jennifer commented, "I think that...you have the opportunity, the privilege, the right, and the responsibility to get to know your students...[and] we make the time to meet the students individually." One of the strategies that she uses, especially with freshmen whom she does not know, is the "who am I project." in which students describe their families, hobbies, career goals, favorite activities. "We take a lot of time to do team-building...in the beginning of the school year," she noted, "...that helps the students connect as a group...and helps me, as the advisor, to know where their interests lie..." The information gives Jennifer some rudimentary insights about the students and some potential starting points for having a conversation.

Every teacher had his or her own way of making time. For example, at ASC, Alexis holds regular office hours. At Opportunity, Robert, Daniel, and Ruth do as well. "I am stationed
at my desk every single morning when I don't have a meeting," said Ruth. "Most of the students that come talk about things that aren't related to academics. Those who have a ton of questions about academics...immediately chat right after class." When time is up, Ruth reassures her students by reminding them, "I'll be here tomorrow morning. I'll see you again. I'm not going anywhere. This discussion is not over." Spending time to talk about matters big and small, academic or personal, is one way to deepen relationships.

Providing an opportunity for students to connect and be heard was paramount among the teachers. As Gabrielle from Pioneer observed, "Sometimes, they just want you to listen," a point of view expressed by everyone in the study. Accordingly, one of the benefits of time was to provide space for student voice.

Sometimes that voice was a whisper. For example, both Ruth at Opportunity and Alexis at ASC recalled students who were too shy to speak during class. To encourage their voices and to build a relationship, each teacher became a pen pal for her student. Ruth told her student, "We're going to have this back and forth...It's going to feel like we're passing notes, which is kind of cool." Alexis and her student had "a mailbox that the student decorated." According to Alexis, "We would leave each other notes every day...not about science, but about what we liked to do, and favorite movies,...things like that. We chatted that way and got to know each other." As both these teachers and their students discovered, time spent communicating - whatever the format - was time well spent. Alexis' colleague Meaghan agreed that the goal was to spend time to provide "love...care...concern...respect... kindness... [and to] help our students take care of themselves."

Time also allows students the opportunity to forge a new path, or learn a new strategy. For example, Margot recalled that at ASC, over time some students wanted to change their arts
major. She reflected, "That kind of shifting happens." In these cases, students who maintained their artistic grades "can audition for another major," but some are discouraged and want to leave. This was the case with a young woman who was a voice major. Margot remarked, "She was doubting her abilities as a singer and was really feeling like 'This isn't for me.'" Margot believed in the girl and together they spent time reviewing all of her options. "In the end," Margot reported, "I convinced her to stay, and the music department gave her an alternative pathway as a composer. She just presented three original compositions."

Having time was just as necessary as making time. For example, each participant spoke of the importance of advisory, which will be described in the next section. What is relevant here, to quote Alexis of ASC, is that advisory is "a family within the school" where people listen to, advise, collaborate, and help each other, where the teacher is the "point person" to whom the students can turn for support. "There's no set curriculum for advisory," noted Alexis,

> It's a place where...students will tell us about their week,...their highs and lows, or vent about some problem...It's a place where I regularly check in with students about their grades, and push them if they need it. We're together for four year...It's a safe haven.

In this protective setting, time allows relationships to evolve and deepen. It allows students to develop confidence, independence, and character in a venue dedicated to inquiry and conversation. The educators unanimously concurred that four years with their students in advisory "makes a huge difference" because, as Opportunity's Daniel, stated, "We will listen."

Teachers were also committed to giving time to their students after school. Daniel mentored after school clubs and activities at Opportunity because, he noted, it is important to give students "more time," and different kinds of time. Two of his colleagues, Ruth and Robert coached sports, as did Jennifer from Pioneer. Ruth and Robert also mentored after school clubs.
"Anybody can start a club,” Robert remarked, "as long as a teacher is willing to supervise, but in the day-to-day, they are student-driven.” He mentioned the newly formed Italian club. "A student and a teacher just started talking about their love of Italy and Italian food and opera, and they decided to start a club.” He went on,

The same thing happened with the Haitian club. Students were saying, 'We have a lot of students who are Haitian. Why don't we start a club,' They asked a teacher to supervise, and that was it. We want to support student interests.

Finally, making time provides the opportunity for students to grow, to find their voices, to pursue career paths, and to prepare for their futures in the real world. ASC's Margot stated, "We're committed to ...their whole selves," and in echoing many of the other teachers in this study, ASC's Margot affirmed, "We make the time."

Prioritizing Time

As important as time is, it is not infinite. With goals of "meeting students where they are" (Alexis, Stacy, Gabrielle, Daniel), "putting students first" (Jennifer, Ruth, Faith), and working individually "one student at a time" (Michael, Margot, Robert), teachers learned to prioritize time and to delegate it to activities that they believed were meaningful and relevant at a particular moment.

Knowing how to allocate and be responsible for time was important for students. Michael, for example, mentioned that at Pioneer, it was often difficult for students to time-manage class room assignments and responsibilities when they had overlapping opportunities for self-expression during a regular school day. For example, he explained that many students were "involved in the school-wide student government board...on Mondays.” At the same time, he continued, "other kids are going to the entrepreneurship class...” So if Michael planned to
conduct a workshop on narrative writing, "...often two or three kids are gone because they have other things to do." To help them keep track of missed class work and due dates, Michael maintains an Excel spreadsheet that he shares digitally with his students. "I try to catch them up... when they come back to class," he said ruefully, "...but it's ultimately their responsibility." His students understand that if their class work is not done, their special privileges will be revoked. He tries to be flexible. "Everything has deadlines," he commented, "but some of those are negotiable." Time management is sometimes an issue of respect, maturity, and character.

Margot of ASC presented a different example of helping a student to manage time. "We have to help them prioritize," she noted, "...figure out and navigate next steps." She mentioned a student who was having both "love-life issues [and]...academic problems." The girl told Margot she was "overwhelmed and depressed." To help her student cope with her situation emotionally and practically, Margot advised her to focus "...on the two or three things that you need to do right now." She showed personal care and support by offering to handle some "other stuff" for the girl. Then she assured her by saying, "Everything else is not urgent. You don't have to do it right now." By putting things in perspective, prioritizing time, and giving emotional and pragmatic support, Margot helped her student "to move beyond."

Some issues of time were less complicated. For example, at Opportunity, Robert found that getting to school late was often an issue for students, signaling disrespect, bad habits, and a lack of motivation in addition to poor time management. One of these chronically tardy students was in Robert's first period class. Robert took a straight-forward approach, telling the boy, "You're so smart, but your grade is a C- right now...and you're hurting yourself." When the boy claimed that he could not afford an alarm clock, Robert said, "You have a phone, right? Everyone today has a smart phone." When the boy nodded, Robert advised him to "set your
alarm and put your phone as far away as you can so that you have to get up and shut it off."

Robert showed his student that he cared about him, but that he would allow no excuses for his
tardiness and subsequent poor grades. It appears that Robert's honest approach and suggestion
worked. He reported that the student is now "usually in class on time."

Making the most of time is important to these educators. For example, Ruth, who is the
girls' basketball coach at Opportunity, told her students that they should tackle class assignments
during the bus ride to the game. "My issue," she told her students, "is that you get your work
done before the actual game." Like Pioneer's Michael, Ruth's message is that time should be
used wisely, and that extra-curricular activities are not an excuse for incomplete work. The other
teachers were in full agreement.

Occasionally, unexpected, unstructured time helps students and teachers alike to
prioritize what is important at a given moment. For example, sometimes while on that bus to a
basketball game, if their school work is finished, Ruth's students and she would take the
opportunity to exchange ideas on anything "...from world events to a personal problem," to ask
for and give advice, and to just "be themselves" together. Thus, making the most of time in the
moment is also a way to strengthen the bonds of a relationship beyond the roles of teacher and
student.

Likewise, autonomy and flexibility of time can be relevant and meaningful. For example,
when one of her students "really needs to talk, to have a one-to-one conversation," Pioneer's
Gabrielle will postpone a lesson until another time. "I balance my week," she said, "based on
what my students need." She stated that "it is healthy for my students to understand that balance
is important, that some things can wait, and that prioritizing helps to prevent burn out" (for
herself as well as for her students). Recently, she remembered, some students were having a
hard time focusing on the work. She asked what was wrong, but received no response. So she
told her class, "This is important. So let's have a conversation." Gabrielle reported that she and
her students spent part of the morning working through the issues for a few members of the class.
She emphasized, however, that once the need was met, "the priority should switch back to
learning." And she told her students, "I know this [conversation] took up our academic time, but
we needed it...Now that we got through this,...let's get some work done."

Michael, also from Pioneer, prioritized time so that students and teachers had the chance
to appreciate each other as individuals. He encouraged relationships with and among his
students by showing them the fun of being together, saying that on occasion "We're going to take
time to go outside and play a game together." He acknowledged that some educators "might
question the wisdom of playing kickball when his students were behind grade level in math" and
needed academic time to catch up. His response was that relationships were being developed"
because we laugh together." Then he continued, "When you have new shared experiences
together, trust opens up. The kids open up to you because you've had experiences other than just
teaching them. It's a much more well-rounded relationship."

Whether their methods and strategies are different or the same, what is relevant is that
every educator was aware of the invaluable role that time could play in the lives of students.
Time offers the space for developing strong and enduring relationships between teachers and
students, for helping students to flourish at their own pace, for providing teachers, students, and
other stakeholders multi-faceted perspectives of each other as individuals, and for preparing
students to live independently and confidently in the real world. Time, well-used, maximizes the
potential of the other constructs in this study. Most importantly, students are enriched by having
the time they need in which to develop and grow.
Section Summary

From the stories that they shared, the educators made it clear that the foundation of the culture of learning at their respective schools were strong, caring, and trusting relationships, supported by other community members, and intentionally nurtured over time with patience and respect. Relationships played a role in every cultural context, as reflected in three themes: Relationships are Foundations of Student Learning, Community Supports the Holistic Child, and The Purposeful Use of Time. Likewise, relationships were inherent in every aspect of teaching and learning (personal, social-emotional, and academic).

Meaghan from ASC explained that at her school, the "vision is to validate and educate the whole child" by protecting their well-being, developing their strengths, and empowering them to be independent. In this endeavor, she credited “authentic, trusting relationships” as the guiding force and link to personal and academic achievement because "...when students are happier and healthier, they're just more successful..." Every educator in this study honored this truth. They agreed that the holistic well-being of the child is the intentional cultural focus in their practices and in their respective schools. Teachers' stories and experiences affirmed that laying a strong foundation of cultural values results in the natural and pivotal emergence of trust, which is a catalyst for students' personal and academic success. In this spirit, a discussion of the theme Trust Leads to What Is Possible follows.

Exploring the impact of teacher/student relationships on student motivation was the context of the second research question. Three themes emerged: Trust Leads to What Is Possible, The Positivity of High Expectations, and The Power of Student Voice. Regarding the concept of trust, educators in the study expressed the firm belief that to be most effective for students, relationships had to evolve to include trust. Opportunity's Ruth was quite serious when
she said, "I want them to trust me with their brains," and "with their hearts," mused ASC's Meaghan. Pioneer's Jennifer added, that "with trust, everything is possible."

Trust is not an automatic outgrowth of a relationship. In more casual relationships, trust may not exist. Nor is it required. For example, people may attend hockey games together because they share a love of the game, and that is the sum total of their relationship. In authentic, long-lasting relationships, trust grows, evolves, and emerges over time as the bonds between two or more people deepen.

**Trust Leads to What Is Possible**

When asked how teacher/student relationships help to build confidence and motivation among disadvantaged students, Trust Leads to What Is Possible is the first theme that emerged, and is the fourth theme that defined a school's culture of learning. Educators unanimously cited trust as an indispensable and dominant factor, a natural outcome of authentic, supportive relationships. When trust is the culmination of deep and sincere relationships, "You can push them" to do the work, stated both Alexis of ASC and Robert of Opportunity. "You can push them," said Pioneer's Gabrielle to accomplish more - both personally and academically - "because they want to make you proud." At this point, trust becomes inherently part of the relationship and has a direct influence on student engagement and motivation.

Trust is the key to breaking down students' defenses, empowering them to be open, to learn, and to grow. Once the barriers are down, when students feel comfortable exposing their vulnerabilities, when they feel safe to exchange confidences, trust empowers and frees them "to be their authentic selves," as ASC's Faith stated earlier. Within the theme Trust Leads to What Is Possible are two sub-themes: 1) authenticity and 2) the structure of advisory, which are described in the following sections.
Authenticity

According to participants, being real and honest are prerequisites both to having a conversation and to building meaningful and lasting relationships. Anything else will not pass as authentic. "They read you," said ASC’s Faith with a smile. "I am this Haitian teacher mama. I love and treat the kids as if they were my own..." For Faith, "being real" is being open and sharing who she is. "I don't do it often," she noted, "but there are times when mama does come out because I'm looking at their expressions, and I'm saying, 'You look a little odd today, sweetie. What's going on?' By being a Haitian mama, Faith was showing her students "that I authentically care about them, and...I am building a level of trust so they can share with me what's going on in their lives." She also spoke of the importance of "listening when they want to talk. Listening when they just need space. Building an environment with them...Trust," she said, "is built day to day through looking and listening and interacting."

Faith shared a another bit of wisdom about "being real," which was to admit that, like her students, she had bad days. She tells her students, "Sometimes I’ll say, 'Today I'm a little bit off...my temper is a little bit off today. So, if I say something in a weird way, know that it's not because of you and if you see me acting...a little bit off, ...just start snapping, and that will bring me back." Then she says, "So, if you feel...a little bit off,...just come up and whisper it in my ear, [and] I'll ask you what you need to be successful.” By admitting that she is human, Faith makes herself authentically relatable. At the same time, she gives her students permission to have an "off day," too, and to know that it is all right to ask for help to overcome feelings without being judged.

Daniel from Opportunity also noted that being consistently your authentic self was what mattered to students and led to trust. With trust, he said, "...you can have a conversation."
cited two characteristics as proof of authenticity and care, culminating in trust. One was teacher persistence. "You can't shrug your shoulders," he stated,

*Persistence is hard...You might have the student who is putting his head down from 6th grade to 12th grade. You're trying to work with him, grade after grade, and you don't give up. You just keep trying, despite the frustrations...*

Daniel also believed that persistence is especially meaningful to students if the teachers who show concern and care are also "...sticking around." As he stated earlier, continuity has weight with students whose lives are often disrupted. "I think," he mused, "that there are closer relationships and more trust between students and teachers who stay. Students notice that."

To earn students' trust, Daniel's belief in "never giving up" was a common sentiment among teachers, frequently expressed, and intrinsic to the commitment they felt toward their students. Their dedication was partnered with their belief in high expectations, which is discussed later in this chapter. Consistency in high standards also engendered trust. As Pioneer's Michael noted, "We give them all the support they need, so they have no excuse to fail."

Robert from Opportunity added that "everything is based on relationships,...[but] "it doesn't feel genuine" if teachers use the same strategy for every student. "Kids really pick up on that," he remarked. Conversely, Robert's experience was that if the relationship was real, "it makes kids try harder." In fact, along with Pioneer's Gabrielle, Robert saw a connection between working hard and wanting approval. He remarked that, "They like it when you say, 'Wow, this is the best piece of work you've done in a long time.' Everyone likes getting praised." For Robert, the students actions were proof that they felt nurtured and trusted their teachers and school. He observed, "In the morning, kids are here together. They're hanging out. They're laughing. They enjoy each other's company. It's a safe space." He concluded, "Kids know that we're here for
them...that everything we do is for their well-being. We're very transparent about that."

Everyone noted how difficult it is to reach the point of authenticity and trust in a relationship. This was especially true because, as ASC's Meaghan remarked, a majority of their students came from "tough backgrounds" and "lived in disadvantaged families who were at or below the poverty line." These circumstances left students defensive, angry, guarded, and wary of others. Yet, each educator emphasized that breaking down defensive barriers and replacing them with trusting relationships was imperative for students' social and academic growth and success. It was the beginning of self-confidence and independence.

Margot of ASC spoke eloquently to this issue. She wants her students to understand that being open and vulnerable means being "in tune with their humanity" and are good qualities to have. "They want so much to trust," Margot said, "to be open...to share the thing that maybe...you don't let everyone see." Students are not always easy to convince, she noted, and recounted the story of a ninth grader's offended reaction when Margot called her "sensitive." "You mean, I'm soft, like, you're calling me soft," the girl cried. She thought she was being labeled, "gullible." Margot explained that "being sensitive means that you feel everything really deeply, and sometimes it's hard to know where to put all that." Margot also told her that "being authentic and open to others were qualities of every great artist, and every fully-developed human being." After a long conversation and after thinking it over, the girl said, "Okay, yeah. I guess I'm sensitive."

Telling students how important it is to be open, honest, and real was easy. Getting them there was hard. As ASC's Faith reflected, "It is about helping them to make a choice." In this effort, authenticity is the common denominator in, what Meaghan, also of ASC, called the
"holistic approach," showing students that "there is a trusting adult in their lives...someone who cares about them...someone who is invested in their education."

Educators expressed that learning to trust and to be vulnerable required time, patience, and conversation. ASC's Margot reflected, "You can't rush it" while Michael from Pioneer observed, "The pace is...different from kid to kid...and if you push too hard, they'll run away.” Jennifer, Michael's colleague, noted that the payoff for the commitment of time, care, and authenticity is that trust, when it is achieved, "opens the door for all of it: the social-emotional, the academic."

As these educators reflected, it became clear that trust is not linear. It evolves over time through honest conversations where everyone's voice is valued and from new shared experiences in and out of the classroom. Teachers explained that the challenge is to continuously protect trust by nurturing, what ASC's Meaghan called "sensitive, respectful, and authentic relationships" with their students. Daniel from Opportunity also commented that incorporating structure creates "a stable, consistent, and predictable environment" in which trust can develop and grow naturally. One of those structures, common to all participants, is advisory, which is addressed in the next section.

**The Structure of Advisory**

Advisory is not an academic course, but a time and a place for regular meetings during school. Its purpose is to strengthen relationships between an advisor and one student or a small group of 15 to 16 students by fostering personalized social and academic support. Alexis, Faith, and Margot (ASC), Robert and Ruth (Opportunity), and Jennifer and Gabrielle (Pioneer) referred to the advisor as the "point person" on whom students can rely throughout their years at school, the primary contact between school and home and between students and teachers. The structure
of advisory is considered an important element in the establishment of trust between educators and students because it provides students with a clarity of expectations and organizing principles in a safe, stable, and predictable environment.

In this study, educators found that the elements of advisory noted in the preceding paragraph are fundamental and integral to relationship-building and learning and to the eventual establishment of trust between teachers and their students. Despite having common overarching goals for their students, for these teachers, advisory was implemented a little differently in their three schools. Differences and similarities are noted in the following stories.

