AN INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN A SUBURBAN, MIDWESTERN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

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Abstract

Students who are at risk for failure in traditional schools often switch enrollment to an alternative school setting. The social, emotional, and academic needs of students attending alternative schools are often different from their traditional high school peers. If we are able to understand how the students make sense of their lived experiences after transferring from a traditional high school to an alternative school, we could better serve their needs. Therefore the purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study was to understand how students enrolled in a suburban, alternative high school in the Midwest made sense of their lived experiences associated with attending this alternative school. This study has the potential to help administrators and educators at this school to better meet student’s social, emotional and academic needs, and may help to inform educators in other alternative school contexts. This study shows that the school-based factors that help students connect with the adults and learning in a social environment, like curriculum and planning, communities of practice, and the learning environment have as much impact on the students’ academic success as the students’ individual factors, like grades, behavior, and personal experiences, and other factors, such as family and community support.

Keywords: At-risk, alternative education, motivation, drop-out prevention, academic, social, motivation, engagement, self-efficacy
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The Topic. Students who are at risk for failures in traditional schools often switch enrollment to an alternative school setting. Alternative schools play an important role in the public education landscape by helping to educate students who, for a variety of reasons, do not thrive in traditional classroom settings (Aron, 2003; Kochlar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 2001; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko & Fernandez, 1989). The Encyclopedia of Children’s Health provides the following definition of an alternative school: “[an] alternative school is an educational setting designed to accommodate educational, behavioral, and/or medical needs of children and adolescents that cannot adequately be addressed in a traditional school environment”. The term “alternative school or program” is used generically, but is operationalized quite differently (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p. 20). An alternative program, whether on-site or off-site, is operated by the school, and students remain connected to their sending school (Evers, 2009 p. 2). While the short-term goal of alternative education is to meet the needs of some students, the long-term goal must be to identify successful alternative education strategies and use these strategies as a basis for improving learning opportunities for all children (Evers, 2009, p. 1). There are a plethora of programs and interventions labeled as alternative; however, there is neither a set definition nor a set of guidelines that help schools determine if they are doing what most effectively meets the needs of their students. Therefore alternative schools need feedback from the students they serve to determine how best to meeting their individual academic, social and emotional needs in their local and particular contexts.
**Research Problem.** Students who are at risk for failure in traditional schools often switch enrollment to an alternative school setting. The social, emotional, and academic needs of students attending alternative schools are often different from their traditional high school peers. Programs have been introduced by many school districts in hopes of creating an alternative experience for their students who have not succeeded in a traditional school setting. Often alternative schools are seen as the last resort instead of a thriving third space, a place of success (McGee, 2001; Lang & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 2001). Because there is not a one-size-fits-all answer model for alternative education, it is imperative to take into consideration the particular needs of students in different alternative contexts. If we are able to understand how the students make sense of their lived experiences after transferring from a traditional high school to an alternative school, then we can create learning environments that better meet their needs. Therefore the purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study is to understand how students enrolled in a suburban, alternative high school in the Midwest make sense of their lived experiences associated with attending this alternative school.

**Significance of the Research Problem**

It order to best serve the needs of students in unique alternative school contexts, it is important to understand their experiences with both their traditional and alternative schools and how they make sense of how these schools have met their academic, social and emotional needs. This problem is significant because if we do not meet these needs, these students are at risk for failure and eventual dropout from high school.

High school dropout is a concern both for the student and for society. The National Center for Educational Statistics reported to the U.S. Department of Education in the 2011
America’s Youth: Transitions to Adulthood (Aud, KewalRamani & Frohlich, 2011) showed that poverty rates were generally lower for young adults with higher levels of educational attainment (p. vii). For example, 34 percent of young adults without a high school diploma were living in poverty, compared to 24 percent who had completed high school and 14 percent that had earned a bachelor’s or higher degree (p. vii). In reference to the median incomes, the report showed that those with a bachelor’s or higher degree in 2009 had median earnings of $33,000, while those who had not completed high school had median earnings of $18,000 (p. vii). The same report also demonstrated that higher levels of education were associated with lower unemployment rates in all demographics. The report states that fifty-five percent of unemployed 16-24 year olds dropped out of high school (p. 40).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) identified two overarching themes that students claim as reasons they drop out of high school—personal factors, such as grades, behavior, attitudes, and experiences, and factors associated with their families and communities (Pietrowiak & Novak, 2002; Rumberger, 2011). The NCES also found that dropout rates are higher with students that have low education aspirations, high levels of absenteeism, and histories of misbehavior in school.

**Justification for the Research Problem**

To prevent dropout, educators have attempted to design programing to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of their students. The United States Federal Department of Education, the John Gardner Center at Stanford University and the Australian government have all commissioned studies on the need for alternative education (Mills & McGregor, 2013). Howard (2002) found in a study based on students’ portrayals of teaching and of the learning environment, the students were able to identify three teaching strategies
that had an effect on their effort, engagement, and achievement. These strategies were: relationships, verbal communication and affirmation, and a sense of community. The authors of the Hanover Research (2013) stated students have the biggest stake in teaching effectiveness and that students are an important source for evidence when it comes to the quality of teaching and the overall learning environment. Without hearing their voices, it is difficult to determine if the programming being offered by alternative schools are best meeting the needs of their student constituents.

Deficiencies in the evidence. The results from this study are useful in helping to fill deficiencies of knowledge both in practice and in the literature. In practice, the alternative school under study developed programing to best support the students that is serves, yet no formative feedback has been provided to the educators within this context to help improve and develop the program. The results of this study also contribute to the alternative education literature by describing a unique context and way of delivering alternative education to a unique set of students. While there is considerable research concerning alternative education, including but not limited to at-risk youth, student motivation, and the pedagogy of alternative education in general, few studies have examined the students’ perceptions. The key focus of the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach is “personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context, for people who share a particular experience” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 45). This focus and resulting insights will help to inform alternative school pedagogy and the creation of learning experiences that best meet the academic, social and emotional needs of the students they serve and demonstrate the value of context-specific knowledge about the particular students for whom that context operates.
Relating the discussion to audiences. This research project is designed to achieve two goals. The practical goal of this research was to better understand the lived experiences of the students’ attending this particular alternative school. With this insight, better programming can be developed to create successful support systems for these students. The intellectual goal of this research is to add to the empirical research that has been completed over the last several decades regarding traditional and alternative high schools. The large number of qualitative and quantitative studies shows that many students continue to struggle to meet high school graduation requirements within the four years of a traditional school system. The lack of uniformity created since the origin of the alternative movement complicates national examination of the practice and effectiveness of alternative schools and programs, but the current state of the knowledge base about alternative schools has implications for policy, practice and future research (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p. 22). This study was designed to add depth to the existing body of research by examining the experiences of students and capturing their own words through in-depth interviews. The voices of the students captured in this study will add complement the growing body of quantitative research that is referenced in many governmental reports.

Positionality Statement

Alternative education is a topic that is close to my heart as well as my career. I currently hold the position of Director of Secondary Education in a nearby school district. My position in my district gives me the opportunity to explore many issues that have to do with high school students, their needs, and the opportunities provided to them by the school district in regards to college and career readiness. With the mandates dictated by the legislation, more pressure has been applied to schools to ensure that all students will
graduate. As a result, the regional directors of secondary education collaborate to do a better job meeting the needs of all our students.

I have several friends who did not graduate from high school but went on to get their General Educational Development (GED) equivalent and have very successful careers and lives. When asked why they did not graduate from high school, they all said the same thing: high school was not for them. They did not enjoy school and felt that the teachers didn’t care about them and that the education they received was not relevant to them. I hear this same thing from high school students with whom I work all the time. I believe that we need a third space (McGee, 2001), an alternative to the traditional school route or getting a GED.

This is the reason I wanted to do research on alternative schools; to better understand what it is like from a student’s perspective to attend an alternative school. Through research and observations of a new alternative school, I wanted to discover how they are able to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of their students and to understand from the students’ perspective how this has ultimately affected their high school experience and future.

**Research Questions**

This project was focused on the experiences of students and how the students make meaning of their experiences as they transitioned from a traditional high school to an alternative school in the Midwest, here after referred to as the Learning Center. The central research question was: How do students who have transitioned from a traditional high school to an alternative school make sense of their high school experience? To investigate this question, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach was used. The IPA approach is a qualitative method that is based on the theory of interpretation. An IPA
approach seeks to find the quality and texture of an experience by understanding the first-person perspective from the third person position through intersubjective inquiry and analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with students to understand what it was like to attend the Learning Center. This study was designed to investigate the lived experiences of these students as directly as possible in order to understand the phenomenon in terms of the participants’ point of view, as well as to add to the body of scholarly knowledge (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994).

**Theoretical Framework**

As early as the beginning of the 20th century educators have debated how best to educate students. Early theories centered around how knowledge and understanding are related to immediate contexts. These theories then were expanded to include participation in practice as seen through the Legitimate Peripheral Participation theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The legitimate peripheral participation theory shows the relationships between learners and how learning is shared within communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As J.G. Greeno researched learning theories in the 1990’s; he took issue with educational researchers such as Vygotsky and the way they used cognitivist thinking to support an argument that he proposes could equally be explained through the lens of the situation theory. Greeno stated “if the goal of education is for students to reason successfully in their everyday activities outside of school… teaching algorithmic skills do not reach important aspects of those reasoning activities” (Greeno, 1997, p. 7).

Understanding how alternative schools can best support the students they serve can be approached from different angles and by using different lenses in the research. Other studies have used theoretical lens’ such as Deci & Ryan’s Self Determination theory and Bandura’s
Social Cognitive theory or Self Efficacy theory. The Self Determination theory is based on
the macro theory of human motivation, emotion, and development focusing on psychological
needs (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The Self Efficacy theory, the belief one has in their own abilities
to deal with situations and the ability to achieve their goals is based on the earlier Social
Cognitive theory which explores the role of observational learning and social experience in
education and psychological development.

For this study the Situated Learning theory was chosen because all too often, in the
traditional setting, students are taught in one manner with very specific goals. In contrast, in
an alternative setting, students are able to learn in a variety of formats and then apply this to
the real world. Lave et al. (1997) highlights that the student learners must be involved in
what and how they learn within the classroom. This supports the need to study students’
perceptions regarding school culture as well as engagement as a gage for dropout prevention
and the requirement for alternative education to answer their educational and emotional
needs. Learning is understood to involve social interactions, meaningful relationships, and
connections through which students can shape their behavior to succeed academically.

**Situated learning theory.** Situated learning theory contributes to a growing body of
research in human sciences, such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology that explores
the situated character of human sciences in understanding and communication that can be
traced back to Lev Vygotsky, Jon Dewey, Jean Piaget and other early education researchers
(Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Situated learning is an instructional approach advanced by Jean Lave and Etienne
Wenger in the early 1990’s. It follows the earlier work of educational researchers such as
Vygotsky and Dewey (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Along with Greeno (1997), Lave and
Wenger (1991) stipulate that learning is located or “situated” within everyday practices. However, learning is not situated in practice “as if it were some independently deifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 35). Instead, learning is conceived as “an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 35). The foundation of the situated learning theory emphasises learning as a “pervasive, embodied activity involving the acquisition, maintenance, and transformation of knowledge through processes of social interaction” (Cantu & Willmott, 2003, p. 284). The situated learning theory (Anderson, Reder & Simon, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Reder & Klatzky, 1994; Cantu & Willmott, 2003) posits four assertions relating to the relationship between what is learned in school and what is needed outside of the classroom: 1) Learning is the foundation for the activities of everyday situations; 2) Knowledge is attained situationally and transfers to similar situations; 3) Learning is the outcome of a social process incorporating ways of thinking and problem solving, in addition to basic content knowledge; and 4) Learning is not detached from the outside world, but made up of social environments (Reder & Klatzky, 1994). The lens of situated learning helps narrow the concept of connectedness to learning and relationships by showing more precisely and persuasively how learning, as a situated practice, is “a complex notion, implicated in social structures involving relations of power” (Lave and Wenger 1991, p. 36; Cantu & Willmott, 2003).

Brown and Duguid (1991) represent learning as an expression of communities of practice that are conceived to have shared values. These shared values refer to the shared norms that get formed, transformed, and transmitted within communities (Cantu & Willmott, 2003, p. 285). The situated learning theory brings to light the idea that learning takes place in
a social context of school, which at one time was ignored as part of the learning process (Brown et al., 1989). The situated learning lens emphasizes that what is learned is explicit to the situation in which it is learned (Anderson et al., 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Particularly important in the situated learning theory is the emphasis on the mismatch between traditional school teaching and real world application (Cobb, Yackel & Wood, 1992; Lesh & Zawojeski, 1992; Resnick, 1994).