At ASC, students were assigned to teacher-led advisories based on their artistic majors. For example, although she is a science teacher, Alexis explained that she advises a group of music majors. Her group includes students from every grade, freshmen to seniors. The personal relationships and trust that grow in advisory are exemplified in Alexis' story of a student who was a sophomore in her advisory where they were working on behavior management and positive thinking. Alexis thought they were making progress in the advisory setting, but throughout the school, the girl was known as "combative," "disruptive," and "oppositional." Last year, as a freshman, the girl was placed in Alexis' biology class. "I was interested to see how she would be in my classroom,..." Alexis recounted. "...I found that she was a different person." She went on, "She was a leader in the class,...telling students to 'Be quiet.' ...helping other students when they needed help. It was total transformation from her reputation in other classes."

Alexis asked the girl about her positive attitude in biology class. The girl told her, "I can't act that [other] way in front of you. You're my advisor." Alexis immediately replied, "I need you to be this way in other classrooms because you are so awesome in biology, being a leader, helping your peers," but the girl simply nodded and said, "I know. I know." Alexis was
hopeful that the girl will mature, and concluded that the experience "...showed me how valuable advisory can be."

In another situation, Margot, also from ASC, learned that one of her advisees liked "dried seaweed." This fact became a special bond between them and a reward or celebration for personal or academic accomplishment. In fact, during the interview, this advisee interrupted to share that she had just passed an important artistic benchmark. After shouts and hugs were exchanged, Margot said, "I suppose you've come for your seaweed," and retrieved a packet from her desk, which she presented with a flourish to her student. Once the girl left, Margot explained that this advisee had begun "to doubt her musical talent and was on the verge of quitting school." Margot spent hours encouraging her advisee "...not to quit, and to explore a new direction in music," which resulted in the success just witnessed. Advisory and a "trusting relationship" afforded this student the time and connectedness to pursue a new path. In fact, as evidenced by the two stories cited, it appears that the time spent and the conversations shared in the safety of advisory relationships nurture both student motivation and self-esteem. Alexis spoke for herself and Margot when she called advisory a family that "empowered students to persist."

At Opportunity, in sixth grade, 10 to 13 advisees are assigned to teachers at random and this group forms a close, mutually supportive team for six years. Here advisors are advocates for their advisees in a number of ways. For example, Robert recalled that when he was a student at Opportunity, his advisor "...spent a lot of extra time with me..." and because of her efforts and belief in him, "she's the reason I went to Boston College." His experience convinced him that "your role as an advisor is...to be that first line of defense" for students. Although his students were not yet seniors, Robert shared that

*When I worked with ninth grade...I wrote three letters of recommendation for different*
...summer programs...And it was really nice because when students ask you to write a recommendation,...it's like they're saying, 'Hey, I have a lot of teachers, but you're the kind of person that I trust'...It's very nice.

Robert's colleague, Ruth emphasized that advisory is "not a study hall," but a time for "bonding and connecting...building relationships and trust." However, she commented that advisory could also be used to help students prepare for the year-end portfolio presentations, known as RoundTables. In advisory, students can assemble their work, write their presentations, rehearse with their peers, and receive coaching from their advisors "over several months without stress or anxiety." Daniel, also from Opportunity, mentioned that sometimes in advisory, there are discussions about values. "We'll talk about...character, he remarked. "We'll talk about college preparedness...and making goals for the future." This last is very much in keeping with one of the school's mottos, "Success is a choice," which appears both on the school's website and in its literature.

For Gabrielle, Jennifer, and Michael, at Pioneer, advisory and the classroom are synonymous. Except for math, which was taught separately by another instructor, these advisors were responsible for incorporating English, History, and Science, into their project-based curriculum, and for meeting state standards while addressing student interests. Each had a group of 15 to 16 students with whom they spent part of every school day for four years in the double role of teacher/facilitator and advisor. Because they are in charge of their own learning plans, advisors could be flexible.

For example, Michael shared that participants sometimes collaborate with other advisors for two reasons. First, to help students expand their circle of friends. Second, to introduce students who have different advisors but similar interests and to encourage their possible
collaboration on a project. Jennifer characterized the role of her school's advisory when she noted, "It's all about getting them ready for what's next..." in the real world. Gabrielle summed up what all the teachers expressed, "The work is hard. The work is challenging. But the connection with the students, having them trust you, being involved with them and for them, that's what keeps me going. That's what makes me want to keep doing it."

The advisory structure was not the same in all schools. For seven of the participants - ASC's Alexis, Faith, Margot, Meaghan, and Opportunity's Daniel, Robert, and Ruth - advisory for the purpose of bonding and student support was held twice a week. In both ASC and Opportunity, the advisory groups met two additional times during the week to focus on building reading and writing skills without, Meaghan said, "pressure or anxiety." During these times, although the emphasis was academic, the class was casual and informal. More to the point, students could still check-in and confer with their advisors about their grades, as well as conference with their advisor about any academic or personal problems. These best practices will be discussed later in this chapter under the theme Learning Through Real World Experience and its first sub-theme of assessments and growth.

Although advisories are set up differently in their respective schools, educators had one significant element in common: Time with their students. Advisors and advisees at ASC and Pioneer stay together for the four years of high school, and, at Opportunity, for six years of middle and high school combined. The 10 educators reported that effective relationships with their advisees are deepened by time, shared experiences, respect, and mutual trust. The strength of their trusting relationships allow advisors to critique their advisees and "push them" to do better, to be better. Pioneer's Gabrielle put it this way, "I want that connection of mutual trust and respect...[so that] I can help them to get where they need to be." In other words, reaching a
level of trust with a caring adult is transformative and empowering for students.

This study's findings show that advisory was not the only venue in which students had the opportunity to build meaningful and long-lasting relationships with adults. However, in addition to relationships that students have with classroom teachers, coaches, or social workers, the advisor plays a uniquely personal and non-judgmental mentoring role in students' lives. As Pioneer's Michael reflected, "They can trust me to critique and to hold them accountable without there being any judgment..." In this way, the advisor is able to reinforce the ideals of a supportive culture of learning.

Jennifer, one of Michael's colleagues, held a straight-forward view. She stated that for students, "Trust was the most important thing." However, she cautioned that "The biggest challenge is getting them there." The ideals of a supportive culture of learning that encompasses trust are also captured in *The Positivity of High Expectations*, which is the theme discussed next.

**The Positivity of High Expectations**

*The Positivity of High Expectations* is the fifth theme that defined a school's culture of learning. It emerged when teachers responded to the second research question, which explored how teacher/student relationships impacted personal and academic growth among students. Teachers expressed their firm belief in the value of high standards and were clear that students had to meet these expectations both socially and academically as part of their development toward independence and productive futures. Ruth, Daniel, Robert (Opportunity) Alexis, Faith, Margot and Meaghan (ASC), and Gabrielle, Jennifer, and Michael (Pioneer) all believed in giving students support, not to coddle, but to empower them and to make them responsible and accountable for their own learning with "no excuses." As ASC's Michael stated, "We give them all the support they need, so there's no excuse for them to fail." A consensus emerged that
curiosity and inquiry, appropriate and professional behavior, and good habits were necessary for student development. High expectations are explored within the following two sub-themes: 1) personal growth and 2) academic growth.

**Personal Growth**

Personal growth speaks to student readiness to engage, to interact, to learn how to participate collaboratively and also independently. Personal growth is about growing up and developing what ASC's Meaghan calls "habits of mind" and what Opportunity's Ruth identifies as a "growth mindset." which students can apply successfully in any situation. Personal growth is a continuous process that derives from a variety of events and interactions. Teacher support and advocacy, peer mentoring and role-modeling, and self awareness combined with well-being are all contributing factors. Yet, personal growth could not be fully realized until teachers understood the often rough and unstable circumstances of their students' lives.

Many of their students came from "tough" backgrounds and had learned "to be mean to survive," stated ASC's Margot. This mindset had to be overcome, but with care. Daniel from Opportunity spoke emotionally but plainly:

> Since coming here, my cultural competency,... my socio-economic competency has grown a lot...I think I understand better now what it really means to come from a single parent home, that may not have a lot of money, may not have computer access, may not have electricity turned on. Maybe one of my advisees is homeless for...a year...Trying to support a student through some of those issues like what does it really mean to be low-income and in school...What does that really mean?...I didn't really know anything about that before I came here.

Teachers knew that they could not change the past, but could use it to motivate their
students to "move beyond," to strive for more for themselves and their families. For Faith, at ASC, this was a two-step process that began with norms and expectations for her class room because she needed to "retrain" her inner city students to respect her authority and use their energy to connect with people in the right way. Second, her goal was to "strip away their defenses so they can connect back to their emotions," which led to personal awareness, true artistry, and authentic relationships. Margot, her colleague, called this "being in tune with your humanity" because, as she told her students, "You can't make art without being vulnerable."

Daniel and Ruth (Opportunity) and Michael and Gabrielle (Pioneer) supported this view, adding that students had to take ownership for their actions and that holding them accountable was part of caring and a path to personal awareness and growth. The following stories illustrate this perspective.

ASC's Meaghan recounted the story of "two young men of color," friends, who were "gifted singers" and shared a goal to attend a prestigious music school in the local area. "They have...pronounced learning difficulties," Meaghan said, "and have a lot of real struggles. School is very difficult for them academically." They especially did not like reading. "But," Meaghan continued, "they come every day and they push because they want to go to this music school, and they want to be performers, and they know that this school will help them do that." Every day Meaghan, their advisor, and other teachers supported and encouraged them, and helped them with assignments, and "the boys made the decision to persist - even though it meant an extra year of high school." Meaghan saw their decision as a sign of personal maturity and accountability. She was proud of these boys, and relieved. "The staff will help them make it through...and at least they can enjoy their music here." she reflected. "Would they continue in school if they didn't have that?...What else might they get into if they weren't here?"
Another opportunity for personal growth also centered on a student musician's desire to attend the same well-known music school noted in the previous story. This student was a freshman at Pioneer, failing in math and, even with a tutor, he refused to do any work in that subject. His advisor, Gabrielle, decided to do something slightly unusual to motivate him. "I've tried everything," she noted. So instead of "punishing him with math packets," she obtained permission from her principal "to take him to [the school], to get him on the tour," an event usually reserved for juniors. She wanted him to experience the excitement and creativity of the famed music college's environment.

*I want to show him what it looks like out here...and what are the things that he needs to do...He's going to meet some people. He's going to learn why he needs to know this math and how this math connects to him, to see the math is...in the music that he's doing.*

The trip happened too recently for any outcome to be known, but Gabrielle was hopeful. "That's how...we do it," she mused. "We try to make it as relevant to them as possible so they can understand why, in this case, math is important." Like other educators in this study, Gabrielle was always searching for ways to help her students to grow up and take ownership of their education so they could try to achieve their passion.

Sometimes a student discovered a new passion and wanted to pursue a new direction. In such instances, personal growth was having the courage to make a dramatic change and forge a new path - with a champion and guide to show the way. In this case, the student was a flutist at ASC and one of Margot's advisees, a girl she described as "a good doobie...a great student...doing everything right." In tenth grade, the young lady told Margot, "I'm not sure. I'm not sure about the flute, about being a musician..." The girl did not seem unhappy or stressed, and she could not identify anything else that she wanted to do, so Margot reassured her, saying, "You're
doing fine. Just keep going."

That summer the girl was one of the urban student volunteers at The Food Project, a diverse organization whose purpose was to build a sustainable organic food system for the hungry. This experience, Margot said smiling, "...flips all the switches for her," and the girl, a little unsure, told Margot, "I think I might want to be an engineer." Margot validated this young woman and her newly-discovered passion. She told her, "Wow! You're really good at science and math, and you know, the field not only needs women, but women of color. That would be a great choice for you and there are colleges that are dying to have...you." Margot helped make this student's personal growth complete. She understands that, "There are a lot of different ways to define yourself...[and] it is our job to clear the path and show [students] the way to many opportunities."

Peer mentoring and role modeling provided other opportunities to support students' personal growth. For example, Meaghan of ASC discussed a group of 11th and 12th grade students who gathered in a weekly support group to talk about their social-emotional problems and to seek support and advice from each other. "In this class," stated Meaghan, "our focus is predominantly on social-emotional obstacles to learning and building skills to overcome them." At the start of the course, students set goals for themselves. "During class," Meaghan reported, "students share how they're doing on their goals, what they want to improve, and what is going really well." She went on, "It's a comfortable setting where they naturally become supportive of each other and share ideas, like on self-regulation, personal management, and other organizational skills." In this comfortable setting, Meaghan reported that "students can express how they feel without being embarrassed," and that the group shares in each other's emotional progress.
If self-awareness was a key to personal growth, it often evolved from a little tough love. Each of the participants had their own words on the subject, but Faith from ASC summed it up:

*I say to the kids,...yes, I'm hard, but the reason why I'm hard is I know how society views you. And you have a choice. You can either decide you're going to live up to the societal stereotypes. Or you can decide that you're going to prove who you are.*

Every educator in this study expressed compassion for their students, most of whom came from rough beginnings and had experienced poverty, racism, crime, violence, or all of the above. Many were empathetic because they, too, had known hardship as children. Noting that she had grown up on welfare in a poor and troubled city, Faith declared: *"Even if they're gang bangers, they want to know that somebody loves and cares and respects them."* Others, including Daniel (Opportunity), Alexis (ASC), and Michael (Pioneer) put it more simply when they said, *"They're just teenagers, just kids."* However, these teachers understood that students also had to put the past behind them and to push forward if they were to survive and succeed.

ASC's Michael called this effort a *"life mission."*

His colleague Jennifer spoke for many when she said that educators were committed to *
"help students to achieve independence and personal growth..."* On a lighter note, Jennifer also addressed the practice of using older students as role models and described their contributions to the personal growth of those who admire them. She reported,

*When a 9th grader walks in and watches a 12th grader present something that he loves, that he knows about, and gives great examples of that learning, it sparks that 9th grader's interest and gets the other kids excited. That's personal growth. That's another school culture builder.*

In the same vein, Margot, from ASC shared the charming story of *"...a senior who said to a*
really goofy incoming 13-year-old freshman, 'We just don’t do that here...You, like, check
yourself.' That's huge," Margot continued. "That is juicy, amazing. What they say to each other
has so much more weight than what I could say."

In order to achieve personal growth, students need more than passion and hope. They
need self-discipline, good habits, solid skills, persistence, emotional well-being, and adult
support in order to grow both personally and academically. For students, cultivating
personal expectations is half of what it takes to being independent, confident, and productive
individuals. Achieving academic growth is the other half. What follows are the teachers'
experiences and perspectives on the development of students' academic growth, the sub-theme
that follows.

**Academic Growth**

As a function of high expectations, academic growth refers to an individual student's
personal dedication to strive for and attain increased knowledge, improved skills, and the ability
to use both to innovate, create, and problem solve. "*I hold it as a value to have an educated
populous. We know through history that a poor education is the quickest way to dis-empower
people.*" Those words were Margot's of ASC. Like Margot, the other educators in this study
were committed to helping their students achieve high academic expectations by teaching them
the value and skills of self-discipline, persistence, collaboration, pride, and the independence to
facilitate their own journey to academic growth and achievement. They identified students' fear
of making mistakes as a primary obstacle to these goals. As Pioneer's Michael observed, "*It is
tough and a little scary for kids at first because a lot of them don't know how to think for
themselves.*" They are unable "*to think outside the box*" because they are afraid to be wrong.

Margot from ASC also commented that student anxiety and the fear of mistakes were
more prevalent today than when she started teaching, making it more difficult to "break through." To illustrate her point, she recounted asking her students to perform the concrete task of drawing a value scale. She noted

    *I had only drawn a small portion of the square that I wanted them to fill...They all did exactly what I had done, and I was, 'No, my darlings, I need you to fill the whole.' Their reaction was very rote...They're scared to break out because they've been taught not to.*

Some anxieties arose from fear of error, while others emerged from students' desire to achieve and make their mentors proud. Stress was also heightened because students believed that much was expected of them. They were right. For these teachers and their schools, grades below a C- were unacceptable. Opportunity's Daniel stated that "...it's not enough to just turn something in" while Robert, his colleague, expected students to "put their work first."
Pioneer's Michael reflected: "I can support them, but I can't do the work for them," while his associate Gabrielle noted that students wanted to do well and "they reach a point where they need us to be proud of them."

Participants also recognized that before real learning could begin, they had to allay student fears. Pioneer's Jennifer added that "mistakes were the norm," and necessary for the development of creativity, problem-solving skills, and innovation. To "diminish the anxiety," Ruth from Opportunity tried to reassure and encourage students with the consistent messaging that "mistakes are celebrated here...things are going to be fine." As ASC's Meaghan put it, educators should treat students "holistically" and build on their strengths. She explained that teaching students "to take care of themselves" physically and emotionally helps them to engage in "healthy, pro-active practices" and "solution-focused" learning.

    The fact is that these teachers all concurred that if learning was "challenging,"
“relevant,” and “project-based,” students would engage, participate, learn, and good grades would follow. For those who struggled academically, there were several supports in place at their respective schools, including homework help after school, modified assignments in the classroom, audio books, and summer school opportunities to increase fluency and facilitate comprehension in reading. These and other programs and practices used to facilitate academic learning and growth will be discussed later in this chapter.

The blending of art, innovation, and science were evident in two stories that ASC's Alexis recounted about her students. Both illustrate the academic growth resulting from work that was challenging, relevant, and project-based. The first was an end of year group project in ecology that had to meet several criteria. "They get to decide," Alexis said, "What's a human problem, and how can I look to nature to design a particular solution to that problem?" For two of her students, the problem was that "my white sneakers are always getting dirty." The students were asked to investigate "how nature is solving this problem." They might find inspiration for "waterproofing or dirt-proofing from a particular plant that has a waxy coating or from a bird's feather." After finding the right ingredient, students had "to incorporate it into the sneaker design" and use their art to create the advertising campaign that would promote their new invention. She continued by explaining that "part of the project is for students to learn 3D modeling software in the STEAM lab to make a 3-D model of their design." Projects such as this one required the application of many multi-modal skills.

In the second example, a musician, one of Alexis' advisees, "was fascinated by biology and science and how music affected brain function." The student took a directed study course at a highly respected local college of music “because she was just so interested that there could be this connection between music and science.” Her curiosity and initiative changed her life
because she decided to pursue a career in science. Alexis remembered, "I think she wanted to do research in neuroscience," and she continued "to explore the affects of music on the brain. That was a really cool experience for her."

For Michael of Pioneer, academic growth often came in the form of peer review. For example, when his students are preparing a research presentation based on a community service project or an internship, they are charged with "asking investigative questions, managing the project, and putting all the pieces together." Then they present it to their peers for critique. "It doesn't move like clockwork," Michael smiled, "but it is a great learning experience."

Academic growth also resulted from lessons outside of the classroom. For example, one Saturday, accompanied by the school principal and the learning specialist, Michael took his students to see a free community showing of I Am Not Your Negro, a documentary based on an unfinished book by the late James Baldwin. Afterwards, "a professor from [a well-known university] led a discussion about the film," its themes, its observations about race in America and its meaning in a 21st century environment. Michael reported that his students "did not know who James Baldwin was" and, although "they had heard of Black Lives Matter, they did not know its history or context." However, "they experienced this moment among a diverse community of students and adults. They were exposed to ideas that might inform their future studies of views of the world." It was a real-world learning opportunity, personally and academically. In Michael's opinion, the day was a "win-win" because it included individual and group relationships, belonging to a community, team collaboration, and relevance.