The framework of this study is based on situated learning theory because there are many individual and contextual factors related to the process of school completion, including relationship building, making learning relevant, school climate, and the community of schooling as well as a student’s overall belief in their abilities to be successful and make meaning of their experiences. The four claims of the situated learning theory are reflected in the problem statement and research question, which focus on the experiences students encounter when attending an alternative school versus a traditional high school. The framework of the study provided the structure needed when examining the literature and endeavors to recognize and bring to light the position of the situated learning theory, the relationship between what is learned in the classroom and what is relevant to the real world, as it is heard through the voices of the students. As students expressed their lived experiences and related aspects of concern and experiential claims through stories the researcher utilized a double hermeneutic process of meaning-recollection, to draw out or disclose the meaning of their experiences (Smith, 2014).
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The intent of this review is to synthesize the literature concerning the topics examined in this study. The research and compilation of information as viewed through the situated learning theoretical framework lay the groundwork for a better understanding of alternative programs and the student’s motivation and engagement (as determined by student experience). To narrow the vast array of studies that can be found on the topic, I chose to ask two questions of the literature based on my theoretical framework:

1. To what extent do individual factors, including student attitude and behavior affect a student’s ability to successfully attend an alternative school?

2. To what extent do contextual factors, including socioeconomic status and community, affect a student’s ability to successfully attend an alternative school?

The literature review is divided into three parts. The first part introduces the different pedagogies of alternative schools and the different types of curriculum preparing them for college and or careers. The second part examines the students’ lived experiences and the challenges that teachers face in understanding students relationships and supporting student engagement. Finally, the last part summarizes the review and lays the foundation for this research. Before looking at the evidence for the specific questions, it is important to understand why students drop out of traditional high schools.

Dropout Epidemic: Why Students Leave

The decision of a student to drop out of high school creates a multitude of repercussions for the student personally and society in general. Christenson and Thurlow (2004) note that “school dropout and school completion are two sides of the same coin”
Research has shown that the failure to adequately prepare school systems for the rising number of at-risk students that need to understand the relevancy of their education will leave our country with educational gaps and ultimately problems that could threaten our social capital and economic stability (Kaufman & Bradbury, 1992).

The last twenty years in the United States has seen a change in public education with state and federal departments of education demanding better outcomes from school districts. As a result of increased government scrutiny and requirements, schools have increased the rigor of standards and discipline only to leave more students behind because the schools are ill-equipped to meet the diverse needs of all students. According to Kauffman and Bradbury’s (1992) research for the U.S. Department of Education, 10 to 25% of the student population are labeled “at-risk” of dropping out due to poor basic skills. However Pallas, Natriello and McDill (1989) note that 33% are at risk due to 35 to 40% of the student population reading below grade level. Pallas et al. (1989) go on to warn that this number will substantially increase by the year 2020.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983 gave warning that our nation was at risk even though the graduation rate had risen to 75% (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Fox & McNaught, 2009). Unfortunately, the graduation rate has not increased in the past 25 years. President Barack Obama and famous businessmen such as Bill Gates have stated before Congress and the American people that all students should graduate from high school.

A number of researchers (Azzam, 2007; Beck & Mulia, 1980; Caraway, Tucker, Reinke & Hall, 2003; Coley, 1995; Egyed, McIntosh, & Bull, 1998; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Finn, 1987; Suh & Suh, 2007) have observed common characteristics associated with those students who drop out of school. This research has shown that low
socioeconomic status, behavioral issues, and academic difficulties can impact the dropout rate. According to Suh and Suh (2007), the more risk factors a student possesses, the higher the likelihood they will drop out, and the decision to leave school is not a result of one single factor.

Various researchers highlight their own specific theories about which risk factors appear to play a larger role than others. Bridgeland, Dilulio and Morison (2006) completed research on high school dropouts from the perspective of the students. The student responses revealed five major factors as to why they dropped out of high school: absences, failing grades, classes were not interesting, too much freedom, not enough rules, and that their friends were also not interested in school (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Along with the five major factors, Bridgeland et al. (2006) cited clusters of reasons for failure related to academic environment, real life events, lack of personal motivation, and external sources of motivation and guidance (p. v). Students who are at risk can often find success and graduate from alternative school settings where their social, emotional and academic needs are better met.

Among the factors identified in the research, family is the most important. A student’s family background and socioeconomic status is a prevailing predictor of school achievement and dropout behavior. The level of a parent’s education impacts their ability to help students with the learning; while the family income can provide sources of support including quality schools, after-school and summer programs not available through their regular schools, and support for learning at home.

Schools are another factor that widely exerts a powerful influence on student achievement and dropout rates. McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) conducted a qualitative study that delved into the thinking and overt behaviors of teachers at a small low-income
school located in a large urban city. The study brought to light the equity traps that exist in public schools. When asked why minority students are perform at lower levels than other students, the teachers’ answers had characteristics of deficit thinking. Specifically in that unless minority students were able to change factors such as their culture and family, then they would continue to have limited opportunities to be successful (Weiner, 2006). The teachers also felt that teaching methodologies, pedagogies, practices, and the school system itself are not responsible for the lack of success in all students (Walker, 2011).

**Standardization of Alternative Education**

In writing the *Alternative Education Programs for At-Risk Youth*, Tobin and Sprague (1999) recognized that alternative education programs are growing and so is the need for them. Currently, traditional school systems are being forced to focus more on high stakes testing, meeting their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), and initiatives that are based on empirical evidence while being required by the Federal and State Governments to perform at a predefined level or deal with the consequences of being labeled underperforming. Alternative education has been shown to be an effective alternative to traditional education by reducing “disruptive behavior, dropout rates, suspension, habitual truancy, tardiness and academic failure” (Hosley, 2003, p. 18).

While the number of students enrolled in alternative education programs has steadily increased over the past twenty years, the type of student and manner in which they are enrolled has changed. This has forced the stigma of the alternative educational setting to dissipate and has opened the door for greater growth in the area of alternative programs and earlier interventions for all students. The positive and negative attributes of the past, present, and future ramifications of the alternative education setting for at-risk students in relationship
to the alternative program is an integral part of creating a prevention/intervention program in the United States to curb the dropout rate. While many articles and studies articulate the need for an implementation structure or framework for alternative education programs as a means to curb the high school dropout epidemic, insight about specific successful structures and strategies remains largely elusive (Pallas et al., 1989; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Tobin & Sprague, 1999; Worrell & Hale, 2001). The literature, seen through the lens of the situated learning theory framework, points to a potential relationship between poor social and emotional support, poor academic performance, and a student’s decision to drop out. Many schools have implemented dropout prevention programs with the one-size-fits-all mentality, not tailoring interventions to fit individual students’ needs, thus creating programs that are minimally effective (D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Hosley, 2003; Leone & Drakeford, 1999).