Helping students to learn was complicated and demanding, but the teachers all agreed on the policy of "no excuses." Robert from Opportunity noted: "It's challenging...The work...is difficult...Teachers are loving and caring, but they will not lower expectations or rigor." This
philosophy made an impact on one of Robert's students. He recalled that the boy "started off this year really, really rocky in terms of his behavior and the effort he was putting in academically." During several conversations, Robert made suggestions and tried to be helpful and encouraging while communicating that the boy could lose his place at the school if his behavior and grades did not improve. At first, the boy did not seem "to get it," but Robert happily reported:

> For the past month or so, he's just been working his tail off and not doing it to get a pat on the back...or to make teachers happy. He's kind of been doing it for himself. I think when you see that in your student, that he's intrinsically motivated,...it makes you feel good as an educator.

For this boy, personal growth had a direct impact on academic growth.

Robert also acknowledged that the process needed to be flexible in order to achieve the goal. He explained that if students were struggling with a reading objective, for example, he always chose "quality over quantity...[because] it's more important for students to understand one book really well than to barely understand three different books." Robert added that choice comes with responsibility when he said,

> Students know that if they don't do their book, then they can't do the required assignment based on the book...That motivates them because students here really care about doing well...They feel that they're really lucky to be in this school.

At Pioneer, depth rather than breadth was the goal accomplished by one of Gabrielle's students who epitomized academic progress on a very personal level. As a freshman, Gabrielle's student "was reading at a third grade level. Her math and writing skills were equally low. And her passion was fashion." Gabrielle adopted a two-pronged approach to this challenge. First, Gabrielle tutored her student "several times a week," to help improve her basic skills in these
subjects. Second, she fulfilled her student's passion to work in the fashion industry by finding her an internship with a local designer. She remarked, "What she does is hands-on. She's learned the correct way of sewing. She knows how to do patterns. She's working on measuring. So her math is measurements. She's not in Algebra 2." Gabrielle explained that, to succeed at her job, her student needed to read pattern directions and understand how to use different fabrics, and she needed to keep a measurement notebook and she was "working on it."

By the end of the year, the young woman was "excelling at her internship," Gabrielle reported. Her reading level "tested between a fourth and a fifth grade level." With pride, Gabrielle shared that "she gave me what she could not do before. She handed in a reflection" about the internship experience that demonstrated her growth in written communication.

In Gabrielle's opinion, tutoring and personal support may have helped, but the hands-on, "real world experience doing something she loved" was the motivator and catalyst for this student's commitment and success - not only academically, but personally. For this student, academic growth was a balance between supportive relationships and student accountability, plus the addition of student voice, a theme which will be discussed in the next section.

Teachers were committed to helping students to find their own path. As Gabrielle said,

I always want the students to know that I have their best interests in mind at all times...I really want them to succeed and...know that they can. I really support them, and I'm going to make sure that I'm calling their name across the stage.

The bottom line, according to ASC's Faith was this: "What we're really teaching is discipline. What we're really teaching is commitment. What we're really teaching are those skills, those building blocks, that one needs to become effective men and women.

Meeting high expectations has many sub-texts. Support and encouragement from
teachers plus self-discipline and commitment from students were among the "building blocks" in the academic growth of these students. In this effort, time was an invaluable asset. Ruth offered the following message - one that she had also received as a student at Opportunity: "We love them and [because we love them] we are going to hold [them] accountable every single time, every day.” Based on these teachers' stories, it appeared that students understood and accepted this message. However, teachers also acknowledged that it was through the self-expression inherent in students' voices, that both personal and academic growth are enhanced and elevated. *The Power of Student Voice* is the theme discussed next.

**The Power of Student Voice**

According to the educators in this study, student voice (and its counterpart, student choice) is a critical component of student learning. All agreed that when students have a say in their own learning, they are more engaged, motivated, persistent, accountable, and successful. Student voice can influence the choice of reading texts and class projects. Student perspectives can be included in behavior plans. Students can lead class discussion and manage their projects. In one way or another, in these educators' schools, student voices were heard and student choices were accommodated - both socially and academically.

Several reasons supported the inclusion of and respect for student's ideas, opinions, and interests. Teachers believed that student interests and passions are at the core of learning and that students should be encouraged to express their ideas. For example, at Pioneer, student voice is at the heart of the learning environment, but it is not always easy to elicit. According to Michael, "It's a little scary for them when they first get here,...they're scared they might be wrong,...but we want students to have as much voice as they possibly can.” He added, "You get these kids and you allow them to talk...all of a sudden, they want to talk. Then there's room for
them to grow, to be creative." To illustrate, he noted that if he suggests a novel for the class to read, students feel comfortable telling him, "We'd really like to read this instead. Then, okay, we will," and he added "as long as it meets our class objectives."

Robert of Opportunity also mentioned that students have input into class texts and topics. He reported that at the end of every year, students are asked to comment on reading materials. Teachers ask, "Did you like this book? Would you recommend it for next year? Why?" He remarked, "We want it to work for kids...as long as it's not completely throwing us off curriculum...We want them to take ownership."

Sometimes student voice creates a bigger noise. Michael from Pioneer discussed the impact of peer to peer communication. He said, "Sometimes, it just happens, like I'll make a connection for the kids by suggesting, 'Hey, you should go talk to so and so...and a project happens.'" For example, Michael and a teacher colleague introduced two boys who shared an interest in the environment and asked them to work together on a camping project on a small island in a local park. One boy, an engineering student, "found a cove on the island that could have a toilet built in." Then, he designed a "shuttle raft with benches" to transport campers. The other student was interested in architecture. The two boys started pricing wood for the raft and brainstorming who might help build the toilet. Michael mused:

I don't know whether this is realistic or not. We're going to meet with the Parks Department. The important thing is they're excited. They're talking. This has nothing to do with me. It's all their own initiative, and they're collaborating now to make this happen.

Teachers' stories suggest that high expectations may be more readily achieved and sustained when student voice, engagement, ownership, and accountability are encouraged.
Voice can also be quietly expressed through a student’s personal interest or need. The volume is not important. Student self-advocacy is. For example, Pioneer's Gabrielle discussed students who were shy and hesitant to use their voices. In those instances, she advised talking to their parents and friends. She offered, "If you find out they love to cook, let them cook for everybody in their group...Ask them if they want an interview with a chef. That’ll get them talking."

Like Gabrielle, Opportunity's Ruth found that personal interests often evoke the most passionate student voices. One student, she noted, "really loved skateboarding. So he started his club. He tells everybody, 'This is my club.' He is designing a logo for the club." Of course, Ruth said, there is a teacher/mentor supporting him. She concluded, "That ownership that is important for him to have, that leadership, that passion that he has for skateboarding...it's going to be celebrated here."

Margot from ASC noted the understated ease of communication when students show confidence by using their voices to request a change of direction. "They come in and say, 'I thought I wanted to be an artist, but actually I'm more interested in piano'...Another might say, 'I don't really like being on the stage. Maybe I want to do lighting,' or something else." Margot was not endorsing changing direction on a whim, but she was pleased that students felt "so natural in speaking their minds."

The quietest voice is often private and reflective, but no less powerful. To explain, ASC's Meaghan addressed the benefits of reflection as follows:

It really forces students to learn about themselves and look at themselves...It demands introspection in ways that I think really help build that motivation for students...It helps them to ...figure out what they kind of want out of the world, of life. It kind of sparks
different curiosities, different interests, and things.

According to these educators, contributing to the community of ideas is a student's right and also a responsibility. Students were not only invited to speak out, they were asked to voice their thoughts and opinions with passionate conviction, based on their own inquiry, research, and reflection. "One thing we're trying to do," stated Pioneer's Michael, "is to get kids, who come from tough neighborhoods, to have more of a voice..to lead the discussions, to listen to each other." Leading discussions was an important step in the development of student voice, even if, as Ruth from Opportunity pointed out these conversations were "guided" or "prompted.” She continued, "We constantly give them opportunities to talk to each other...They share what they think...They go back and forth... agreeing, disagreeing...before we come back together as a whole group and decide what we think as a whole. " ASC's Meaghan, added that providing opportunities for students to be heard and respected was "crucial," to boost student confidence and self-esteem.

Educators in this study regard student voice as a valuable part of their schools' cultures. It manifested as a unique presence in their schools. It was expressed in a children's book written by one of Jennifer's students during an internship at Pioneer. It was visualized through paint on canvas by the visual arts students or through the interpretation of Faith's young actors at ASC. It was inherent in the scientific discoveries shared between Daniel and his students at Opportunity. It occurred frequently when students were given the freedom and responsibility to share through honest conversation.

In the end, teachers agreed that the development of student voice is nurtured and encouraged in relationships, either in a group or person-to-person. In speaking about circle practice, discussed earlier, ASC's Alexis stated "Sometimes it takes a few times of hearing other
people before students feel comfortable speaking up, but...the majority eventually do feel all right about it." She referenced student voice in the context of relationships when she commented, "I think through relationships you can really have honest conversations...build a rapport with students...The students feel comfortable talking honestly about how they're doing, and we can then decide together what to do next."

According to these teachers, student voice is a real and powerful force in student learning. It adds strength, substance, perseverance, and authenticity to students' personal and academic growth. Pioneer's Michael's affirmed, "Whether you call it student voice or you call it student leadership...We want buy-in from the kids. We want initiative from the kids." Student voice is an equally vital factor when educators make decisions in students' best interests. When these decisions include student voice, they become collaborative decisions and have a better chance to be effective and sustainable. To this point, the viability of Team Collaboration Includes Students is the theme discussed in the next section.

Section Summary

Earning students' trust was top of mind for every educator in this study. They understood that trust is both the underpinning and the catalyst for student voice, for the development of student engagement and motivation, and ultimately, for student confidence, persistence, and achievement. That is why, each of them commented similarly to Pioneer's Michael when he reflected, "I want the kids to trust me to guide them, not just as a teacher, but as a person." Trust was the key to breaking down students' defenses. It empowered students to be open to learn and to grow both personally and academically because according to Gabrielle and Jennifer (Pioneer), Alexis (ASC), and Robert (Opportunity), "without trust, nothing is possible."

Yet, developing and earning trust took time and "could not be rushed," said ASC's
Margot. "If you push too hard," observed Michael of Pioneer, "they'll run away." Educators found that to earn trust, they had to freely give it by being transparent about themselves. Michael's colleague, Jennifer, commented that it was important to show students, "that I'm a real person and have a life...” Once trust exists, teachers stated that students are more willing to engage, use their voices, and pursue their interests and passions more consistently.

For educators in this study, the holistic well-being of the child is an intentional cultural focus. Trusting relationships create a collaborative environment in which teachers can hold students to high expectations - both socially and academically. In the presence of trust, student voices are also welcomed and play an active role in their own learning.

Best practices and their impact on student academic outcomes is the context of the third research question from which three themes emerged: Team Collaboration Includes Students, Relevance Sparks Student Engagement, and Learning from Real World Experience. The next section begins with a discussion of team collaboration and how it influences student growth.

**Team Collaboration Includes Students**

The third research question asked educators to identify the best practices that resulted in academic success for disadvantaged students. Their first response was the construct of team collaborations that had multiple configurations, but all of which were structured to benefit individual students as illustrated under the theme Team Collaboration Includes Students. Sometimes teams were teachers working with other teachers. At other times, teachers worked with staff. Importantly, students themselves were often key members of a team. Finally, teachers spoke of the importance of collaborating as a team of two with their own 'point person' or mentor, and also valued the times spent bonding and collaborating with colleagues outside of school. Team collaboration manifested in many, all of which ultimately had a positive impact on
students who were at the center of every team.

For the educators, the concepts of team and collaboration are synonymous. In the context of this study, team collaboration is a basic principle that defines how community members often work together to help students and each other. At each school, teams come together in weekly faculty meetings, and in regularly scheduled team meetings that are organized by grade, by department, or by subject. Sometimes the topic is curriculum planning. At other times, individual students and their social-emotional or academic problems are the subjects of concern and conversation. In addition, social collaboration among teachers outside of school strengthen personal and professional relationships with each other.

An individual teacher's reserve of emotional stamina is strengthened when team collaboration is focused on developing solutions for students' social-emotional problems. According to Jennifer of Pioneer, social-emotional issues are "commonplace, most often just below the surface." They often manifest in difficult behavior. ASC's Faith explained the process at her school. At our weekly faculty meetings, we regularly share if we're having difficulties with particular students...some names bubble up as having similar problems...that present similarly to your student. Then there's a conversation or protocol that we use to unpack what's happening...and we come up with one or two things that we are all going to try.

Teachers agree to try the intervention for at least three weeks, and to compare notes via email or at the next faculty meeting. For example, ASC’s Faith described "a kid that...was always needing to go out... leaving and never coming back to class." She and her colleagues devised a strategy that would accommodate the student and also hold him accountable. They "...talked with the student to see if he would try it," and he agreed. All of his teacher would write the day's agenda on the board and "color code the times that the student could get up and
leave and take a break." He did not need permission, so he "isn't on blast in front of everyone else," but he had to promise "to return within five minutes." Every teacher would be using the intervention. "So, there's no tension," Faith noted, "It's happening in every class so that it is a habit that is being developed in each class." In this approach, the student is not seen as the problem. He is part of a collaborative solution for turning his anxiety and subsequent need to leave the class into an acceptable behavior over which he has control. In this case, Faith reported that the intervention was successful.

Ruth of Opportunity remarked, "We have a ton of students that are just on our radar...I specifically remember talking about one of our students. He struggled with behavior issues. He would come to class and not even write his name." She commented that the team tried many interventions and talked to the boy all the time. "We finally noticed that if he didn't come in ready to learn in the beginning of the day, it would affect the whole day, like, if he didn't have his breakfast." She continued, "We had breakfast ready and waiting just in case. We had pencils, paper, books in case he forgot any of those...We did see a ton of improvement by the end of the year...We're still learning."

Interventions do not guarantee success. Alexis of ASC acknowledged that interventions do not always work. "It's challenging," she said, "to keep up with other teachers on different teams when you have several interventions happening at the same time." But, she reflected, "this is a family...The teachers really make an effort to collaborate...there's just a lot of caring...a lot of positive energy." Opportunity's Daniel agreed that there was "not enough time to follow-up."

Some students have severe problems. Alexis from ASC noted that the students at her school are "very emotional" and that many of them had been hospitalized. Daniel from Opportunity speculated that "harsh realities at home and gang-related violence in the
neighborhood were possible contributors” to students’ stress. As a result, even with a supportive

team of teachers, students, parents, and health and wellness providers, things do not always end

good. Alexis' colleague, Faith remembered the ones she lost when she said:

    We have kids that are...gang-related...that walk around with bracelets on their ankles...I
    had a student who was really talented, who's doing a 15 to life bid...I've lost two kids to
    violence, gunshot...It's about helping them make a choice.

Despite challenges and tragedy, these educators, persist with intervention efforts and their

purpose remains the same; namely, to help students achieve well-being and then grow as

individuals, as scholars, and as citizens. For these teachers, helping students make a choice

means including them in all areas of their personal and academic growth. Accordingly, just as

teachers encourage students to use their voices as active participants in their own learning, they

encourage students to play a central and vocal role as part of their wellness team and its

recommendations. ASC's Meaghan affirmed that the "support group structure" empowered

students to share and compare their feelings and experiences and then become "supportive of

each other." Students know they can express themselves during advisory, in one-to-one

discussions with teachers, in clubs, and among themselves in collaborative peer group settings.

"Someone," said Pioneer's Jennifer, "is always there to listen."

The goal of these educators is to foster students to cope with their emotions and to be

pro-active in taking responsibility for their own well-being. Teacher preference is that students

try to deal with their problems in class. As discussed earlier, Ruth from Opportunity offered

students the option of sitting at a "restart" table until they felt ready to rejoin the group. Robert,

her colleague, preferred trying to ameliorate problems with "one-to-one talks." Pioneer's

Gabrielle encouraged students to "take a walk with a friend and return when they felt calmer."
ASC's Faith urged her students to let their passion get them through a personal crisis by reminding them that as artists "...you have a gift that not everybody has..." and then challenging them to use their gift to be "...a chain breaker in the history of their family."

However, if a student resists, or a crisis appears to be imminent, teachers call upon other team experts immediately because as Meaghan advised, "social or emotional...blocks [are] the main obstacles to success." She continued, "it's all about the holistic approach, getting to know the students." The underpinning of team collaboration is the caring, security, and sense of well-being that students find in their relationships with teachers.

While teams may comprise teachers only or teachers plus support staff, team collaboration is not always the purview of adults alone. Beginning with relationship-building, team collaboration is an integral part of students' lives when appropriate. For example, an intervention designed to help a student is more effective when the student is an active participant whose voice is heard as a respected member of the team. Also, team collaboration is not reserved only for problems. For example, according to the educators, team-building activities take place in and out of the classroom because they allow teachers to learn students' interests, which often become the first step in building relationships - one of the pillars of a successful team. As Pioneer's Jennifer reported, "If a kid comes in and says he wants to be a basketball player, then I know he likes basketball, and that's something I can talk to him about." Team collaboration often begins with one teacher and one student. As relationships deepen and evolve into trust, they expand to include others, and the team becomes stronger.

Sometimes, team-building extends to include parents. Every educator noted that parents come to school at least twice a year for conferences and to see their children perform artistically or academically. As ASC's Meaghan remarked, "...we know that student learning outcomes are
much better if family engagement is higher... we have a strategic plan to systematically engage families” in the whole school. Parents are encouraged to join the family engagement committee where they and other community members talk about what's happening at the school and work to make things better.

Parents are also integral to their children's academic programs and plans. For example, the teachers all mentioned their schools' summer reading programs, which are "mandatory" for students who are not reading at grade level by the end of a school year. "They are notified well in advance," said Opportunity's Robert, "so they won't make other plans for their child."

Teamwork is sometimes rooted in understanding another's point of view. For example, as Ruth recounted earlier, a student who questioned Opportunity's 'no hats' policy protested eloquently and persuasively that headscarves were part of her culture. The school honored the girl, her principles, and her culture, and the girl continues to wear headscarves. Ruth reflected, "We try to respond to their personal as well as their academic needs."

Regarding academic learning, student opinions, beliefs, and choices are welcomed and addressed whenever and however possible. For example, in their reading clubs at Opportunity, Daniel's and Robert's students choose some of the texts or topics. In their colleague's mentoring group, Ruth's students not only have input about topics, they are often in charge of the discussions. For Michael, Jennifer, and Gabrielle, community projects at Pioneer are part of the everyday learning experience. Students select their projects, and, with guidance and queries from teachers, they "managed these projects to completion" - individually or with a peer and a partner from the greater community. As Gabrielle remarked, "We always try to incorporate collaboration... teamwork... where the students have to support each other.” With every project, students gained confidence and pride in their problem-solving abilities. Teachers were proud,
too. Michael shared that "the thing that excites me the most is the collaboration the kids create on their own."

Pioneer's Jennifer and ASC's Margot both pointed to the benefits of peer-to-peer teamwork in the form of mentoring between older and younger students. For example, Jennifer recalled the help and support that her students received from former students who had graduated and returned to "act as role models for other students " through mentoring and the sharing of their experiences after high school. Margot told a story of a senior she described as "my hero." She watched him approach a group of freshmen acting "mean" toward another student, and he stated, "We don't do that here. You need to stop." And they did. "That's amazing," Margot exulted. "What they say has so much more weight than what I could say." What is significant in these stories are the myriad forms of team collaboration that support students and also include them as valued, pivotal members. She summed up the importance of the many different forms team collaboration takes to support students by saying, "We do it as a team...It's all of us."

Teachers also benefit from team collaboration with peers and colleagues. For example, Opportunity's Ruth spoke of the strength she drew from supportive peers and team collaboration that often started with one trusted person. Ruth described her own 'point person' as a colleague and also as "my basketball coach when I was a student at Opportunity. She does a really good job pushing me [to think about] what's going on. We have our check-ins, get to walk around the neighborhood, and talk...” Daniel, also from Opportunity, spoke admiringly about his evaluator, saying, "I can talk with her about anything.” He continued,

She's known me a long time. It helps when I am uncomfortable - when - as the science department chair - I have to critique a teacher. I try to let him know that I'm not judging
him, but just commenting on the work. I like to think it's a growth opportunity for both of us.

Finally, in addition to collaboration during the school day, teachers often met and bonded outside of school. Looking back, ASC's Faith recalled that "It started out years ago. On Fridays,...we would just go someplace and hang out...and chat. We do things with each other...we go to shows together...we have get-togethers at each others' houses ..." Similarly, Robert from Opportunity reported that as a department, teachers have "humanities get-togethers" throughout the year..."an opportunity to be in each other's company without being...stressed..." He added that "it's funny because...all we do is "talk about kids..."

At ASC and Opportunity, being part of a team, socially as well as professionally, is both comforting and productive, a chance to bond and establish friendships. At Pioneer, teacher sentiments are the same. Michael reflected,

We don't go out after school as much as we used to (we have families now) but...a lot of us have been here for a long time. We're pretty deep into the work, and a lot of the work is collaborative, the friendships are still strong.

Whether they socialize on or off campus, educators speak with respect and affection of their commitment to each other as colleagues and as individuals. They also appreciate the benefits of collaboration. "We share with each other, and we help each other get through each year," Gabrielle of Pioneer stated, "Whatever you need...these people... will always be there...a source of care, camaraderie, and emotional fortitude." The schools they represent may focus on different areas of learning; yet, the teachers have a common goal, which is to prepare students to be productive, independent, and successful both as individuals and as citizens of the community.

Educators report that team collaboration for and with students is an intentional, everyday
occurrence, an on-going and active process between teachers and their students, among themselves and other colleagues, and with the broader community of stakeholders, including parents, mentors, and school partners. For example, Margot of ASC described an average day as one in which she moves from one team collaboration to another. "Every day is different," she stated. "I meet with the instructional leadership team about curriculum...with the arts chairs to talk about auditions... I meet with my content team and I meet with students...They need a lot of hand-holding."

Relying on their relationships and trust in each other, different teams of community members come together to strategize and implement effective social, emotional, and academic practices for their students. As a team and as individuals, collaboration is both a personal endeavor and a commitment, instituted to help students to grow and thrive. Teachers create a network of caring team members and an environment of safety and stability. The aim is to reassure and protect students whose lives are often chaotic. As noted earlier, the bottom line for Margot and the other educators in this study is "We do it as a team...It's all of us." Other best practices that result in positive outcomes for students are described next under the theme, *Relevance Sparks Student Engagement.*

Relevance is at the center of personalized learning for these educators and their respective schools. They believe that an issue or topic that is relevant to students will pique their interest and curiosity. Their experience has shown that relevance can create an environment in which students participate, conversation and communication flourish, and the desire to learn and problem-solve pushes students to high levels of social and academic achievement.

**Relevance Sparks Student Engagement**

Relevance tends to be a buzzword in education. For these educators, their schools, and
their students, it is a reality. Accordingly, *Relevance Sparks Student Engagement* is a theme that also addresses the best practices of educators in this study. Teachers often use the concept of relevance to engage and motivate students by connecting content work in classrooms to students' lives or to problems, issues, and events in the world. In these instances, relevance is a tool or strategy, used when teachers think it will be effective. However, for teachers in this study, academic relevance is an intentional pro-active strategy and a cultural principle that drives curriculum and is incorporated daily into class discussions. Making relevant connections for students is a goal that teachers try to honor every day. "We are always making connections," said Ruth from Opportunity. In addition to academic relevance, these teachers identified other forms of relevance, including human relevance as established through cultural sensitivity, activism, and making meaningful connections with others, all of which will be discussed in this section.

Educators in this study agreed and shared stories that when students find personal meaning in a current event, relate to the circumstances of a character in a novel, or discover how math and science concepts could benefit their lives, they were more likely to actively engage in their learning. For example, Pioneer's Gabrielle referenced a student who was "interested in becoming a chef." Gabrielle taught her future chef "how to calculate the total costs of a product and determine a competitive retail price that would generate a desired profit." The student was enthusiastic about the "financial literacy" that was relevant to her career goal, but, said, Gabrielle, she "resisted learning Algebra, which was required by the state." The student eventually realized that financial literacy was "very similar" to Algebra, and she was able to appreciate its relevance to her ambition. Importantly, she was no longer "afraid of Algebra because she already understood a lot of its concepts."

Relevance also evolved from a student's intellectual pursuits in the classroom. For
example, in Alexis' biology class, ASC students were engaged in an ecology unit on biomimicry. She enthusiastically reported that students choose a human problem and then must ask, "...how can I look to nature and design a particular solution that would solve that human problem based on nature?" Students were free to explore any relevant topics, such as the effect of greenhouse gases on a particular ecosystem, or to investigate a natural product whose properties were able to "dirt-proof" sneakers, as discussed earlier. Alexis wanted students "to find issues they cared about...see how nature is solving this problem...incorporate that into their design...and promote this new invention that solves this human problem." By figuring out real world solutions to these real world problems, relevance becomes a motivating force that inspires students to engage in activities and conversations that positively influence their personal and academic growth. Alexis reflected,

*I guess there's definitely an element of student choice, and...teachers are very concerned about covering what's relevant, what students care about...part of the relevance is also helping our students to find issues that they may care about and to becoming activists...*

Each educator had a story about curriculum that sparked students' interest. For example, Meaghan of ASC reported that her students were reading Shakespeare's *Othello*, and "...they love it. They love the drama that's unfolding. The relationships...jealousy..." She continued, "Those relational themes that are present for adolescents are also replicated in *Othello*...that's a good example of why this text was chosen."

If current events are an area of focus, inspirational items might emerge anywhere. For example, Gabrielle of Pioneer commented, "*I might watch the news and see...a great thing that my students could do for a project.*" She also remarked that she is always trying to show her
students how "things in the real world connect to each and every one of them and their different passions." She offered an example, remembering a student who wanted to become a travel agent. With him in mind, one day during a social studies discussion about cultural differences around the globe, she referenced a country that was in the news and informed the class that "in this country, they have different social norms than we do, and you should become familiar with local customs if you are planning a trip there." It was one way to bring relevancy and life to an abstract conversation and to address one student's passion. Her colleague Michael had his own approach for incorporating relevant current events into curriculum discussions, noting "We've been using newsela, which is a great online site for current events, and" he added, "I ask the kids to bring in articles, too."

Some issues and events outside of the classroom were personally meaningful to students, directly or indirectly, and challenged them to go beyond their own vantage points to consider a broader world view. For example, Opportunity's teachers Daniel and Ruth each mentor a club that meets monthly and is student-led. Students choose the topics for discussion, such as racism and police brutality in the 21st century, an especially relevant topic because, as Ruth noted, "most of the students at Opportunity are Black." She said that "students expressed anger, fear, and frustration," but could not see any solutions. Their topic coincided with Black History Month that had an unsung heroes theme, and a local unsung hero showed them the way forward.

In speaking with the students, this hero recalled his own experiences with racism and hate. According to Ruth, the gentleman had been "part of the civil rights movement...but because he was openly gay and interested in a white man..." he was hated by both black and white people. As a result, he never became a well-known member of the civil rights cause, but
he continued to march and to work behind the scenes. His message to students was to "move beyond" the anger by doing something positive and constructive. He was "a good example," said, Daniel, of an "unsung hero." By his presence, his deeds, and his words, this local hero is both relevant and a role model.

The local hero's message is similar to the one that ASC's Faith gave to her students when she warned them not to become victims of stereotyping. It is also the advice that Pioneer's Michael gave to his students after they saw and discussed the film *I Am Not Your Negro*. He was honest and plain-spoken: "We acknowledge that it's not a fair system...that there is racism...misogyny...You work on fighting those things,...but it is not an excuse to turn to crime, or dropout, or be on welfare...you move beyond. You...push yourself."

Pushing oneself meant that students should speak up and identify what is meaningful and relevant to them, to their learning, and to their personal growth. Often, student expression results in students having some choice in their learning. However, the privilege and the right of choice come with responsibilities. According to ASC's Alexis, students had to voice their views on a subject, ask questions, and "be the owners of their education and lead discussions on the issues," get involved, "be part of the solution," and pay it forward. In fact, students often made the connection that working hard was, as Opportunity's Robert stated, "...not to get a pat on the back...[or] to make teachers happy." It was something that students did "to please themselves...to make a difference."

According to the teachers, reaching this point of self awareness could be a lengthy process because for some students, relevance involved an exchange of the bleak reality they knew for a brighter one that was not yet defined. Many students had been shaped by circumstances of poverty, gangs, drugs, and violence, and their teachers wanted to derail what
ASC's Margot identified as "the student to prison pipeline." Speaking for other educators, she stated, "I am overjoyed when I see a student understand that student government is another possibility...for leadership when gangs may have been the only option until then." Her colleague Faith offered a different perspective by reflecting on the importance of teaching "through...and with cultural competencies" to establish relevant connections with students. She recounted the following story of setting an example and building character through personal relevance.

_Sometimes students snap like a teenager would snap...and I'll say, 'Sweetie,' what's going on...because I wasn't staying up last night figuring out how I could [bug you] so you would snap at me...Now let me ask you this: Have I ever been disrespectful to you. No? Did I deserve what just happened? Okay...so what's going on because that's not the you that I know..._

She continued, "We show that we care, then it is up to students" to develop personal interests, to take advantage of opportunities, and to become relevant to others as active, productive members of their communities. She concluded that "...our job is to help students become their authentic selves."

Teachers also revealed that relevance sometimes results in social or political activism that goes beyond one person's experience to benefit many others. Two stories illustrate the evolution from tragedy to triumph. As discussed earlier, after the devastating deportation of her parents, who were illegal immigrants, and with the help of friends, one of Margot's students at ASC graduated high school and college and became a successful entertainer. To pay it forward, she also became an activist, fighting for a pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants.

Pioneer's Jennifer recounted another story of survival and triumph. One of her students "...came home one day to find that her drug-addicted mother had overdosed." With no adult
support, "this young woman missed a lot of school, and had nowhere to go." She had heard about Pioneer, applied, and was chosen by lottery for admission. Since then, she is "surrounded by people who care" and support her. "She loves kids," Jennifer said, and wanted to help them. In particular, she was drawn to children with special needs. "She identified with them," reflected Jennifer. To help this student to pursue her interests, Jennifer found her an internship in a daycare center and reported that not only was the young woman happy, "she was writing a children's book to call attention to the kids at her internship." Following her passion may lead this young woman to a career working with children who have special needs. Jennifer is convinced that whatever this student does, "she will find a way to help," because own story makes her empathetic to people in need, rendering their experiences relevant to her own.

For both of the women in these stories, it was not enough to move beyond their own hardships. They used their experiences to 'pay it forward' and make a relevant and positive difference in the lives of others. According to ASC's Jennifer, the life lesson is that "we just have to connect everything to the real world when...having a conversation."

Many constructs in this study overlap and reinforce each other. For example, in this section, relationships, trust, community, high expectations, and real world opportunities are all embedded in concept of relevance. According to the teachers in this study, their students were guided to find relevance and meaning for themselves in their academic studies, in their projects and activism, and in their personal relationships. By doing so and then by sharing their experiences, they became relevant to others and to their communities.

The concept of relevance assumes an even broader perspective in the context of real world opportunities in which all students in the three schools studied are required to participate. In this study, real world learning is defined as an instructional approach that provides students
with real world experiences outside of the classroom. Real world expectations play a relevant role in shaping students' abilities and inspire them to strive for personal success, as ASC's Faith urged, "to be the first in your family to go to college." Accordingly, the theme Learning through Real World Experience is described next.

**Learning through Real World Experience**

For the educators in this study, *Learning through Real World Experience* is the definitive best practice experience for their students. Students leave the classroom to solve real world problems in a real world environment. In anticipation of this culminating high school activity, under the guidance of their teachers, students prepare their goals and proposals with clarity and professionalism. It is an opportunity for students to independently research their projects, to present their findings, and to be evaluated by a community of other professionals.

Teachers in this study consider real world engagement to be a significant factor in student learning and growth. It is also a graduation requirement at their schools where options for real world learning are based on students' personal interests. These possibilities include internship placements at organizations, entrepreneurial ventures that students create and develop, and community service projects. Through these experiences, students have the opportunity to explore, discuss, and learn the skills to solve real-world problems that are of personal interest to them. Although students have mentors to guide and advise them, they are responsible for doing the required work and for managing their projects to completion. The culminating activity is a formal presentation where students describe their projects, the real world problems addressed, and their proposed solutions.

Although each school has a different protocol for implementing real world experience, every educator in this study cited the importance that Pioneer's Gabrielle expressed of, "getting
them out in the real world.” The two sub-themes to be discussed in this section are 1) assessments and growth and 2) personal interest. A discussion of assessments and growth and their impact on student development follows:

**Assessments and Growth**

For these educators, assessments are about both academic and personal growth. Regarding academic growth, part of the reality for students are on-going assessments of their progress. At ASC and Opportunity, assessments include the Massachusetts state standardized tests that students are required to pass in order to earn a high school diploma. The state requirements appear daunting because most of the students in these schools tested below grade level in both reading and writing abilities. However, the teachers believe a personalized approach to academic learning produces positive outcomes, so as Opportunity's Ruth remarked, "We don't teach to the test."

Each of the two Massachusetts schools has a specific program and protocol. For example, at ASC, a reading and writing seminar by grade level is conducted four days a week. The purpose of the seminar is three-fold: 1) to raise student reading abilities to grade level; 2) to prepare them for the state standardized tests in sophomore year; and 3) to continue building reading and writing stamina, fluency, and comprehension in junior and senior years. As Meaghan explained, "Seminar is a reading and writing skill-building block...the ninth grade is leveled by reading ability..." but starting in tenth grade, reading and writing are taught together "where students are building proficiency...by different strategies." In Meaghan's reading and writing group, she and her co-teacher were working on building reading skills, including "...helping students follow along...when others are reading, practicing to read aloud and follow along...and stay alert.” ASC educators also use other reading strategies and activities to
facilitate reading comprehension, ranging from group discussions to performing a book as a play. The goal is that students are able to summarize and analyze, verbally and then in writing, no matter what text they read or what test they take.

Because teachers are considered generalists at ASC, every educator teaches a seminar class even if the subject is outside his or her primary area of expertise. For example, Meaghan's colleague Alexis, a biology teacher, teaches reading and writing to a group of tenth grade students who are following the English Language Arts curriculum. Alexis spoke about the approach used to develop students' writing skills. Student relevance and interests are considered when texts are chosen. Alexis noted, "We're reading short stories...memoirs...students are reflecting...They're practicing reading and writing...strategies..." Once a book is completed, she continued, students "...have to do this five-paragraph essay based on a prompt," similar to a prompt that might be on the state test. "I'll spend some time going over details about the structure, or we'll focus on a three-sentence analysis...We really break it down." At the end of the writing assignment, students are told that the prompt is similar to those on the state test and are given the state rubric so they can self-assess their work. Alexis reported that students are reassured because "it's not, 'Here, take this practice [state] test...'...no teaching to the test..." no anxiety, no pressure, and a message of "we've got this."

If a student fails the seminar and does not meet the optional criteria for passing, the student must attend mandatory summer school. According to ASC’s Faith,

Students that don't meet certain requirements...are required to go to summer reading at the end of their ninth grade year and...at the end of their tenth grade year...that is about a six-week program where they go every single day and they have an additional reading tutorial...led by an amazing reading specialist.
Students attend the summer program Monday through Friday for six weeks. The goal for students over the summer, Faith reported is to "give kids the opportunity to jump two grade levels." The reading specialist also trains teachers in the curriculum and strategies so they might continue to use them throughout the next school year.

Students' emotional growth is a critical element of assessment. According to Alexis, ASC observes no formal procedure or protocol, and assessment of personal growth is "...really informal, through my conversations with them...with their families and with their teachers. I hear about how they're doing...and we can have a conversation...[and] they can reflect on their behaviors."

There are both similarities and differences between the reading programs at ASC and Opportunity. At ASC, there is interactive discussion and a goal of student readiness to take the state exam in English. At Opportunity, the effort to improve student reading fluency and comprehension appears to be more low-key. According to the school, DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) "is a silent reading program" where students enjoy a book of their choice for 30 minutes, four days a week. According to Opportunity's Robert, book offerings are based on an appropriate reading level suggested by a reading test. He noted, "We give students a test in the beginning of the year, and then we give them a similar test at the end of the year" to measure student progress in reading comprehension and fluency. Like ASC, the goal at Opportunity is to build stamina, fluency, and comprehension; however, student ability - based on an individually administered reading test - determines the pace, reading level, and suggested texts. Before any given school year, Opportunity also requires new students to attend a three-week mandatory summer program to build "Math and English language arts skills" and to become acquainted with the school's overall expectations.
At both ASC and Opportunity, strategic and intentional reading programs are central to students’ academic schedules. Teachers deliberately select texts for these programs that are related to student interests, believing that interest is a direct link to engagement. At Pioneer, the goal is the same, but the implementation is different. There is no specific reading program, but reading and writing are integral to every subject, every project, and the emphasis is on “Learning to Interest,” one of the school’s tenets. Michael mentioned that the goal is to read three books per year as a group. He reflected, "I do like to always have us reading something together...but if I bring in a novel and the kids are like, 'We'd really like to read this,' then 'Okay, we'll read this instead.'” He continued by noting that at Pioneer "...literacy is more than reading and writing. We look at it as speaking and listening, also...We'll read a book, but then we do current events..." based on articles found in newspapers and online. In addition, Michael said that students also "have independent reading books...internship-related reading...some of them are very practical more pragmatic type books...more career/tech oriented...” For example, Michael referenced two students. One student, interested in veterinary medicine, "is reading about elephants in Africa." Another student who wants to become an architect is "reading a book on welding.” Through different reading experiences, students learn literacy skills and research skills opportunistically during group discussions and inquiry in addition to the specific skills the teacher/advisor believes are necessary for them to know and understand.