Hoye and Sturgis’s observations (2005), along with Suh and Suh’s (2007) work in the area of school reform and the development of alternative structures, is starting to delve into and indicate what it takes to successfully support at-risk youth, involve them in significant learning opportunities, and ultimately prepare them for successful futures. Suh and Suh (2007) state, “developing school wide dropout prevention programs creates a one-size-fits-all mentality that would reach students that exhibited no risk factors while not reaching other students with multiple risk factors” (p. 298). There are risks to this approach though: “regular schools may increase their push-out with transferring more students out to alternative schools or they can become second class systems, students being channeled or tracked into weak alternative programs” (Hoye & Sturgis, 2005, p. 5). However, Brown et al. (1989) argue that methods that entrench learning in activity and use social and physical learning environments
are more in line with the situated learning and cognitive research. The concept that learning is situated and occurs with particular identifying features and purposes should be considered before adopting any alternative program or strategy.

**Alternative Pedagogies and Curriculum**

Morley (1991) states, “Alternative education is a perspective, not a procedure or program. It is based upon a belief that there are many ways to become educated, as well as many types of environments and structures within which this may occur” (as cited in Aron, 2003, p. 6). Several descriptions for alternative schools provided in the literature are defined by program’s characteristics, students’ interests, or the functional level of the student. Christenson and Thurlow (2004) theorize that “consensus is emerging with respect to essential intervention components” (p. 38). These components address more individualized or personalized education no matter the location of the student. Leone and Drakeford (1999) posit the elements of effective alternative education programming include a clear focus on academic learning, professional development on how to teach at-risk students, a strong level of autonomy and professional decision-making, and a sense of community (p. 87). The situated learning theory claims that “learning is the result of a social process” (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Teachers do not learn this at university; teachers must receive professional development on how to foster and sustain relationships with students. Lave (1997) challenges the idea that conceptual knowledge can be abstracted from the situations in which it is learned by arguing that knowledge is situated. Learning is part of the activity, context, and culture in which it is developed and used (Brown et al., 1989).

Tobin and Sprague (1999) researched types of alternative programs and described several alternative strategies: program location, choice of admission, low ratio of students to
teachers, highly structured classrooms, positive rather than punitive emphasis on behavior management, and social skills instructions that they found to have positive outcomes for students. In their conclusion, however, they stated “more research is needed on types of delivery systems and specific strategies” (p. 13).

The Survey and Analysis of Alternative Education Programs conducted by Hosley (2003) sought to determine the common elements across alternative programs. In tandem with the research of Gregg (1999) and Raywid (Aron, 2003), three main types of alternative programs (academic, discipline and therapeutic) were outlined and used as a basis for the study. In the academic category, Hosley (2003) found that there was an emphasis on student responsibility for learning, vocational and community service components, deregulation, flexibility, autonomy, and teacher and student empowerment. A study by Guerin and Denti (1999) is in alignment with Hosley (2003) in that they suggest that successful programs have certain characteristics: curricula that focus on core academics and are responsive to the needs of the students, their social skills, and their social responsibility. Alternative schools that have proven to be successful build communities, develop instruction that engages the learner, and create an organizational structure that supports all members of the community (Aron, 2003). As Dewey (1914/1944) stated, “what the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must be what the community wants for all of its children” (p. 5).

At-Risk Student Perspective

With the inclusion of a review of literature in the area of school reform, the research into education and the dropout epidemic as viewed through the situated learning lens reveals greater depth and a clearer understanding of why students drop out of high school from the perspective of the student dropouts themselves. Nelson and Eckstein (2008) posit that an at-
risk student can be seen as “one whose conduct interferes with their own learning and the learning of others.” However, some researchers consider these students not as at-risk but as vulnerable (Terrion, 2006).

The situated learning theoretical framework lens underlines the work of educational researchers and experts such as Raywid (2001) and Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko and Fernandez (1990) in explaining that a change in the way schools work and view alternative students is essential. Raywid (2001) suggests a diversified system of schools is an appropriate response to the current accountability versus learning system in place. In other words, if a student is not successful in one arena, then another should be available. Raywid states, “we have done our best to standardize schools” (p. 584). This is where the problem lies; students are not standardized, and schools should be a reflection of students and their needs. Research is only beginning to address the necessity of alternative programs to promote student engagement and school membership and to incorporate best practices into the teaching of real life applications.

Wehlage et al. (1990) researched the needs of the at-risk student. The researchers found that students desire to feel connected to school. This connection occurs through social bonding with other students and adults within the school. Involvement, commitment, and academic engagement are outcomes of positive relationships. Academic engagement must take place if the at-risk student is to achieve success. The student must feel connected to the school and feel what they are doing is worthwhile (Wehlage et al., 1990). The researchers looked at three obstacles to educational engagement: school work is not intrinsically motivating; the work tends to be abstract and disconnected from real world applications; and teachers are more concerned about covering material versus connecting the concepts. Nelson
and Eckstein (2008) support this by concluding that when students have the opportunity for application of what they have learned to real-world scenarios, they become more engaged. Engagement is not a solo expedition; students thrive through collaborations and conversations. Unfortunately, many times the work done is disconnected from the work that is relevant to the students’ life (Nelson & Eckstein, 2008).

The Measure of Effective Teaching (MET) projects key findings showed that student perceptions can accurately predict student achievement gains, identification of strengths and weaknesses, and develop new effective teaching strategies (Hanover Research, 2014). The manner in which a student perceives their school environment and learning may impact their desire to complete high school or to drop out. Perception means to become aware of something using external clues, even though the clues may not represent reality; the person uses them to create a feeling, often the perception becomes reality in the person’s mind. The situated learning theory recognizes that the relationship between students and teachers as well as their environment is essential to their success in school and beyond (Lave & Wenger, 1997. “Learning transforms who we are and what we can do; it is an experience of identity. It is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming . . . . Viewed as an experience of identity, learning entails both a process and a place. It entails a process of transforming knowledge as well as a context in which to define an identity of participation” (Lave et al., 1997, p. 215).

Wenger (1998) and Brown, Collin, and Duguid (1998) studied the relationship of student perceptions and student connectedness to learning through the lens of situated learning theory and found that “conventional schooling too often ignores the influence of school culture on what is learned in school” (Brown et al., 1998, p. 32). Drawing on research
into cognition as it is revealed in everyday activity, the authors argue that knowledge is situated, being in part a product of the activity, context, and culture in which it is developed and used. Concepts are developed in the context of their use in much the same way as meanings of words are developed Brown et al., (1998, p. 34). This directly relates to this IPA study in appraising the alternative educational setting versus the traditional educational setting in regard to students’ ability to make sense of their own learning and the learning environment.

The High School Survey of Student Engagement conducted by Yazzie-Mintz (2007) investigated the attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs that students have. Yazzie-Mintz (2007) determined that engagement within the school context is about relationships. “Student engagement can be described as the student’s relationship with the school community: the people (adults and peers), the structures (rules, facilities, schedules), the curriculum and content, the pedagogy, and the opportunities (curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular)” (p. 1). Wehlage et al. (1990) describe social capital as the relationships that are created in a community and are vital to building the membership within the community. At-risk students need adults to reach out to them, as many students did not develop these relationships within the home as a child. The development of the child is influenced by his own and others’ social capital—the learned skills and abilities—with which he interacts in that environment (Wehlage et al., 1990). Many students fail to find success, and repeated failure has led to a feeling of alienation and disconnect from school. These students require an environment that is nurturing and shows the students that they have a voice and are respected members of the community.
The High School Survey of Student Engagement has been reported for several years. Even though the survey is not specific to alternative schools, the responses of the high school students completing the survey speak to the disengagement of youth to school. When students were asked in an open-ended question, “If you have been bored in class, why?” their responses are as follows: 75% of students stated the material wasn’t interesting, 39% of students claimed the material wasn’t relevant, 32% of students stated that the work wasn’t challenging enough, and 27% said the work was too difficult, and 31% stated there was no interaction with the teacher (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009, p. 5). In the same report 24% of student who claimed they had considered dropping out cited the reason, “no adults in the school cared about me” (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009, p. 5).

Conclusion

Studies as early as Cox (1999) have called for “a need for more rigorous evaluations of alternative programs,” suggesting “experimental designs failed to produce positive evidence of effectiveness of programs” (p. 333). This study adds to the literature on alternative schools and their effect on students. Much literature can be found on alternative schools and programs; however, the research is either old or limited in findings. The need for future studies in both methodological and implementation issues of current programs have led me to this topic of research.

Research into specific programs or intervention strategies has requested additional empirical data as well. A study by Nye, Hedges and Konstantopoulos (2002) leaves open the question of what the mechanism of small class size effects might be. The researchers’ state, “randomized experiments could yield important information on how class sizes produce effects and in particular how it influences instruction” (p. 215). Another research study that
looked at specific programs and interventions is one by Borman and Hewes (2002). This research is a meta-analysis of four program evaluations. The study of prevention and early interventions influences educational policy, theory, and practice; however, this study provided no definitive answer to the question of the best or most effective program or intervention. The quasi-experimental study itself is not easily replicable and can only be generalized because of the types of programs being evaluated.

The Andrewander, Entwisle and Horsey (1997) study is an interesting addition to my research in the area of predicting student drop-out and interventions. Much research is found on early interventions and student success; this study brings to the table the discussion and need for future research in the area of adjustment pressure or transitions. While many articles and studies articulate the need for an implementation structure or framework for alternative programs as a means to curbing the high school dropout epidemic, insight as to specific structures and strategies remain elusive. Research from the mid-1990s through today have been focused on the structures, motivation, and engagement and the global impact of at-risk youth who drop out of high school.

The information gained from various literature and methodological reviews has answered the two guiding questions used to sort the literature in the area of alternative education and indicators of at-risk youth. Andreander et al. (1997) identified through their research three contextual factors of dropouts’: family, children’s personal resources, and school experiences. Knesting (2008) and Caraway et al. (2003), along with Smith, Gregory and Pugh (1981) laid the foundation for individual factors: student engagement and persistence. Some may say that studying student engagement can seem daunting because student engagement is dependent on collaboration, and perception. Most important in this
process of exploring alternative education from the student perspective is listening to what
the students themselves say and believe about their relationship to the school community
(Yazzie-Mintz, 2009). The research illustrates that the sole purpose of teaching and learning
is to open the students’ eyes and minds to the world and that the path to greater knowledge
can happen through discovering and investigating (Cladbaugh, 2010). Confucius stated,
“Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Let me do and I understand” (as cited in
Bransford, 2000).
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter outlines the research method that was used to understand the transitional experiences of at-risk youth who moved from a traditional high school to an alternative school.

Research Focus

The study emerged out of an overwhelming number of the studies concerning alternative education including but not limited to at-risk youth, student motivation, and the pedagogy of alternative education in general. These areas are vital to developing a more comprehensive understanding of the best practices in alternative high school settings. The mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, however, has left a gap in the research concerning the voice of the student. The key focus of an IPA study is on “personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context, for people who share a particular experience” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 45). This focus and resulting insights will help to inform alternative school pedagogy and the creation of learning experiences.

The situated learning theory used for this study aligns with the IPA focus and allows understanding of the experiences of the students. The situated learning theory conceives that learning is a process of social and personal transformation in communities of practice. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) approach contrasts with other perspectives in education concerning the acquisition of knowledge by individuals. They posit that the theoretical focus should be on the students’ interaction within a group, with learning viewed as a “feature of membership in a community” (Matusov, Bell & Rogoff, 1994, p. 918). The social cultural approach to learning of Lave and Wenger has implications for social research and social practices. The focus of IPA on the lived experiences, coupled with the situated learning framework’s focus
on interactions within a community illuminated individual participation and attendant learning of the at-risk students of the Learning Center school.

**Research Tradition**

The study used qualitative research to provide an in-depth analysis of data collected from interviews with participants in a natural setting to reveal the perspectives of the participants in Learning Center School. A qualitative approach was chosen for this study in order to convey how an experience has a larger significance in a person’s life rather than fix an experience in predefined categories as many of the studies do. “Qualitative studies are concerned with the quality and texture of experience, rather than with the identification of cause and effect relationships” (Willig, 2001, p. 9). Specifically, the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen as a way to investigate, interpret, and explore the participants’ understanding of their lived experiences.