At these three schools, there are other forms of assessments; however, reading and writing are ubiquitous and connected to every aspect of students’ lives. Texts that are appealing and relevant to student interests are intentionally chosen for after school clubs and projects as well as for the classroom. At Opportunity, for example, in speaking about the honors biology group, Daniel noted that he "picked five or six books...and in collaboration with the students...we
both pick the one people want to do...."

In Rhode Island, where Pioneer is located, passing the state standardized test is no longer a mandatory requirement for graduation. To earn their diplomas, students must demonstrate overall proficiency based on school and district requirements (aligned with state standards). At Pioneer, as at ASC and Opportunity, teaching to the test was never an option, and now it is no longer a factor. They continue to follow their own protocols. Gabrielle remarked,

Right from freshman year on, they're learning...about the career that they want...looking at...authentic, relevant projects that can help them personally...so now they have to read about it, now they have to write about it. They have to meet all of the learning goals.

Educators in this study all acknowledge the place for formal evaluations and the importance of holding students to high expectations that are school-based and student-centered, not test-obsessed. In the learning environment, the emphasis is not on state exams, but on school benchmarks which measure growth holistically. Thus, in addition to academic achievement, ASC's Faith emphasized the importance of considering students' emotional and personal progress and stamina, of being "...with them on the emotional roller coaster" so they can learn to cope.

Students are partners in this endeavor. Michael (Pioneer) Margot and Faith (ASC), and Robert (Opportunity) spoke of the need to help students learn how to self-assess, to understand, as Opportunity's Ruth commented, that they could "learn to grow" by having a "positive growth mindset." While a "positive growth mindset" can be used for independent work, students can apply it to group work as well. For example, Ruth noted that some assessments are based on the contributions that students make to an assigned team. "They always end up feeling so great," she reported, "They're like, We did so well because we worked together." They understand that everyone is working hard, and Ruth concluded, "The students start to feel the importance of
teamwork."

At ASC, Meaghan and Alexis referred to the intangible of growth mindset as developing good "habits of mind." Meaghan was very clear when she noted that helping students to develop good habits for "staying alert and being engaged" would result in the "personal benefit of acquiring confidence and the academic benefit of being able to access the curriculum."

Teaching students to be reflective is also part of the process. Asking them to be specific and accurate when they speak is another. Michael of Pioneer spoke to the goal that all shared when he stated: "We want the kids to be able to assess themselves and to think critically and honestly about how well they're doing."

The reason is straight-forward. Namely, these educators are leading students toward self-confidence, independence, and the ability to set goals, problem-solve, and achieve on their own in the real world - without the safety net of caring educators. According to ASC's Faith students need to be prepared for post-secondary training and "to be who they need to be" as college students, members of the work force, and citizens of the greater community.

To this point, ASC's Margo and Alexis as well as Daniel of Opportunity spoke of "molding" students. Gabrielle of Pioneer expanded on that idea, saying "...it's about molding independent and innovative thinkers" to which her colleague, Michael, added the need to develop "well-rounded people, good people." Daniel spoke passionately about guiding students in their transition from childhood to young adult, affirming that he wanted students to be secure in their relationships so that they had "the courage to make mistakes." He also restated the need for high expectations when he said that students "...can't just give up." For Daniel, the goal was to show students how to take control of their own lives, and, for example, not only be accepted to college but to know "how to be successful in college," and in life.
Sometimes growth evolved from students' self-assessment and a change of direction. ASC's Margot noted that it was not uncommon for her students to find new passions. "That kind of shifting happens," she remarked, and added, "There are a lot of ways to define yourself." Yet, because goals and growth are different for each child, Michael of Pioneer sounded a note of caution when he remarked that students need time "to process" and "to talk about stuff" so that they do not "get overwhelmed... retreat... and shut down."

Educators acknowledged that it is not easy for students to figure out who they are, what they want, and how to achieve their goals. They have to maneuver a complicated variety of overlapping expectations - from teachers and from themselves. With teacher guidance and student persistence, the results can be very rewarding. An example is the overlap between growth and personal learning demonstrated in the story of one of Jennifer's students at Pioneer, who was able to pursue her passion for graphic design by working as an intern for a small graphic design company.

Jennifer recounted how this young woman proved her professionalism and dedication to her mentors. "She's in [college] ...and working on her degree and has a...part-time job on the side doing something that she loves, that she's been doing since high school. It's great." What is also "great" is that this student has earned the trust of her mentor/employers so that "she now runs the store when they're on vacation." According to Jennifer, there is a strong possibility that this student will be offered a full time job when she graduates. "I have mentors that end up hiring their interns," she noted. This is a prime example of what can happen when personal growth meets personal interest in a real world learning opportunity. The importance of nurturing students' personal interests is the final sub-theme in this study and is discussed next.

**Personal Interests**
In this study, real world learning experiences are always connected to students' personal interests. Educators all express their goal that Pioneer's Gabrielle expressed to continually help students to "make connections." Accordingly, students' pursuit of personal interests is a hallmark of the educational culture of learning for these educators and their schools. Student passions are expressed in many forms both in and out of the classroom. As discussed earlier, students' interests are fostered through classroom projects, mentoring programs, artistic expression and performances, after school clubs, and some student choice in the topics and texts of any given class. Students are also encouraged to express themselves, their interests, and their beliefs by leading discussions and participating in student government. Personal interests and learning are part of the fiber of the schools in which these educators work and are paramount in the development and growth of students. Examples of students' personal interest are embedded throughout this document. In this section, the focus is the culminating activity for students at each of their schools, illustrated in the following examples. This is where the link between personal interests and learning through real world experiences is most evident.

At Opportunity, students in grades six through eleven make year-end presentations to demonstrate what they have learned both academically and personally. Referenced earlier, these are portfolio presentations called RoundTables. Daniel of Opportunity stated, "We ask students to present their own best or favorite work that they believe represents their own performance and growth in the end of the year RoundTable portfolio of work." Students are also asked to provide one sample of a subject or topic that has been challenging. Standing, they deliver their presentations and then field questions from a panel that includes their parents or guardians, two teachers, and two outside community members whom they do not know. It is a reflective process that requires students to self-assess and describe what they learned about themselves and
their subject matter, and what they still want to accomplish. In this way, students hone their professional skills and their ability to respond in the moment. They also gain self-esteem. Ruth, Daniel's colleague, commented, "...they develop, I think, a personal sense of their own accomplishment..."

This researcher witnessed an eleventh grade student give her RoundTable audience a lesson in math, logic, and reasoning as "she diagrammed a physics problem on a Whiteboard." After she finished, she asked if she could explain "just one more thing" because math was her favorite subject. She also discussed "how historical events and their context ran parallel to themes in the classic novel, The Great Gatsby." Then, she connected those ideas to show their relevance in today's world. Fielding questions with ease, she closed by "thanking her audience for the opportunity" to make her presentation. She appeared to be in total control and commented that she had "made this presentation so often that she had been looking forward to it," a show of self-confidence that was one of the school's objectives for its students.

One person asked the student what she planned to study in college, and she replied that she wanted to be a doctor, but had not yet chosen a specialty. Those who watched her presentation felt pride in her accomplishments and in her promise and potential. After congratulating the future physician on her performance, one community member told her, "When you finish medical school, you can be my doctor." RoundTables are the steps that lead to a culminating display of knowledge and real world learning, called Senior Internships.

Based on an area of personal interest, seniors at Opportunity write proposals to potential internship mentors. Robert explained: "Early in senior year, [students] start thinking about.. some possibilities" of interest with one of Opportunity's community partners. Ruth continued, "... we just reach out to the resources around us... Just connecting them is really important..." so
the students can "explore their passions..." in a specific or related field. Local science labs, hospitals, and the police station are some of the institutions that host Opportunity seniors for internships. What is important, Ruth said, is that "they're out there in the real world, doing real things." Daniel added, "Everyone doesn't get what they want all the time, but we try," and he was pleased to share that "a student wants to be a dentist, so we had an internship this year with a dentist."

Internships at Opportunity take place during the second semester of senior year. "So, they don't come to school on Wednesdays," Daniel reported. "They go to internship...for 100 hours, and they have to submit journals...about what they're doing. Then there's a presentation." Students describe what they learned from their real world training to teachers, mentors, family, friends, and community members.

Unlike Opportunity and Pioneer, where student selection is lottery-based, entry to ASC depends on an audition that demonstrates student potential. Once accepted, students pursue personal interests that are both academic and artistic, but the intention is to become a professional artist in one of several disciplines, including, music, theater, visual, and dance. Students are groomed to be disciplined in their art and in their academic work. They learn that discipline, commitment, and persistence allow art to flourish and foster academic achievement as well. As Faith said, "we want to push the envelope" and develop the whole child: artist, scholar, and citizen to be successful. Throughout the year, students are required to meet regular benchmarks in their art form. Students who meet the benchmarks advance to the next level in their art forms. Those who do not meet the benchmarks have to repeat their artistic year - even if they pass their academic subjects.

It is students' artistry that is at the core of the culminating senior year, a real world
experience known as Senior Grant. ASC's Faith describes it as "a graduation requirement" and an opportunity for students to use their artist voices. She states, "I'm trying to develop artists that have a voice. Right?" So, she challenges her students, asking, "What are you going to use your art for?...What is that thing in society that really would make you get up on top of the roof and scream and shout, saying, 'This has got to end?' Okay, you're an artist. How are you going to address it?"

In preparing their Senior Grant proposals, ASC students are challenged to use their art to express their activism and to address a problem within their local community a) by developing an action plan that incorporates their art form, and b) by enlisting the support and help of a community member or organization with a similar cause. Faith continues, "They write a letter of intent, which takes a lot of work. We have a rubric describing what needs to go into the letter..."

Once their proposals are fine-tuned and work with their mentors is completed, students present their ideas to a panel of "judges" comprised of faculty and greater community members. The judges select a group of finalists who finalize their grant proposals and then make a second presentation to a new panel. The winning students are each awarded a $500 grant to use toward implementing their plans. As important as the project itself, part of the learning experience is the professional approach students are required to undertake to find a community member and to win the approval and mentorship which prepares them to implement their plans. Students must use their art to persuade others to their point of view and their cause.

Faith expressed special pride in the student preparation for the Senior Grant that starts at the beginning of junior year. The skills developed in the reading and writing seminar, the project-work created and developed in academic classes, the artistic disciplines and commitment that have been nurtured - all come together through an intentional and structured series of units.
"The eleventh grade has scaffolding towards their Senior Grant. Right? So we have a history unit, an art history unit, and then we go into an artist activist unit, then we go into this Senior Grant, and then [after] we go into college prep all through the lens of reading and writing."

Senior Grant is not the only opportunity for real world learning experience at ASC. Students participate regular performances for their peers, faculty, and community members. They also are exposed to multiple disciplines and career options within their artistic major. For example, music majors may take a lab in sound engineering. Theater majors may rotate through concentrations in set design, lighting, and production. "At the end of two years," Faith reports, "[students] can decide whether or not they want to stay with their acting concentration or if they want to do one of the [related] concentrations that we have developed.” Providing some intentional flexibility both supports students and encourages them to stay and persist rather than give up. As Faith’s colleague Margot commented, "We want to keep attrition rates down...so we have to keep clearing the path...showing students new opportunities."

At Pioneer, learning is truly personalized. As Jennifer, Gabrielle, and Michael noted, every student has "an individualized education plan." From freshman through senior years, community projects and internships are part of every student’s learning experience. While proposals for community projects are shaped in class with feedback from both teacher and student peers, the presentation and implementation of the projects take place outside the classroom and are managed by the students.

For internships, students (usually seniors) work, off-campus, two days a week, learning under the tutelage of on-the-job mentors. Michael affirmed, "We’re not forcing kids into anything, but we want kids engaged in their community, whatever that means for them...it could mean within that one little vein of whatever they’re interested in." Students are required to
problem-solve at their internships, but can seek counsel from their mentors and teachers. Michael and his colleagues, Gabrielle and Jennifer, use their role as advisors "to ask the right questions" and to help students "find good resources" so that they can learn how to improve their work, research their problem or area of inquiry, make innovative suggestions based on research, and move forward to present their findings and offer options for addressing real world issues.

One of Michael's students, who is planning to be a nurse, had an internship at a nursing home. One of her responsibilities was to keep patients active and moving although many of them were confined to wheelchairs. Michael repeatedly asked his student, "Tell me more about the activities you've got to do...to get them moving." He pushed her to think of what she could do to overcome their physical restrictions. On one of his visits, Michael was exchanging ideas with the student and her mentor. The student turned to her mentor and said, "I like music and dance. Is there any way I could do that kind of class here?" The mentor replied, "Well, you could, but a lot of them can't...get out of their wheelchairs." Then, they all wondered, "What if we did just upper body movement?" That moment was the student's epiphany. With her wheel-chair patients in mind, the young woman created an upper body movement program set to music. Michael's evaluation was that "it's not just about advancing yourself if you have an awareness of the world around you." This student learned that by being sensitive to her patients' physical problems, she was able to be both innovative and flexible to meet her patients' need to exercise while accommodating their physical limitations.

Encouraging students to pursue their passions often is the push they need to persevere. For example, Jennifer reflected that "a lot of times...one thing that you'll notice is sometimes the students are really able to dig into their strengths." She remembered, "...a couple of years ago, I had a kid who was autistic...he was really interested in transportation." Social communication
was difficult for him, but, Jennifer continued, "...he was able to get an internship in transportation, and it's just incredible, but then he's in school...and he was able to earn his associates degree in transportation." She spoke with passion when she said, "I think the number one thing is that personal vision...the internship is great because it gives [students] that real world experience...to see what it is they're pursuing." Even if an internship is not exactly what students wanted, she tells them, "...try to turn it into something...that is connected... You get what you work for."

Gabrielle noted that many students come to Pioneer because they are "...struggling in traditional schools...they're failing and looking for something else..." That something is often the internships offered at Pioneer because students want"... to get out into the real world," and follow their "passions." For example, one girl is interning at a highly ranked local university studying "with an engineer and learning about robotics." Another student is enrolled in a certification program to become a teaching assistant. "We run the whole gamut," said Gabrielle. The goal, she continued, is for students "to have some type of real world learning...out of the building...in the real world."

Although internships experiences are reserved primarily for seniors, preparation for real world professionalism starts in freshman year. Gabrielle explained that students start "career exploration" in ninth grade and look for community service projects that relate to their initial goals. Continuing through tenth grade, the work on these projects remains under the close supervision and guidance of teacher/advisors. In eleventh grade, Gabrielle noted that students engage in "a lot more real world learning projects and assignments," and they start to hone their research skills. Many are also developing personal and academic independence, she continued, by "taking college classes," plus "evaluating other authentic, relevant projects that can help
them personally in their internships.

Gabrielle relayed the story of a student who was interested in culinary arts. At his internship for a small restaurant, his mentor asked him to propose a revision to the menu. The student "did a marketing plan discussing the needs of customers" in the area, followed by a "survey of current customers." After analyzing the data, the student created a menu, "changing some of the things on the menu" and updating the "graphic look." The value of Pioneer's internships is especially personal to Gabrielle. She confided,

You know...my role before I became an advisor was an internship coordinator...building relationships with businesses...establishing partnerships with organizations to help our students do anything from science projects to engineering projects to art projects...building those partnerships was really, really critical...That's why it's critical when our kids are out at internships...that the advisor is also out.

There are a variety of assessments for evaluating student progress and/or gaps during their internships. For Gabrielle, what is most important is whether students are "meeting expectations and getting through the academic piece." First, advisors monitor their students during monthly on-site visits, observations, and discussions with both the student and the mentor. Second, students maintain and submit internship journals about what they learn, problems that they face and how they address them. The journals, Michael remarked "become part of the final evaluation." Third, mentors, students, and advisors evaluate the internship and the final project based on a rubric and conference together to give feedback on the results. Michael offers, "They usually do align fairly well." Fourth, students present their internship projects and accompanying research at the twice-yearly Senior Exhibitions held on the Pioneer campus.

Michael reported that, while "students have a lot of assistance...they're really responsible
for managing a project...[and for] "putting all the different pieces together." During Senior Exhibitions, students describe what they learned, how they contributed to the internship, how the internship influenced their career choice, and the relevance of the experience to their future and to the community. They receive feedback and validation from fellow students, advisors, mentors, family, friends, and community members. It is an opportunity, as Jennifer stated, for students "to feel challenged by the evaluation...to be the expert in their area...and to have their moment as a successful student."

As discussed earlier, for students who want to start their own business, Pioneer offers an entrepreneurial program as an elective. Students learn how to prepare a business proposal for marketing their business and are given the opportunity to present their concepts and plans to business representatives and investors for feedback and possible funding. An idea from one of Jennifer's students was for "Yummy Yummies...a fusion food snack cart." Jennifer commented that the young entrepreneur's plan had "a good product niche," but the marketing and sales potential were not fully developed. Jennifer reported that there was some interest in the idea, but investors were unsure if the concept had sufficient "upside potential" financially to warrant investment.

Every educator discussed the many real world opportunities their students were able to experience, but uppermost in their conversations were the final projects that seniors developed and managed on their own. Opportunity called these occasion Senior Internships; ASC, Senior Grants; and Pioneer, Senior Exhibitions. Whatever they were called, the preparation and the purpose were the same. First, each student had to choose a hobby, an issue, or a career goal of deep personal interest and determine how to use that interest to help the community. Next, with professionalism, each had to contact and explain the idea to a company or individual who
could offer relevant experience and an opportunity to explore the viability of the plans and revise it, if necessary. Third, each had to finalize in writing, an action plan for implementation, accompanied by any necessary additional materials. Finally, seniors had to present their ideas to peers, faculty, community members, and mentors for evaluation. In all cases, this assignment was required for graduation. These assignments were hard work and also reflective in that students looked at where they started, what they accomplished, and what it meant to be a good member of the community. In the opinion of Pioneer's Jennifer, "real world experience gives them a chance to see what it is they're pursuing...[and to live their]...personal vision."

These educators and their schools have different approaches to real world learning through student interests. Yet, what they have in common is significant. Real world learning is a catalyst that helps students develop 21st century skills and habits, including technology, teamwork, research and problem-solving, plus independent and innovative thinking. It empowers students with the courage to fail, the will to succeed, and the opportunity to self-assess and affirm their goals or find new ones. In any event, real world learning is, for every student, a step forward into the future. Once again, Jennifer of Pioneer spoke for all the teachers when she reflected that students "struggle with their independence...[but] when they work things out and make it happen...when they're loving their internships...and talking about the real things they get to do," they gain confidence and pride. The bonus, she explained, is that "...the other kids...want that as well." These educators agreed that, for their students, personal learning through real world experiences developed character, independence, ownership, accountability, a commitment to community as well as to self, and the opportunity to understand, appreciate, and take advantage of their options.

Section Summary
In this section, teachers discussed the three themes that influenced best practices in their schools and resulted in positive student outcomes. The themes are *Team Collaboration Includes Students, Relevance Sparks Student Engagement, and Learning through Real World Experience.* Within the theme, *Team Collaboration Includes Students* the construct of team collaboration is an intentional and everyday occurrence between educators and their students, and among themselves and other colleagues. It is part of the structure of the culture of learning, part of the "safe love nest" that ASC's Margot referenced earlier. Relying on their relationships and trust in each other, different teams of community members come together to strategize and implement effective social, emotional, and academic practices for their students. As a team and as individuals, collaboration is a personal endeavor and commitment, instituted to help students to grow and thrive. Through their stories, teachers exhibit awareness of their students' anxieties and needs. They create a network of caring team members and an environment of safety and stability. Their aim is to reassure and protect students whose lives are often chaotic.