The methodology of phenomenology was derived from the work of Husserl and later advanced by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenology is used in the social sciences and psychology fields to understand experiences by examining the parts or meaning of an event, role, or process from the point of view of someone who experienced it. Phenomenology places the research participants at the focus of the study and uses their words to shape a broad understanding of the experience (Creswell, 2009). This method requires an intensive analysis of detailed interviews of a small number of participants (Moustakas, 1994). The sample size for each study needs to be small to gain the potential of IPA through the method of data collection of in-depth interviews that are recorded and transcribed verbatim.

IPA studies are conducted with small sample sizes, as the case-by-case analysis of
individual transcripts takes a long time. The focus of the interpretive analysis is to give
details about the perceptions and understandings of the research participants. IPA involves
detailed examination of the participants’ world and attempts to explore personal experiences
(Smith et al., 2009). Though this is complicated by the researcher’s own perceptions, they
are needed to make sense of the others’ personal world through interpretive activities and
two-stage interpretation process. “The participants are trying to make sense of their world;
the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their
world” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 53).

I chose this research design to discover how students perceive and make sense of their
transition to the Learning Center and to engage students as they reflect upon their personal
changes and experiences moving from the traditional high school to the Learning Center. IPA
allows for a detailed investigation of a particular case and provides the opportunity to get as
close to the individual’s truth as possible (Moustakas, 1994).

**Site and Participants**

The research site was an alternative education program within a medium-sized district
of about 2,700 students in a suburb of Kansas City, Missouri. The school district designed the
Learning Center to meet the diverse needs of the student population in an effort to reduce the
number of dropouts. The program provides competency-based credit (credit based upon
mastery of learning objectives rather than seat-time). The Learning Center students are
expected to master all of the objectives of their peers in the traditional high school
curriculum and are required to take all required End-of-Course (EOC) exams. The program is
g geared toward students who must work full-time to help support their families, students who
are parents, and students who do not exhibit behavior issues but fail to thrive in a traditional
high school. The Learning Center currently has 21 students enrolled for the 2013-2014 school year.

I selected this site because it is in a neighboring school district to my home and the district where I work. This allowed for easy access to students in their home environment for interviews and focus groups. The information from this study was given to the school district for their use to improve the Learning Center as well as to help implement a similar program in the district in which I work.

The detailed examination of a particular phenomenon is the basis of phenomenological studies. With this in mind, Smith et al. (2009) state, “samples are selected purposively” to offer more insight into the phenomenon being studied (p. 48). Purposive sampling was used to identify and recruit participants who can offer a meaningful perspective on the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). For this reason, the group of four junior or senior level students was chosen. These students were mature enough to understand that the experience has a larger significance in a person’s life; they would be able to reflect on their experiences leading up to the transition to the Learning Center, their attitude about school, their personal learning and include thoughts about their future plans. Smith et al. (2009) recommend a smaller sample size of 4 to 10 interviews because “successful analysis requires time, reflection and dialogue” (p. 52). They caution less experienced researchers to not see “the higher numbers as being indicative of ‘better’ work” (p. 52).

**Recruitment and Access**

The school district where the Learning Center is located is 15 miles from Kansas City, Missouri, in a town close to the researcher. The district administration and Learning Center administrator agreed to the study and all interviews being completed at the Learning
Center with the four junior students. The superintendent’s permission letter is found in appendix A. Parents of potential student participants were notified via mail of the opportunity for their child to participate in this study. The letter included information concerning the study, purpose, and outcomes as well as a detailed description of the process and benefits to the student and school. Along with the letter, two informed consent documents were included: one for them to sign and return in a self-addressed envelope and the other for their records. A copy of the consent letter is shown in Appendix B. The parent letter included an opt-in or opt-out check box as well as parent signature. Once consent had been given for the students to participate, I met with all participants on school property to explain the purpose of the study, the incentives of participation (a $10 Quik Trip gift card), and allowed them an opportunity to opt out before scheduling the first focus group session and subsequent interviews.

**Data Collection**

To better understand the phenomenon and following the Phenomenological analysis approach, the researcher was the primary instrument for collecting and analyzing the data from the students’ reflections and stories. “IPA shares the view that human beings are sense making creatures, and therefore the accounts which participants provide will reflect their attempt to make sense of their experience” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3). To accomplish this, three semi-structured interviews were conducted through an idiographic mode of inquiry, which permitted greater flexibility of coverage and allowed the interview to go into novel areas (Smith et al., 2009).

A qualitative interview is described by Smith et al. (2009) as “a conversation with a purpose” (p. 57). Semi-structured one-to-one interviews with each participant were
completed at a mutually agreed upon time and location in a private environment at the Learning Center. The aim of the one-to-one interviews was to allow the participants to tell their own stories, in their own words. IPA approach also allowed the researcher and participant to “engage in dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in light of the participants’ responses and the researcher was able to enquire after other interesting areas which arise” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 57).

During the three interviews, the researcher took notes, but mainly focused on making the participant feel comfortable and relaxed. After each interview, the researcher kept reflective memos (Maxwell, 2008) concerning the evolving perceptions in order to capture personal introspections that were useful in the data analysis phase. Following the standard qualitative interview procedure as described by Smith et al., 2009, a pre-designed interview schedule was developed with a set of neutral, non-leading, open-ended questions. The interview protocols are included in Appendix C.

Smith et al. (2009) propose an interview schedule as a way to organize questions based on the overarching research questions and theoretical framework. Smith et al. (2009) outline the steps a researcher should take as the following:

1. Choose questions that will answer the research question.
2. Think about the range of topics to cover.
3. Logically order the topics to cover.
4. Formulate questions that are appropriate for the study.
5. Edit and revise the questions as necessary.

Benefits of creating and using an interview schedule are that it dictates the flow of the conversation, and if a participant has difficulty answering a question, the researcher is able to
use the interview schedule to elicit more information or change topics as needed. As the interview progressed, the interviewer became an active listener and veered away from the planned questions as the conversation shifted (Moustakas, 1994, Smith et al., 2009).

Double hermeneutic occurred during the interviews. This was where both the participant and researcher interpreted the experience; therefore the interviews were conducted by the researcher and were recorded using Audacity onto my personal computer to ensure that the thoughts and perspectives of the participants were conveyed as accurately as possible (Yin, 2012). After the interviews, the audio files were transcribed verbatim using a three-column template. Due to the age of the participants of this study, the researcher used pseudonyms to aid in anonymity during data collection and documentation. The researcher allowed the participants to read and remove any potentially harmful information from the transcripts.