The theme *Relevance that Sparks Student Engagement* speaks to a continuous, systemic, and intentional value of a school's culture. It is a goal of the curriculum. It is a goal that allows teachers the flexibility to include current events, texts, and materials that reflect students' interests and concerns. In addition, being relevant means that teachers listen to their students' voices and empowered them with some level of choice in the topics and materials used for discussion. It means that students lead some of the discussions because ownership of the tasks and materials is a form of relevance. To ensure relevance, participants engage in a mutually respectful collaboration between teachers and colleagues, teachers and administrators, and especially between teachers and students. Relevance is a purposeful commitment and a promise to value students’ perspectives and contributions to their learning. It is intentionally incorporated
into the learning in the classroom, and in other activities during and after school. Accordingly, it nurtures students' interests and contributes to their growth - personally, emotionally, and academically.

Finally, the theme *Learning through Real World Experiences* focuses on the opportunities that allow students to pursue their personal passions. It has a direct role and a lasting impact on student development and growth. Every day the connection between class work and life is made, leading to an end-of-year final event. The educators who participated in this study confirmed that when students spoke and expressed their personal interests and issues, they were heard. Students' hobbies and passions were used to engage them in relevant reading, to promote new ideas, to encourage inquiry, exploration, and innovation. In this section, the teachers concentrated on what students learn, what views they hold, how they grow, evolve, and develop, and how they apply their interests and passions in a personal culminating experience of reflection and giving back to their communities. Students also learn how to self-assess and take stock of what they know, what they want, and how to adapt and grow to meet self-directed challenges and ambitions. Their final projects - internships in the real world - are the sum total of the best practices that guided them during high school, and which are encapsulated in the three themes described in this section. These real world experiences represent each student's personal journey of growth, discovery, and preparedness for what he or she wants to do next.

"It is possible," said Pioneer's Michael, "for every kid to be excited about putting their best effort into their work." According to the findings, Michael's words articulate the goal for every participant in this study. They are invested in their students' wellness, in their personal and intellectual self-discovery, and in their future opportunities. These educators believe that their commitment to students is important and effective. Margot of ASC reflected, "Giving students
opportunities as human beings that they might not have recognized before,...this is the work...the right thing to do.”

Chapter Summary

The themes and sub-themes discussed in this study are not discrete. They are decidedly not silos, separate from each other. They overlap, diverge, repeat, and complement each other. It is a messy process, but so is life. This chapter presented findings related to the three research questions that guided and informed the narrative study. Of the nine themes that emerged, the truth that Relationships Are Foundations of Student Learning is paramount. As described by the educators, relationships are an intentional and deep-rooted characteristic of their respective cultures of learning, as well as the core principle upon which the learning environment is built and developed. The remaining eight themes - including Community Supports the Holistic Child, The Purposeful Use of Time, Trust Leads to What Is Possible, The Positivity of High Expectations, The Power of Student Voice, Team Collaboration Includes Students, Relevance Sparks Student Engagement, and Learning through Real World Experience - also reflect the relationships between students and teachers, and teachers with their peers and colleagues. In addition, the findings suggest that successful academic outcomes for disadvantaged and other students are not dependent on the focus of learning in a particular school environment. The participants in this study, for example, represented three schools with three different areas of focus, and in each school, students exhibited positive results (See Table 4, p. 128). Thus, as educators described, success appears to be due to the persistent adherence to the findings that emerged in this study.

The findings also indicate that there is a synergistic interaction and connectedness among the themes. Themes build on and evolve from each other, interact and overlap, and circle back.
Relationships are the starting point and the foundation that supports and binds all the others. The emergence of these findings led to the development of a model (See Figure 3, p. 233) that illustrates this synergy.

The central construct of this model is Relationships, which are rooted in Community and developed in the space that Time provides. A direct outgrowth of Relationships is the second construct of Trust, which fosters High Expectations and is bolstered through Student Voice. The third construct features Team Collaboration, Relevance, and Real World Learning Experiences, which emerge and evolve in the presence of the first two constructs. Each of these constructs interacts with and strengthens the others, and by so doing, reinforces and deepens students' personal and academic growth. Together, the three constructs comprise the culture of learning.

**Figure 3: The Synergy of Constructs that Define an Intentional Culture of Learning**
The findings suggest both the complexity and the possibilities that an intentional culture of learning provides to students and their learning and to their teachers as well. The findings also indicate that in order to personalize learning and to educate children holistically, the three constructs are essential. Between and among them are the elements of student well-being and authenticity, plus individual academic and personal growth. As participants described, to gift children with these elements and to show them how to use them with effectiveness prepares them to take their place in the world, to actively pursue their own interests, and to pay it forward by contributing to the betterment of society. That is exactly what the educators in this study describe and what they continue to do every day. Based on the findings presented in this chapter, the Synergy Model emerged and informed the study's conclusions. These conclusions, including opportunities for future research, will be discussed in Chapter Five.
Chapter 5: Conclusions, Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Using narrative methodology, the purpose of this qualitative research was to explore deeply the cultures of learning at alternative high schools through the voices and perspectives of their alternative educators in order to understand a) the culture of learning (and its social and academic elements) at their respective alternative high schools and b) how these cultures influenced disadvantaged students. In accordance with these goals, and based on the conceptual framework and its two-fold lens - of both social and academic components - three questions that guided and informed this study were:

1) How do alternative high school educators describe the culture of learning at their schools?

2) According to alternative high school educators, based on their respective cultures of learning, how do teacher/student relationships help to build confidence and motivation in disadvantaged students?

3) What student-centered best practices have alternative high school educators experienced that resulted in academic success for disadvantaged students?

This qualitative narrative study explored the lived experiences of alternative high school educators who described the cultures of learning in their respective schools and offered their views on how these cultures helped disadvantaged students to achieve positive outcomes - both personal and academic. The ten participants in this study were selected purposefully to insure that they had at least three years of experience as alternative educators in high schools whose graduation rates exceeded the national average of approximately 81 percent (NCES, 2014). At selected schools in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, gatekeepers were contacted per Northeastern University protocol. After receiving their approval, prospective participants were
contacted directly. Those who expressed interest completed a Confidential Informational Questionnaire (See Appendix B), and the group of participants was chosen.

There were two primary criteria for participants' diversity. One was the number of years of service as an alternative educator. The other was for a minimum of three years of teaching or other experience at their current school. There were no criteria for race, ethnicity, gender, or age. Yet, the ten participants were diverse. The seven women and three men ranged in age from mid-twenties to mid-fifties. Five were White, and five represented minority groups. Three had worked in traditional school settings. Three had been employed in corporate America. In addition to teaching, two were department chairs, and one was a dean. One participant had worked only at her current school. All engaged in semi-structured, one-to-one interviews that lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss first, research conclusions and the impact of the Synergy Model (See Figure 3, p. 233) which emerged during the analysis of the data; second, implications for practice; and third, recommendations for future research. Accordingly, this chapter is organized into three sections: 1) Conclusions and Discussion; 2) Implications for Practice; and 3) Recommendations for Future Research.

**Conclusions and Discussions**

There were four primary conclusions that emerged from the analysis of the data in this qualitative narrative study. They are: 1) Students' personal and academic growth is founded in authentic and nurturing relationships between teachers and students; these relationships are protected and enhanced by interactive and collaborative support groups; 2) Trust emerges from honest relationships and empowers students to participate in and be responsible for their own learning; 3) Personal learning opportunities and real world experiences increase student
engagement and persistence, resulting in positive outcomes, both personal and academic; and 4) There is a synergistic connection between relationship-building, support groups, trust, and personal learning that together connote an intentional culture of learning, as illustrated by the Synergy Model (See Figure 3, p. 233). These conclusions are explained in the sections which follow. Discussions show how the conclusions relate to and are supported by the existing literature. Connections between the conclusions, the Conceptual Framework (See Figure 2, p. 39), and the Synergy Model will be presented as well.

**Conclusion One: Nurturing, authentic teacher/student relationships are fundamental to students' personal and academic growth and are protected by collaborative, interactive support groups**

The first conclusion in this study is that the relationships developed between teachers and students are a necessary component for student success - first in personal growth, and subsequently, in academic progress. Participants in this study offered specific explanations for this view. First, their collective experience was that before students could be engaged in learning, they had to lower their private defenses, engage in honest conversations, and learn to trust others and themselves. This process was fostered in the safety and security of teacher/student relationships. Second, in practice, participants saw that authentic relationships were a catalyst that empowered students to be open and responsive to inquiry, risk, failure, persistence, accountability, and success. In short, students needed to feel and to believe that adults in their schools knew them and cared about them as individuals. Therefore, not only were relationships the required starting point for student growth, they were the linchpin of the culture of learning in their respective school environments. To reach this conclusion, participants in the study identified three primary characteristics of the culture of leaning: *Relationships, Community,* and
Time - each of which will be addressed later in this discussion. Paramount among them were authentic relationships between teachers and students. Relationships, in turn, were motivating factors in students' engagement and persistence to achieve high expectations in both personal growth and academic accomplishment.

The literature substantiates the importance of student/teacher relationships on student outcomes. Noddings (2005) spoke directly to this point when she stated:

The caring teacher strives first to establish and maintain caring relations, and these relations exhibit an integrity that provides a foundation for everything that teacher and student do together (p. 3 of 6).

Watson (2011) gave testimony to Noddings in her study of disadvantaged high school students who were thriving in an alternative school where the collaborative learning culture was based on "long-term, caring relationships with students" (p. 1519). Others had similar views. For example, in their quantitative study, Klem and Connell (2004) sought to identify factors that contributed to student engagement in elementary, middle, and high schools in urban districts. They identified a strong link between teacher support and student engagement. In addition, Murray and Malmgren (2005) found that at-risk, poor students could especially benefit from positive relationships with their teachers.

The need to protect the privacy and confidentiality of teacher/student relationships was also noted in the literature. To cite one example, as reported in Gallagher (2013), the security and safety that students felt in their relationships with teachers was manifest in their self-esteem and impacted social and academic outcomes. These positive relationships, Gallagher stated, became "...a secure base from which [students] can...take on academic challenges and work on social-emotional development" (p. 1 of 7).
Findings indicated that participants in this study understood that to help their students in the classroom, they had to know their students as individuals and to appreciate their interests. In other words, they had to cultivate relationships with students outside as well as inside the classroom. They did so by mentoring after-school clubs, coaching sports, taking students to lunch or to a play, and making time to form personal bonds. Advisory provided a particular opportunity for students to have a long-term, deeper relationship with one teacher. The efforts put forth to develop well-rounded and strong personal relationships (in class, outside of class, and in advisory) benefited both teachers and students. As the findings showed, when invested with honest communication and protected with what Schein (2002) called psychological safety, relationships flourished and were rewarded with students' personal growth in confidence and motivation, as well as with their academic growth in self-directed achievement.

Another related finding was that relationships did not exist in a vacuum. They were supported, on an as-needed basis, by team members - such as Health and Wellness and academic intervention groups within the school. Participants believed that it was preferable for students to resolve any emotional issues or academic concerns with the teacher in the classroom - both to maintain student focus and to strengthen the relationship between teacher and student. However, they also agreed that collaborative support groups offered additional caring relationships that were beneficial to students' well-being. Importantly, teachers and support groups worked as a collaborative team. Although each member had a discrete area of expertise, strategies, interventions, implementation, and timing on behalf of a student were discussed and agreed to collectively among team members, regardless of rank or position within the school.

The literature supports the value of authentic interactive team collaborations to help students to cope and to maintain meaningful connections with others. For example, Fullan and
Scott (2014) cited that working in interdependent, collaborative teams provided a support system in which educators can make important decisions and contributed to learning. The importance of team collaboration was a theme in the findings of Quinn and Poirier's 2007 study on effective alternative education programs. In their study, teachers reported that formal and informal collaborations with peers and administrators were "critical to school success" (p. 36). They spoke of a support network with whom they could talk openly about students' problems, as well as other concerns. Supportive relationships and collaborative teams were also integral to Senge's (2006) learning organizations "...where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire...and where people are continually learning to see the whole together" (p. 3). That is, when there is a high level of interconnectedness among people, communication is easier (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

As the literature and findings show, coming together as a collaborative team on behalf of students is indicative of the importance of professional relationships among staff. However an unexpected finding was that mutually caring, helpful, and respectful relationships between teachers and between teachers and administrators (in and out of the school setting) were instrumental in bolstering teacher self-worth and morale. These supportive relationships contributed to teachers' commitment and continual efforts for their students. For example, Ruth of Opportunity stated that "I feel very supported from the top down." Her colleague Daniel specifically cited feeling comfortable in the "real relationship" he had with his evaluator. ASC's Alexis enjoyed being "valued" by all the members of her school community. These teachers appreciated what each and every one referred to as a "family" of colleagues and friends. To underscore the sense of community among adults in and out of school, Jennifer from Pioneer remarked that educators "definitely spend a lot of time together."
Michael, also of Pioneer, noted that colleagues dropped by his class just to see if a particular strategy was working. He also referenced his principal who sometimes came to his class to observe and provide feedback, and at other times came just to assist him in the classroom or to share a "silly story." In Chapter Four, Michael shared his own story when he described the day that he, the school principal, and two other colleagues accompanied his students to a showing of James Baldwin's documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*. He spoke of it being more than an academic experience, but also one of social bonding and equity between adults and children. Collegial relationships among adults, including mutual respect, cooperation, and friendship, appear to be role models for students and created a positive learning environment as well.

When Margot of ASC said, "We do it as a team. It's all of us," she was referring to the depth and breadth of relationships and collaboration throughout the school setting. Therefore, this finding, suggests that, to be an effective culture of learning, authentic relationships and a sense of well-being must be systemic and interactive across and at all levels of the learning environment. Also, according to participants, strong relationships require patience and time in which to grow and thrive.

**Conclusion Two: Trust (which evolves from honest relationships) empowers students to participate in, voice their opinions about, and be responsible for their own learning**

The second conclusion is that trust naturally evolves from authentic and caring relationships, and that the high expectations that are seeded in relationships come to fruition in the presence of trust. Educators in this study were clear that without trust in their relationships, students would not have made effective progress in developing social sensitivities, appropriate habits, and caring, supportive interactions with others. Nor would they have been able to engage
and self-motivate to acquire acknowledge. Conversely, if their personal relationships with teachers (and other adults in school) deepened into trust, then, according to the experiences of these teachers, everything is possible, including personal, emotional, and academic growth, self-confidence, self-motivation, persistence, and achievement.

The literature attests to the truth of this finding. According to Bryk and Schneider (2002), there is a direct correlation between trust and student engagement that is a product of mutual respect. Namely, the stronger the respect, the deeper the trust, and the greater the student engagement. Likewise, in their 2013 study, Harris et al. indicated that the positive connection between trust and student performance went beyond the teacher/student relationship to embrace the student's relationship with the school. To explain, Harris et al. reported that when students and their teachers developed trust, students felt safe and cared for not only by their teacher, but within the school. Further, they found that when students could relate to the school, they were more likely to participate in school activities, adhere to behavioral expectations, and, "in some cases, improve academic performance" (p. 28). These researchers, as well as Bryk and Schneider (2002) concluded that building a culture of trust across the school community resulted in a positive learning atmosphere for students and staff alike.

Trust and the benefits that ensue are circular and may repeat continuously. Noddings (2005) discussed the cause and effect in the circle of trust. She believes that, listening is proof of caring and, over time, it gives rise to trust. When students trust, they become receptive and willing to listen to what educators want to give them - knowledge, advice, a suggestion - and will think of their relationships with their teachers as mutual collaborations and cooperation. The ongoing conversations in a caring, trusting relationship allowed teachers to discover students' interests, talents, and needs, which were used to help students to "make connections between
school studies" (p. 4 of 6) and their own interests.

In other words, student voice had a role in meaningful learning. Participants described the impact of student voice on positive academic outcomes. As students became confident in the mutual respect of a caring relationship and learned to trust, they also gained the self-confidence to express their opinions, ideas, and academic suggestions in the larger school community. Student engagement and self-motivation followed, along with accountability and ownership.

The literature gives evidence that attests to student voice as a significant factor in learning. According to Toshalis and Nakkula (2012), student voice played "a critical role in student engagement and the capacity to complete difficult academic work" (p. 27). The authors pointed out that student voice was on a spectrum that ranged from volunteering an opinion on a topic, actively participating in a decision-making process, identifying a problem, and at some point, leading the discussion and managing a solution to a problem. What was empowering and motivating to students was being given "a chance to formally declare their opinions about something in the hope they will be considered when decisions are made" (pp. 24-25). Simply stated, just being invited to be part of the process inspired student engagement, as well as ownership of their work and pride in their efforts. Significantly, in the opinion of Toshalis and Nakkula, "Without voice, there is no authenticity in the learning" (p. 33).

In their study, Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011) also spoke to the social and academic agency that resulted from student voice. They suggested that adults had to view students as capable before giving them voice. Throughout their research, Kirshner and Pozzoboni sought to give credence to this view. First they cited literature that proved that high school youth were capable of strategic thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving and "were developmentally ready to participate [in decision making] under conditions of support" (p. 1636). They also
found that students were experts in their personal worlds and could provide insights and ideas that were relevant to subjects and topics in school.

The researchers also pointed to an anomaly among some disadvantaged youth that presented an opportunity. Some youth, particularly those of color, had mature responsibilities outside of school. These included taking care of younger siblings, working after school to help with family expenses, translating for family members in a variety of situations. These students assumed adult roles and made adult decisions, but were not offered the same experience at school. Based on the findings in their study, Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011) argued that "to treat students as legitimate participants with adults" (p. 1658) offered four potential benefits. First, it produced student buy-in and accountability for their learning. Second, it honored the students' right to express themselves. Third, it welcomed students into the learning community. Lastly, it deepened the relationships and trust between students and their teachers. Thus, there is an interconnectedness between relationships, trust, high expectations, and student voice. Moreover, because interacting relationships can overlap, student voice is also a key component of real world personalized learning, which itself emerges from trusting and collaborative relationships and high expectations.

As a result, this finding suggests that trust emerges organically, naturally evolving from caring student/teacher relationships. It is a force that empowers student voice, which leads to some degree of personal academic choice. Subsequently, the combination of trust and student voice resulted in student engagement and self-motivation as students strove to meet the high expectations set for them: first to please their teachers and then to satisfy their own ambitions. In the process, students became accountable and took ownership of their learning. This finding corroborates the literature in describing how teacher/student relationships empower and motivate
students. It also validates the importance of both social and academic learning and growth.