**Interview protocol.** The interviews were informal and comfortable for both the researcher and the participants as the researcher had established a friendly rapport with each the participants prior to the interviews. Because of this high comfort level, interviews flowed naturally with limited discomfort and were focused on their lived experiences, needs, and goals. The interview consisted of open-ended questions, making use of probing follow-up questions as needed. IPA focuses on the participants’ experiences; the researcher encouraged the participants to tell their stories, with the researcher taking on the role of the active listener.

During the introduction to the study, both in person and through an introductory letter, the researcher explained the background and purpose of the study and answered questions from the potential participants. The researcher scheduled individual interviews
with each participant. The researcher conducted these interviews in the director’s office during December. The study involved four participants. Each interview was informal and was allocated 30 to 60 minutes. Each interview began with an overview of the study. The researcher offered to answer any questions the participant might have. Participants understood all the relevant details of the study, and they each read and signed the participant informed consent form. Participants were assigned pseudonyms in order to protect anonymity during the study. After receiving permission from the participant, the audio was recorded on the researcher’s iPad.

Data Storage

The data collected for this study was stored securely in the researcher’s password-protected Evernote account. Interviews were recorded through Audacity and saved as sound files and videos. All notes were typed. Storage in Evernote allowed the researcher to maintain participant confidentiality as well as ensure the data would not be lost due to technology failure. Documentation, both audio and written transcript, were backed up on a password-protected external hard drive. Documents were labeled by the participants’ pseudonym and interview date.

Protection of Human Subjects

The researcher does not believe that this study posed any significant risk to the participants, although measures were taken in the data collection, storage and analysis to protect the participants’ confidentiality. The study planned to highlight the transitional, social, and emotional challenges of at-risk high school students in an alternative school setting. Because of the personal information that was presented, the identity of the participants remained confidential at all times. The researcher used gender neutral
pseudonyms during transcription and recording. The study was performed based on the statutes prescribed by the Institutional Review Board of Northeastern University. The researcher ensured that information remained confidential, and an informed consent letter was signed by the parent/guardian of all participants due to their age.

**Data Analysis**

A qualitative study analysis follows a basic order of steps as outlined by Creswell (2007) as: preparing and organizing the data; reducing the data into themes; and presenting data in tables. Even though there is no clear right or wrong way of conducting IPA analysis, Smith et al. (2009) recommend four main parts broken into six steps in the IPA method of research analysis. The first and second parts deal with transcribing the interviews and making initial notes on the interview transcripts. These first two parts were conducted for each of the four interviews and were designed to “encourage a reflective engagement with the participant’s account” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 80). Once this was accomplished, then the third part was to develop emergent themes, while the fourth and final parts consisted of searching for connections across emergent themes and then patterns across cases to include in the final discussions. The authors point out that the data analysis stage is “a commitment to an understanding of the participants’ point of view, and a … focus on personal meaning-making in particular contexts” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79).

Smith et al. (2009) break down the four main parts of an IPA analysis in a unidirectional guide of six steps to make the analysis more manageable for the novice analyst. The researcher followed the steps in analyzing the interviews of the participants of this study.
Step one of analysis was in the form of the first written transcript; where the researcher read and re-read the data. This step encouraged the researcher to make sure that the participant became the focus of the analysis. Repeated reading also allowed a “model of the overall interview structure to develop, and permits … an understanding of how narratives can bind … an interview together” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 82).

At step two, the researcher began initial noting by examining the semantic content and language use. InVivo coding uses the participants’ “behaviors or processes” in the “terms used by the participants themselves … help us to preserve participants’ meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 76). This is detailed and time consuming but allows the analyst to become familiar with the data. The aim of step two is to “produce a comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments on the data” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 83). Through the analysis of the initial notes, a clear phenomenological focus was established as the researcher started to find that more interpretative noting helped to understand how and why the participant has their concerns, thoughts, or reflections.

At steps three and four, the researcher began developing emergent themes across each data set by mapping the interrelationships, connections, and patterns. The analysis also “involves a recall of what was learned through the whole process of initial noting” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 91). In order to focus on the emergent themes, the researcher began to chunk the transcripts and notes to break up the narrative flow of interviews. Focused coding allowed the researcher to take earlier codes that continually reappear in the first cycle and use those codes to sift through the data (Saldaña, 2009).

In the final steps of five and six, the researcher continued with the data analysis of interviews from multiple cases and began to look for patterns across all cases. Step five
specifically warns the novice analyst to follow the previous steps to allow new themes and ideas to do justice to each individual interview. In step six—the development of the themes and interpretation of the data—the researcher analyzing each theme by descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments made by each of the participants, leading to subthemes.

To ensure confidentiality, all recordings collected by the researcher were kept strictly anonymous and stored in a secure location. Pseudonyms were used during the data collection process in order to further ensure confidentiality. All digital recordings of data were destroyed following the transcriptions and the completion of the data analysis.

Once the interviews were completed, the researcher transcribed the audio versions of the interviews and then began coding and analyzing. The researcher used the guidelines described by Smith et al. (2009), which include analysis and identification of emergent patterns. The transcriptions were uploaded to MAXQDA software for analysis in order to ascertain which themes were most prevalent. The researcher reviewed each interview multiple times, which brought out significant themes that began to repeat in each interview and then over the span of several interviews. Certain themes were considered as emergent because they were the most prevalent and appropriate to the study.

The thematic coding focused on alternative education students and connected their experiences and important aspects of the alternative school and their experiences. The themes were connected through overarching topics of social, emotional, and academic needs. Organizing the themes in this way helped the researcher better understand how students make meaning of their experience at the Learning Center.
Credibility and Transferability

Qualitative research is at times examined closely for credibility and validity to ensure that the research is rigorous and worthy. To establish this, Guba and Lincoln (1985) created qualitative versions of the accepted quantitative work in regard to credibility, authenticity, transferability, dependability, and conformability. They describe credibility as frequent observations and method fact checking to ensure the research is trustworthy. Transferability is defined as a well-constructed narrative will permit other researchers to agree whether the findings are generalizable to other research contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Smith et al. (2009) believe that qualitative work should take into consideration the special features and recommend specific strategies to be used to gain trustworthiness. Smith et al. (2009) recommend using negative cases, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement, audit trails, and member checks. Smith et al. (2009) recommend using Yardley’s (2000) criteria for assessing quality: “sensitivity to context… commitment and rigour… transparency and coherence… and impact and importance” (cited in Smith et al., 2009, pp. 180-183).