**Conclusion Three: Personal and relevant learning opportunities increase student engagement and persistence, resulting in positive outcomes, both personal and academic; student voice and choice are integral elements in personal learning**

The third conclusion is that students engage and actively participate when learning (in the classroom and outside of it) is personalized (in some ways) based on their interests and is also made relevant and meaningful to them and to the world around them through the purposeful selection of topics and resulting discussions. Real world experiences provided authentic opportunities for students to problem-solve and to grow personally, academically, and professionally. Such positive outcomes were further enhanced when student voice and choice, inherent in personal learning, were part of the equation. For example, Pioneer’s Gabrielle noted that if a student expressed an interest in cooking, she would try to arrange “a tour of a culinary campus...and interviews with chefs” among other possibilities. By being mindful of students’ personal interests, teachers are continuing to strengthen the relationships and trust between themselves and their students. Educators shared these common goals, but implemented them differently because, as noted in Chapter Four, the schools in which the participants worked had different areas of learning focus. Yet, in each learning environment, teachers injected relevance into the work, both through current events and through their knowledge of students’ interests.

In Opportunity, the learning focus is on scholarship and a tightly developed curriculum. So, student choice was more evident in the reading and writing and honors classes, as well as in after school mentoring programs where students gave input for topics and texts. Students also pursued personal interests in a variety of clubs and sports, or they were invited to start their own club, with the assistance of a faculty member. The year-end RoundTable presentations prepared
younger students for real world Senior Internships that were both discussed in Chapter Four.

At ASC, content curriculum was also connected to real word issues and problems - both social and political - as well as to topics and ideas that were particularly meaningful to students as scholars and as artists. Whether they were arts teachers or content teachers, participants spoke of the importance of the creative perspective in everyone's life. As Alexis pointed out, at one time "all great scientists and mathematicians were also artists."

Students were assessed academically through tests and projects designed to find solutions to real world problems. Their artistic development was showcased at regular benchmark performances throughout high school. In addition, a senior internship, called Senior Grant, was a critical element of real world learning for these students and was discussed in Chapter Four.

Real world learning at Pioneer started in the ninth grade. Students were actively involved through a community service projects-based curriculum, which focused on students' interests. An entrepreneurship elective course provided another opportunity for students to pursue their passions. Internships were primarily available to seniors (and some juniors) who spent two days of every week at jobs that reflected their personal and career interests. Although students might change their career goals, according to Michael, real-world opportunities also taught them "how to ask questions...write a research paper...and act professionally..." and become independent problem solvers and productive members of the community.

The common constructs of relevance, student choice, and real-world experience were intentionally cultural and purposefully developed by the educators in their respective schools. Importantly, despite the differences in learning focus, students in the three learning communities were successful and graduated (See Table 4, p. 128). These facts suggest that the elements of success may be more important than how they are delivered.
The literature substantiates the positive influence of personal learning both on student motivation and on their personal and academic outcomes. For example, in their study, Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) commented that student voice, motivation, and engagement are "the trifecta of student-centered learning" (p. 33). In addition, they cited other researchers, such as Noguera and Wing (2006), who linked student choice to "elevated achievement levels in marginalized student populations" (p. 28). Based on the findings of their study, Toshalis and Nakkula argued that student voice expressed students' personal choice. Importantly, their data showed that students who had some control to personalize their learning were authentically engaged and challenged themselves to succeed.

Fullan (2009), also a proponent of personalized learning, stated that it is about much more than meeting students' individual needs. Rather, it engages students in their own learning through their passions, experiences, and voice. Fullan stated that when students had a role in their own learning, they would own it and achieve optimal results. To illustrate, Pioneer's Jennifer told of an autistic student who was interested in transportation and found an internship in that field. His passion motivated him to take college courses, through dual enrollment, about the business of transportation. As a result of his commitment, this young man earned his associates degree as well as his high school diploma. This is only one story of the positive results of student choice that emerged in this study.

Quinn and Poirier (2007) made the point that personal learning might refer to more than content. They found that it was motivating to simply give students opportunities to express input about classroom activities or about topics and questions for discussion. Students wanted to be included and to have an active role in their own learning or in their learning environment. Wolk (2010) stated simply that personalized learning matched student diversity.
Further support of the positive link between personal learning and student achievement was presented in the 2014 Hanover Research report, which was a summary of the literature review on this topic. The report noted that personal learning could be implemented via a number of formats, such as on-line programs, dual enrollment collaborations with local colleges, and real world internships, among others. Also cited were the benefits of these formats, as well as other strategic approaches to personal learning that educators found to be effective: First, grouping students heterogeneously allowed students to help and learn from each other. Second, offering alternate pathways via dual enrollment or academically themed cohorts, such as criminal justice, increased student options for choosing and pursuing personal interests. Third, having students manage their own projects and plans leading to a showcasing of their accomplishments engendered buy-in, ownership, self-confidence, and pride. Fourth, providing real-world experiences, such as internships or community service projects developed independence, accountability, and a sense of citizenship. Finally, according to the report, student choice was a primary factor in academic success because it increased positive participation, developed responsibility, and gave students "a vested interest in what they are producing" (p. 13).

The fifth approach was that learning in a small school environment fostered stronger relationships, and, therefore, large schools should reconfigure themselves into small schools-within-schools. While this was a finding of the 2014 Hanover Research report, it may not be a feasible action for schools to undertake. This suggestion is, however, a topic of consideration for future research and will be discussed later in this chapter.

The Hanover Research (2014) report concluded that whatever the strategic method or venue for delivering personal learning, content that is relevant to students' interests is directly related to improved academic outcomes. Overall, the findings in the report included the
following facts: 1) Personal learning engaged student interest; 2) Personal learning gave students the opportunity to set their own learning goals, formulate plans for achieving them, and adapt what they learned for use outside of the classroom; 3) Personal learning could have a positive influence on student academic persistence, leading to successful outcomes; and 4) Student choice was an important influencing factor in positive academic results, "even when student choice is an ancillary part of the curriculum" (p. 14). In short, personal learning, incorporating student choice, galvanizes students to self-motivate, persist, and improve their performance. As such, this report parallels findings elsewhere in the literature.

Likewise, the findings in this study show that students' personal growth and academic achievement are manifest in personal learning, which encompasses multiple components. These include student choice, relevance, and project-based learning in the classroom, plus hands-on real world experience inside and outside of the school. The findings also suggest that authentic personal learning is possible when teachers spend time getting to know their students, their passions, and their interests - not only in the classroom, but through clubs, field trips, advisories, and other opportunities. Pioneer's Gabrielle noted, "It's all based on the student...their needs...their passions," and that as long as the focus is on the student, then "the rest will...come."

**Conclusion Four: The connection between relationship-building, trust, and personal learning is synergistic and together these constructs connote an intentional culture of learning**

A final conclusion is that there is a synergistic interaction and interconnectedness between relationship-building, support groups, trust, and personal learning as catalysts for improved student learning, which is depicted in the Synergy Model (See Figure 3, p. 233). To recap, the model consists of three constructs. The first and central construct is Relationships,
which are rooted in Community and developed in the space that Time provides. The second construct, Trust, is the direct outgrowth and desired culmination of Relationships. The construct of Trust fosters High Expectations and is bolstered through Student Voice. The third construct features Team Collaboration, Relevance, and Real World Learning Opportunities, which emerge and evolve in the presence of the first two constructs. Each of these constructs interacts with and strengthens the others, and by so doing, reinforces and deepens students' personal and academic growth. Together, the three constructs comprise the culture of learning.

This conclusion is important because it suggests that while these components may operate independently and discretely, they are most effective when working together. It also suggests that the interaction between them is not accidental, but intentional. When asked to describe how her school viewed their culture of learning, ASC's Meaghan stated, "Every part works and interacts with every other part." From her perspective, Ruth of Opportunity believes that "It's important to ask for help to collaborate...to stay connected within the community." As seen throughout this study, other educators felt the same.

What is notable in the literature is that many studies speak to two or more of these elements in combination, suggesting the interaction between them. For example, the Hanover Research (2014) report established a connection between student choice, personalized learning, and improved academic achievement. Toshalis and Nakkula (2012), Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011), and Fullan (2009) found these connections as well. Fullan added that such links had to be made for school systems to work collectively and collaboratively, and throughout the learning environment. From another perspective, the positive impact of relationships and trust on student motivation and academic performance were the nexus of Bryk and Schneider's (2002) work, which stressed the need to improve the culture and interpersonal relationships in schools. Harris
et al. (2013) and others agreed, and Noddings (2005) underscored the importance of relationship-building by adding the element of care.

Finally, Elbot and Fulton's (2008) study supported the viability of the interaction between many social and academic parts all focused on the student as the center of the learning community. Teacher who participated in their study reported that by trusting students, giving them choice and responsibility, and holding them to high expectations resulted in "amazing work" (p. 9) and student independence. Lastly, their study, like others, found that relationships that were intentionally and respectfully fostered from the top down "created a powerful means of uplifting adult behavior, which also made the staff better role models for students" (p. 9).

In other words, the findings suggest that student growth and success benefit from intentional, collaborative, and continuous interactions between social and academic components that focus on students and care for them holistically. Interconnectedness, therefore, is at the core of an intentional culture of learning at effective alternative high schools, and is sustained by a team effort and relationships at all levels (See the Synergy Model, p. 233).

The intentionality of this process is key because according to Houston and Sokolow (2006), "Intention is not only a principle: It is a power, a force" (p. 2). Thus, when disadvantaged students (and other students as well) are at the center of their own learning, the findings strongly suggest that they will be empowered to grow socially and academically, to persist, and to succeed. While traditional schools might use some of these elements, other schools might require a change of mindset in order to apply this finding effectively. This view will be explored later in the Implications section of this chapter.

**Section Summary**

This section described and discussed the four conclusions that emerged from this study
through analysis of the data. First, the development and nurturing of teacher/student relationships lay the foundation for the personal growth and academic success of students - disadvantaged and otherwise. Support groups play a vital part in helping to sustain these relationships by providing social-emotional assistance. Moreover, teacher/student relationships are further enhanced when positive relationships are also fostered among teachers and between teachers and administrators. Second, over time, caring, trusting relationships evolve into trusting collaborations. These give students the confidence and the will to voice their opinions and ideas, to become active participants in their own learning, and to assume responsibility for their personal and academic outcomes. Third, when presented with real world opportunities, students engage to find real world solutions to real world problems. Such opportunities range from classroom projects to internships outside of the school, which reflect student choice. In all cases, real world learning provides students with meaningful and relevant connections to their lives and to the world around them. Fourth, in an effective culture of learning, personal and academic supports continuously interact (See the Synergy Model, p. 233). Significantly, learning to know the whole child through the development of relationships leads to a breakdown of a student's defensive barriers and makes way for trust. As students receive security, care, and develop a sense of well-being, they become empowered to be proactive and productive on their own behalf. That is, they choose to engage, take risks, make mistakes, pursue their passions. They aspire to meet the high expectations set for them, and to be accountable with no excuses. Quite simply, as Opportunity's Robert said, "If you have good relationships...students will want to work harder..."

At the heart of every conclusion are the relationships which insure students' well-being and subsequent growth. To be most effective, these relationships should be long-lasting and sustainable. Meeting this goal requires honest conversation, sincere listening, patience,
consistency, persistence, and trust - all given and taken in mutual respect. As many educators in
this study noted, breaking down student defenses and building trust in its place demands an
allotment of time. Therefore, the conclusions suggest that a shift in school culture that
provisions time in school to allow relationships and trust to evolve and students to achieve is
worthy of attention. As Schein (2010) stated: "...culture...matters because cultural elements
determine strategy, goals, and modes of operating" (p. 14). Senge (2006) expressed a similar
view. One aspect of a learning organization, he said, is "where new and expansive patterns of
thinking are nurtured..." (p. 3) and that "organizations need to discover how to tap people's
capacity to learn at all levels" (p. 4). Time might provide the space for discovery and new
thinking. Simply put, if a shift in culture may bring about a change in results, it deserves
consideration.

Implications for Practice

The genesis for this study was two-fold: First, in 2016, according to the federal
Department of Education, the U.S. national high school graduation rate had risen above 80
percent, but among disadvantaged students, the rate was 10 to 20 points lower. This gap had
persisted for decades. Second, in effective alternative high schools, the gap did not exist. In
fact, in these schools, students, the majority of whom were disadvantaged, were graduating at a
rate higher than the national average. As a result, the purpose of this study was to explore,
through the perspectives and experiences of teachers, the culture of learning in these schools and
to understand what these schools and their educators did and how they did it that led to positive
academic outcomes for students. Accordingly, this chapter addresses several areas of
practice in alternative high schools and the implications for practice that may benefit the greater
educational community.
The first implication is that schools should examine their curriculum content. As the literature and the findings in this study show, student engagement, persistence, and academic performance are positively influenced when students are given a role in their own learning. Student choice does not mean abandoning standards and rubrics. In fact, teachers in this study emphasized that both are used in their respective schools. Also, as the literature attests, neither does choice mean that all materials and texts are left to student discretion. However, the literature has also shown that choice may result in noticeable gains in personal self-esteem and in academic performance. Educators in this study provided many stories affirming that correlation. These include Alexis's account of two ASC students who wanted to go to a premier music college and "pushed" themselves to pass math and Gabrielle's recollection of a Pioneer student who loved fashion so much that she persisted and jumped three grade levels in reading between her freshman and junior years. Therefore, schools should consider the inclusion of topics and texts across the curriculum that are meaningful and relevant to students because they motivate them to succeed.

In addition, both in the literature and in this study, findings indicate that student choice includes class room projects based on real world issues, as well as community service and real-world internships that prepare students for post-secondary education and careers. In addition, both internships and community service are considered to offer not only a real world learning experiences but to build character as well. Using this study as an example, community service projects or internships could be semester projects for seniors and take the place of electives. The reported benefits of such activities in student engagement and persistence may warrant their inclusion in a school's curriculum.

The second implication is that honest and trusting relationships at all levels throughout
the school may influence students' personal and academic growth. While this research explored the positive impact of student/teacher relationships on student outcomes, what also emerged was the significance of supportive, non-judgmental, and respectful relationships between teachers and their colleagues and between teachers and their administrators. Gabrielle (Pioneer) and Faith (ASC) were among those who appreciated the importance of the give-and-take of professional collegiality and support. Or as Ruth (Opportunity) expressed, "I can talk to anybody about anything."

The deepening of professional relationships into supportive personal friendships were evidenced when Faith (ASC) and Robert (Opportunity) attested to the strength they derived from spending time and speaking openly with colleagues outside of the school building. With regard to administrators and evaluators, Alexis (ASC) noted that she felt "validated." Robert felt "very supported from the top down." Michael (Pioneer) commented on how good it was to be "appreciated." Daniel (Opportunity) spoke repeatedly of the benefit of having a non-judgmental mentor to provide guidance and to express praise, validation, and high regard for them as individuals and as professionals.

According to educators in this study, honest, supportive relationships across all levels within the learning community resulted in emotional well-being, self-respect, and contentment in every teacher. Their positive feelings about themselves, their colleagues, and their school contributed to a positive and effective culture of learning that implicitly, explicitly, and holistically benefitted students and their ability and desire to learn. The implication is that teacher appreciation and validation should be a key component of every school's culture of learning.

Building authentic trusting relationships takes time. However, schools might consider
deconstructing the relationships noted here to consider how they might be supported. For example, advisory, a wellspring of teacher/student relationships might be achieved by taking a few minutes from other periods during the school day. Because time-on-task is an issue in many school districts, these periods could be considered as both academic support and career planning.

Relationships between teachers would occur naturally a) by content area if they had some decision-making regarding curriculum and b) by being part of teams that address particular student issues. The success of teacher collaboration depends on whether they are given any degree of autonomy and opportunity to demonstrate leadership. Administrator trust would help to realize this goal and, at the same time, enhance relationships between administrators and teachers. Reluctance to give teachers autonomy could be ameliorated if administrators would agree to a pilot study where a team of teachers is given an academic problem to solve and a year in which to demonstrate improved student performance. The link between relationships and student growth that is both social and academic underscores the potential value of a pilot study and its own findings and implications for best practices.

The third implication is that time be allocated to incorporate the strategies that have proven to be effective for students' personal and academic growth (Hanover Research, 2014). For example, time spent on additional writing strategies might be more productively spent in asking students to write about things they know and things they enjoy and to use those unrestricted written expressions as tools for skill-building. Skill building is important, but, as the literature and this study have indicated, relevant and meaningful content is needed to engage and motivate students and make them receptive to appropriate tools and strategies.

In addition, time spent on curriculum development might be refocused on lessons and projects that bring relevance and excitement to content information with skills embedded in
activities rather than vice-versa, as described in Meier's (2007) article, "Standards, yes, standardization, no." Finally, regarding curriculum, students should be exposed to different topics and texts, and they should be allowed time to discover and discuss what appeals to them, the better to elevate their active participation.

A commitment of time, near- and long-term, should be part of the school schedule so that teachers and students can bond and develop the relationships that the literature and this study substantiate have a positive influence on student outcomes, socially and academically. In many schools, PLCs (Professionally Learning Communities) and/or advisories are already part of a school's schedule. The important thing is to use time purposefully, not only to talk about students in the abstract, but to spend time with them. Getting to know students - who they are, what sparks them, what frightens them, what they hope and dream - these are the seeds of relationships that will yield holistically good results for the social child, the academic child, the whole child. The longer these relationships can be sustained, the more influential they may be. In the end, while having time is important, how it is used is even more so, and, in this study, there is evidence that if time is used to nurture students, to care for and then push them, they will respond, and they will achieve.

A final implication lies in the apparent synergy between relationship-building, support groups, trust, and personal learning that were found in effective alternative high schools. The implication is that an effective culture of learning is also an intentional design in which all parts and all players work interactively and cooperatively to empower students to grow and succeed both personally and academically (See the Synergy Model, p. 233). As noted, some of the requisite elements exist in traditional schools. Some need to be developed. For others, a change of mindset may be necessary.
Open, non-judgmental conversation is a proposed starting point. Committees, comprised of both faculty and administrators, could be assigned to research other successful alternative schools and to formalize and prioritize a list of core ideas for exploration. These might include: discussions on 1) how to build time into the schedule for an advisory/mentor block that fosters relationships over four years; 2) how to build relevance and student interests into curriculum; and 3) how to incorporate community service and/or internships as requirements for seniors. These are strategic ideas which could be investigated at faculty and department meetings, and at PLCs.

The implications require an inclusionary cultural mindset in order to build relationships, trust, and mutual respect between faculty and administration. Continuous professional development led by an objective person hired to facilitate relationship building between faculty and administration might help to create a culture of authentic and respectful collaboration, which, in turn, may be a step toward trusting relationships. An organizational change in mindset must be authentic to be effective. As Senge (2012) wrote: "Learning takes place in the whole body because it is more than an intellectual experience and requires actual engagement" (p. 43). The challenge will be for school stakeholders to maintain an intentional, honest, and collaborative interaction that puts students first.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Through the voices and perspectives of educators, the results of this study described how an intentional and effective culture of learning engaged and motivated students to persist, succeed, and graduate. What also emerged were some gaps and opportunities for future research projects that may deepen that understanding and broaden its reach. These suggestions follow:

1. The study focused on participants who taught in schools in the Northeast. A narrative study (or series of studies) that replicates this one would add additional information about how
educators in different regions of the U.S. define and develop an effective culture of learning for a disadvantaged student population. The data from such research could be compared with this study to analyze similarities and differences.

2. Participants in this study spoke of being valued, respected, appreciated, and having autonomy in their classes. Therefore, it would be beneficial to explore alternative high school administrators' perspectives about the role of teachers in the culture of learning, and how administrators cultivate buy-in and support among faculty and staff. The format might be another narrative study or a series of studies in different geographic regions throughout the U.S. In addition, a focus group of teachers discussing the personal and professional pros and cons of their school would be informative as well.

3. Many alternative high school students were unsuccessful in traditional school settings. It would be useful for educators to hear how students describe the two school environments and how each venue impacted their level of academic achievement and personal growth. A second study to explore educators' perspectives of these students and their circumstances would be of additional value.

4. It would be informative to track former alternative high students through a 'where are they now' ethnographic study to capture, periodically, how graduates describe the influence of their high school experience on their post graduate lives. For example, one topic would be to evaluate their degree of persistence in college or at work.

5. Many alternative high school teachers and administrators have prior experience in traditional school environments. Their perspectives on how traditional schools might be able to adapt some effective alternative school practices would be useful. For example, making learning more relevant, allocating more productive use of teacher time to build relationships would be
among the topics for discussion.

6. Most alternative schools have small student populations compared to most traditional high schools. For example, among the schools represented in this study, none had a student population above 460 compared to the 1,000+ students found in many traditional high schools. Research substantiates that small schools are more conducive to sustainable teacher/student relationships than larger settings (Fullan, 2000; McKinney, Steiglich, & Stever-Zeitlin, 2002), and this finding is evidenced in the relatively small number of students in every charter school throughout the United States. Also, although some alternative high schools have student populations that exceed 1,000, the schools have areas of career concentration and students are assigned according to their interests, resulting in a small school learning environment of 300 to 500 students. Therefore, converting large schools into small schools-within-schools, although not a new topic, is worth exploring and discussing again. A starting point might be a series of focus groups that includes teachers and administrators from both alternative and traditional schools in an exchange of priorities and perspectives.

7. There is also a need to explore the views of traditional high school educators and administrators regarding a) the causes for the lagging graduation rate among disadvantaged students, b) their plans to improve that rate, c) how alternative high schools achieve positive outcomes for disadvantaged students, and d) how they might adapt alternative high school strategies in their own schools.

8. Finally, the subject of time and how it may be used more effectively for students' personal growth has not yet been fully explored in the literature. The format may be a comparative case study between two alternative high schools whose graduation rates among disadvantaged students exceed the national average and two large urban high schools where the
percentage of disadvantaged student graduates are below that norm. How time is used and to what effect would be the purpose of the study.

The suggestions above reflect the original and continuing intent of this study. Namely, to shine a light on the needs of disadvantaged students, to explore and discuss best practices that were used effectively by the alternative high school educators who participated in this study, and to investigate how these practices might be adapted in more traditional learning venues.

**Concluding Thoughts**

The journey of this research was a revelation and an inspiration. When I started, I wanted to explore the culture of learning in alternative high schools whose practices were effective with disadvantaged students. I wanted to investigate what it was about these cultures that made them work successfully for their students. I wanted to understand their intentional components and to discover if there were commonalities across them as expressed through the voices of teachers. Their words were crucial for two reasons: First, they contributed to the literature in which teacher voice is largely absent. Second, they provided insights from those who were in daily contact with students and knew them better than anyone else in the school building.

The teachers were my touchstone. They gave generously of their time, their wisdom, their laughter, their tears, their experiences, and their stories so that I could be both student and messenger. I learned that a true and effective culture of learning is messy and complicated, but also has clarity and intentionality of purpose, which is that student graduates are socially, emotionally, as well as academically prepared to meet the world. I learned that students must be collaborative partners in their own learning and ultimate success. I learned that relationships and trust are pre-requisite foundations for students’ personal and academic growth, but cannot be realized fully unless relationships and trust are also nurtured between colleagues and between
teachers and administrators. A culture of learning begins as a culture of trust.

I learned that the intangible element of time should be used respectfully and purposefully in the service of student-oriented objectives. For example, providing teachers with the time and the autonomy to adapt curriculum to incorporate student interests might be more engaging than a series of reading strategies. It might be beneficial for student learning if teachers were asked to collaborate in choosing texts and materials for their students. I learned that making time for an advisory period within the school schedule would help teachers and students to bond and build relationships, especially if they stayed together for the four years of high school. I also learned that the mindset of an effective culture of learning was one that other schools should consider. If some schools can be successful, then all schools can be successful.

Finally, the Conceptual Framework (See Figure 2, p. 39) that guided and informed my study suggested an intentional culture of learning that had two interacting components: one for social learning and one for academic learning. The study's findings confirmed the presence and importance of these components and their interconnectedness because, as Jennifer of Pioneer observed, "They complete each other." However, through the experiences of the participants, many new interconnected characteristics emerged that enhanced the picture of how social and academic learning are effectively realized. The result was a more complex, multi-faceted view, represented in the Synergy Model (See Figure 3, p. 233).

And so, I would like to end with the voices of the educators who took part in my journey and brought me safely home with a desire to do better, to be better. Because they so often echoed each other's thoughts and words, I present the following, with my sincere thanks, as a verbal collage of their spirits, their dedication, and their personal and professional excellence:

**Once More in the Voices of Teachers**
I honestly believe that if you're a teacher, you can't do anything effective without relationships.

From the first, the goal is to know each student based on their passions and...on their strengths.

The school vision is to validate and educate the whole child.

Never giving up on students...is especially important for kids who have difficult family lives...

We're people working with people, and you approach them with love and care...concern and respect...kindness and curiosity...eagerness...authentic investment and authentic engagement.

I've learned to listen better...to be pushed by their thinking....

If you have an awareness of the world around you, an awareness of the community and how it works, then you have a voice in that. It's much more than just academics.

There's always that little piece of you that you see inside your students.

When kids are excited about what they want to be doing, they will want to learn about it, read about it...explore it...write about it.

It's our job to clear the path, to show them the way to many opportunities.

Trust is the most important thing you have...their defenses go down and that is when you can get that real connection.

It's about getting to know that kid...what would help...and working as a team.

It's hard to fall through the cracks here.

We give them all the support they need, so there's no excuse for them to fail.

I want students to realize that there is a connection with everything we do.

We're building citizens. That's the hugely important thing...well-rounded people...good people.

What we do here is true land. It's the truth. This is real work. I know in every fiber of my being that what we do is the right thing.
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Appendix A

Gatekeeper Recruitment Letter (Sent via email and USPS)

Northeastern University
College of Professional Studies

Ms. Merle Schell, Doctoral Student
Dr. Elizabeth Mahler, Principal Investigator (Doctoral Advisor)
Northeastern University
College of Professional Studies
360 Huntington Ave.
Boston, MA 02116

[DATE]

Dear High School Principal,

My name is Merle Schell. I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University, preparing to conduct the research for my dissertation. In order to address my research questions, I am recruiting educators in Massachusetts who are active participants in the pedagogy and philosophy of their successful alternative high school and its culture. Specifically, the purpose of my study is to understand how alternative educators build a culture of learning that is effective with disadvantaged students, leading to positive academic outcomes. I know from public data and published articles that yours is one of these schools. My goal is to give voice to teachers whose first-hand experiences are largely absent from the literature and whose perspectives would be of great value to the educational community.

Selected participants will engage in a single audio-recorded conversational interview that will last approximately 60-90 minutes. Preferably, interviews will take place in a room within the school that you approve and where participants will feel comfortable. Or, they would be conducted at a nearby location off-campus that would offer the same privacy and personal ease. Please be assured that identities and interviews will be kept completely confidential and protected in strict and secure locations that are password protected and otherwise locked and inaccessible. To further protect their privacy and confidentiality, each participant and every school will be assigned a pseudonym and will be known only by that pseudonym. These pseudonyms will be used in the interview excerpts noted in my dissertation, in the discussion of findings, and in any other potential publications.

Participation in this study is voluntary and participants may withdraw at any time with no effect on your school or district. I will at all times try to put participants at ease, feeling comfortable to
communicate and participate in the informed consent process. When all of the interviews are completed, I will prepare an executive summary of the findings and email them to participants to review for accuracy and to provide feedback and suggestions (if the wish). These must be returned to me via email no later than one week after receiving the summary.

If you are comfortable with the nature and purpose of this study, and if you approve having members of your school to participate in this research which seeks to inform the education field about a culture of learning that is effective for disadvantaged students, please contact me via email: schell.m@husky.neu.edu by [DATE]. Also, if you believe that the purpose of this research is worthwhile, would you please a) recommend some faculty members whom I should contact and/or b) give me permission to contact your faculty directly to enlist their support for this study. Finally, if you have questions and would like to speak to me directly, please call me at 781-985-8374 (cell). My sincere thanks in advance for your consideration and your help!

Respectfully,

Merle Schell
781-985-8374
schell.m@husky.neu.edu
Appendix B

Confidential Informational Questionnaire

Section 1: School Information

Would you describe your city/town as rural, suburban, or urban? __________

Does your high school consist of grades 9-12? Yes_____ No_____

How many years has your school been an alternative learning environment? ______

What is your current student enrollment? __________

What is the teacher/student ratio? __________________

How would you describe the type of learning at your school?
Project-based_____ Real World_____ Experiential_____ Personalized _____ Other, please specify____

Section 2: Participant Information

Name: ________________________________

Preferred contact information:
  ○ E-mail ____________________________
  ○ Phone _____________________________ Cell/Home/Work?

How would you describe your current position at your school? (Check all that apply.)
  Teacher _____ Facilitator _____ Mentor _____ Other, please specify _____

How many years have you been a member of your school's community?
  0 - 3_____ 4 - 7_____ 8 - 10_____ more than 10 _____

Have you ever worked in a traditional school setting? Yes_____ # of years _____ No_____

On a scale of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest), in your opinion, rate the effectiveness of your school in developing trust between teachers and students: 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____.

Please complete and return this questionnaire to Merle Schell at schell.m@husky.neu.edu if you are interested in participating in this study. Thank you very much for your time!
Appendix C

Participant Recruitment Letter
(Sent via e-mail)

Northeastern University
College of Professional Studies

[DATE]

Dear [Potential Participant Name],

My name is Merle Schell. I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University, preparing to conduct research for my dissertation. In order to address my research questions, I am recruiting teachers from successful alternative high schools such as yours who are active participants in the pedagogy and philosophy of their school and its culture. Specifically, the purpose of my study is to understand how alternative educators in Massachusetts build a culture of learning that is effective with disadvantaged students, leading to positive academic outcomes. My goal is to give voice to teachers whose first-hand experiences are largely absent from the literature.

Selected participants will engage in a single audio-recorded conversational interview that will last approximately 60 - 90 minutes. Identities of participants and their schools will be kept completely confidential, identified by pseudonyms only. Participation in this study is voluntary. Participation or non-participation will not affect your status in any way. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without penalty. When possible, a brief tour of the school would be helpful to provide greater context of the school environment.

After all interviews are completed, an executive summary of findings will be emailed to participants for you to review for accuracy and to provide feedback. Participants will be asked to respond with comments and feedback no later than one week after receiving the summary. Your name, school name, and findings, including interview excerpts and field notes - identified only with pseudonyms - will be published in my dissertation and other publications.

It is important that participants are comfortable communicating and participating in the informed consent process. I am attaching a brief questionnaire that will provide me with your contact information if you choose to participate. If you are comfortable with the nature and purpose of this research, are interested in reflecting on your experiences, and would like to volunteer to participate in research that may inform other educators in their efforts to help disadvantaged students, then please respond via my student email at schell.m@husky.neu.edu by [DATE].

Your insights and views are important. Thank you in advance for your interest.
Appendix D

Participant Recruitment Email and Follow-Up
(Sent with attached recruitment letter in Appendix C
and informational questionnaire in Appendix B)

Text of Reminder Recruitment Email

Dear [First Name],

I am writing to follow-up on an email that I sent to you a few weeks ago, inviting you to participate in my doctoral thesis study, which I am conducting through Northeastern University. As a reminder, the purpose of my study is to understand the culture of learning in alternative high schools and how educators transmit that culture to empower disadvantaged students to achieve positive academic results and graduate.

I would greatly value and appreciate your insights and views about your experience as an alternative educator. They are important. So I hope that you will consider participating.

Please see the attached: a recruitment letter which explains the process, as well as a short questionnaire on basic contact information. Your participation would be completely voluntary and kept confidential. However your perspectives and ideas would be informative and beneficial to other educators and their efforts to build a culture of learning that will help disadvantaged students.

If you wish to participate, please fill out the attached questionnaire and email it to me at my student email address: schell.m@husky.neu.edu.

Thank you in advance for your consideration to participate in my study. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Merle Schell
Appendix E
Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University
College of Professional Studies

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Name of Investigator(s): Principal Investigator, Dr. Elizabeth Mahler; Student Researcher, Merle Schell

Title of Project: Building an Intentional Culture of Learning from the Perspectives of Alternative High School Educators

Dear Participant,

You are invited to take part in a research study that I am conducting under the direction of Dr. Elizabeth Mahler, my doctoral dissertation advisor. This form describes the study, but I will explain it first. You may ask me any questions. When you have decided whether or not you want to participate, please let me know. You do not have to participate. However, if you decide to take part, I will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy for your records.

You are being asked to take part in this study because you are an alternative high school educator in a school that has proven to be effective and successful with disadvantaged students, leading to positives academic outcomes and graduation. In all, 8 to 10 high school teachers from other effective alternative high schools in Massachusetts will be participants in this study. The purpose of this research is to understand the culture of learning in alternative high schools and how educators transmit that culture to empower disadvantaged students to achieve positive academic results and graduate.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to engage in one interview that should last about 60 to 90 minutes, but no longer so that you will not be inconvenienced. The first ten of those minutes will be spent going over this informed consent form. The interview will take place in a location and at a time that is convenient for you. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed the next day. When all participant interviews are completed, an executive summary of findings will be written. I will email a copy of the summary so that you may review it and, if you wish, provide feedback and suggestions via email or telephone. When possible, you will be asked to provide a brief tour of your school to provide context of the school environment.

There are no expected risks or discomforts related to this study. There will also be no direct benefits for taking part. However, your views are important, and there is little educator voice in the literature. I care very much to hear what you have to say; I am interested and eager to listen
and to learn from you. Your insights and experiences may help other educators who want to better understand how to reach and motivate disadvantaged students to achieve.

Your identity and participation in this study will be confidential. Only I will see the information about you. I will review interview transcripts and remove all identifying information, including the names of people and places, and replace them with pseudonyms so that no future reports or publications will have information that identifies you in any way. All data will be kept in a locked file cabinet. This consent form will be maintained in a locked drawer in my home office for three years after completion of this study. All other identifiable data will also be secured in safe, inaccessible locations and will be destroyed within one year of completion of this study. In rare cases, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study to ensure that the research is being done properly. If this situation should arise, I will permit only people who are authorized by the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board, to see this information.

Although there will be no payment for your participation, I sincerely appreciate your time and expertise. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Even if you start the study, and you may withdraw at any time, and you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an educator in your school and district.

If you have any questions or problems, please contact me at 781-985-8374 (cell phone) or via email at schell.m@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Elizabeth Mahler at e.mahler@neu.edu. If you have any questions about the protection of your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Telephone: 617-373-4588 or email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish. Thank you very much for your consideration.

I agree to take part in this research.

Signature of person agreeing to take part ____________________________ Date ____________________

Printed name of person above __________________________________________

Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent ____________________________ Date ____________________

Merle Schell

Printed name of person above __________________________________________
Appendix F

Interview Guide Basic Information

Demographic Information:

Name_____________________________ School Position_____________________

Years in this position_____________ Total years in education __________

Pseudonym__________________________

Introduction

Thank you very much for being part of this research. The purpose of this study is to understand the culture of learning at your alternative high school, what you do, how you do it, and how you transmit the culture to empower disadvantaged students to self motivate, persist, achieve, and graduate. Your thoughts and answers to questions from an interview guide will inform my research. To ensure that your responses are accurately represented, I will be using this digital device to capture your answers. At this point, do you agree to be recorded? Thank you.

I may take some notes during the interview. These and all of your responses will be kept secure and confidential, and pseudonyms for you and your school will be used whenever I quote from the notes or transcript. In addition, to meet our human subjects requirements. I emailed an informed consent document to you regarding the research so that you would have the opportunity to review it. As noted, it states that all information is kept confidential, that your participation in this study is voluntary, that you may withdraw participation at any time, and that I do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the informed consent document that was sent to you or about the interview process?

I would appreciate your signing the consent form, which is your permission to proceed with the interview. The interview will last between 60 and 90 minutes. If it is okay with you, I would like to begin with a few introductory questions and then move into questions about my research. Do you have any questions at this time? So, let's begin.

Interview Guide Questions

Warm-up questions:

1. Tell me what you enjoy about being an alternative educator.

2. What are your views about learning?
   Follow Up: What are your personal and professional goals?

RQ 1: How do alternative high school educators describe the culture of learning at their schools?
I would like to begin with some questions about the environment and culture of your school.
3. What comes to mind when you hear the term "culture of learning," and how would you describe the culture of learning at your school?

4. What are the norms and values that you believe most inform your school?

5. How do these norms and values impact your school's vision and your own approach to teaching and learning?
   Follow Up: Can you provide an example or two?

**RQ 2: According to alternative high school educators, based on their respective cultures of learning, how do teacher/student relationships help to build confidence and motivation in disadvantaged students?**

Now I would like to learn about the role of teacher/students relationships at your school.

6. At your school, what do you believe is the role of teacher/student relationships in motivating disadvantaged students?
   Follow Up: How would you describe the students at your school who are disadvantaged?

7. How are these relationships nurtured?
   Follow Up: What are two or three key characteristics of these relationships?

8. How does meeting students' personal and emotional needs influence their academic performance?
   Follow Up: Would you share an example or two?

9. How do teachers at your school interact and work with each other? with administration? to nurture relationship-building?
   Follow Up: Can you give one or two examples?

**RQ 3: What student-centered best practices have alternative high school educators experienced that resulted in academic success for disadvantaged students?**

I would like to turn now to academic practices at your school.

10. How do you and your school meet the academic needs of your students?
    Follow Up: Can you provide one or two examples?

11. What is the nature of learning at your school that supports the individual interests of each student? How do you support them?
    Follow Up: What is the role of students in their learning?

12. What do you believe are the primary reasons that you and your school are successful with disadvantaged youth?
    Follow Up: Can you give me an example?

13. What is the process at your school for evaluating students' growth and progress?
Follow Up: How does this process reflect the culture of your school?

Wrap-up

14. Can you describe how supportive relationships and student-centered learning work together (if they do) at your school to influence disadvantaged students to succeed?

15. How have you changed and evolved as a teacher as a result of being in an alternative school environment?
   Follow Up: Can you give me an example?

16. Is there anything at all you would like to add to our discussion?

Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts, ideas, and experiences with me and for being so open. I appreciate your time and your expertise. When all of the interviews are completed, I will send you a draft of the executive summary of my findings from your interview. The summary will be for your review and comments, as well as to suggest recommendations for improvement. Thank you again for your valuable contributions to my study.