Using the first principle of sensitivity to context, the researcher sought peer debriefing concerning the interview questions, schedules, and data collection methods. The interview questions were reviewed by a peer in education who was qualified and discussed revisions and made appropriate changes as needed. Following the second principle of commitment and rigor, the researcher will show a degree of “attentiveness to the participant… and care with which the analysis of each case” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 181). During the interviews the researcher was careful to balance between digging deeper and picking up on clues from the participant to ensure the quality of the interview and completeness of the analysis. The third principle, transparency and coherence, refer to how
clearly the stages of the research are outlined in the final write-up and understanding who the reader will be. The researcher will clearly explain the research study, the process, and the analysis in a way that is easy for the reader to follow, because the researcher is a practitioner/researcher who works in the educational community and understands the perspectives of teachers and administrators. The final principle, impact and importance, is shown by telling the reader “something interesting, important or useful” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 183). Throughout this process I looked for overarching patterns that would help me to understand the experience of students requiring attendance at the Learning Center while highlighting how the experience has been different for each student.
CHAPTER 4: THE FINDINGS

Imagine yourself as a child playing the board game *Life*. You are playing the game, going through the motions; you roll the dice and then you move the right amount of spaces and you do what the game tells you to do. But do you really understand what each step of the game means? Probably not. Some students feel like this in a traditional high school: They don’t fit the game of school and need an alternative route, one not found in the traditional game of life.

The participants of this study, like many of their peers, do not fit the traditional game of school due to individual and contextual factors. To these and many at risk students, school means being rejected by peers and teachers alike as well as academic failure. Because of this, thankfully alternative schools have been created, giving at-risk students a place they can be successful. Alternative schools have taken on many different aspects to meet the needs of their individual students. While many studies have been conducted in order to determine the need for alternative education, the programming for alternative education and even the type of students that attend an alternative school, studies related to the students’ perceptions are lacking. This qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study was conducted to better understand the experiences and perceptions of students enrolled in alternative education programs as they relate to what constitutes a successful alternative education school.

Purposive sampling created a small group of students that was included in the interview process sharing their perspectives with the researcher. Smith et al. (2009) state, “it is possible to move to more general claims with IPA but this should only be after the potential of the case has been realized” (p. 3). As such, the information gained from the
participants’ perceptions can lead to greater understanding of other students and their needs related to alternative education. The purpose of this chapter is to give an overview of the data collected and results focused on the perceptions of the specific participants who all have a shared experience within the Learning Center.

Description of Location and Participants

Location

The Learning Center is a relatively new alternative school. The school opened for the 2011-2012 school year. The school is located on the same campus as the traditional high school; however, it is located in an annex building attached to the Upper Elementary School that is located at the back of the school campus. The two buildings that make up the Learning Center are open concept, with no interior walls, which adds to the overall sense of a community. The students are allowed many freedoms that are different from the traditional high school; students are able to move freely within the classrooms as needed, listen to music via head phones during class, and most importantly to the students, they are able to design their own learning timeline to accomplish their personal goals and courses needed for graduation. Students are permitted to drive to and from the school like the traditional high school students, which also gives them the opportunity to attend some of their courses at the traditional high school as needed to meet all graduation requirements.

The community of practice in that a “community of practice is formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain” (Wenger, 2007 as cited by Smith, 2003,2009) This type of learning environment enables students to work at their own rate and level while collaborating with each other and their teachers for support as needed. The Learning Center gives the necessary opportunity for student choice in admission, but
only permits juniors and seniors to attend. The attendance at the time of the study was 21 junior and senior students.

**Participants**

All students currently attending the Learning Center were approached and given information concerning the study (Appendix B) by the director as an invitation to be a part of this study. Four senior students volunteered; all students were 18 years of age at the time of the study. As a group, the participants represented a small demographic range in that two of the participants were male and two of the participants were female. The school district is not an ethnically diverse district; however, the participants are a consistent with the district’s general population in regard to their socioeconomic status. The participants shared information about their personal feelings, experiences, and backgrounds that have affected who they are as people and as students in their beginning interview, and they talked about their reasons for attending the Learning Center, like issues with relationships, feelings, and academic difficulties.

*Andrew* is a high school student whom most would see as a typical student. He is social and is engaged in the traditional high school through sports and friends. He sees the traditional high school as a normal place from which all students graduate; he believes that whether they are successful or not it is up to them. Andrew explained, “They [teachers] answer any questions you have, tell you what you need to do to graduate, and get through the class.” He adds, “if I could go back, I would try harder in my other classes so I wouldn’t have to come down here.” Even though he had some academic problems overall, he feels he was fine in the traditional high school except in the area of math, and that the Learning Center is simply a means to complete his math credits so he can graduate. Andrew explains, “It [The
Learning Center] helps you graduate, if you are struggling in school then you come here to get what you need to get done.” He was on track to graduate with his cohort group at the time of the interviews only because he was attending the Learning Center which allowed him to make up credits he was lacking in order to graduate with his cohort.

**Aiden** is a high school student who fell into the wrong crowd and “partied” his first two years of school. He explained, “The reason I moved down here is because my freshman and sophomore year I just really didn’t do anything. I mean I wrestled, so second semester I did stuff. I just remember ending my sophomore year and maybe 8 credits and my GPA was maybe a 1”. He realized too late that he was in over his head, and understanding that in order to go to medical school he had to make some changes, he decided to attend the Learning Center when the counselor offered him the option for his Junior and Senior years. Aiden stated this simply: “I would say my school has definitely gotten better. Because I realize I am down here for a reason. I need to graduate.” The Learning Center has been a way for him to graduate from high school with his credits as well as a higher GPA. He spends his entire day at the Learning Center following a path that he has designed with his counselor to make sure he is college ready when he graduates from high school.

**Jessica** is a traditional senior in age only. When she was 16, she chose to drop out of high school. When asked to explain why she stated, “Everything with my grades, they [teachers and administrators] didn’t encourage me at all, they just put me down. I don’t have any respect for any of them.” As Jessica describes her treatment by her teachers and lack of relationship building between herself and her peers, she feels very negatively about the traditional high school. Jessica describes her experience at the traditional high school:
A few teachers at the high school that will support you but most of them blow you off…most of my classes they don’t really talk through it, they just hand you a piece of paper or maybe a slide show and have you fill it in on your own.

Jessica’s goal is to go into the military. In order to make this happen, she wants to get her high school diploma. The Learning Center program is a means to acquire this diploma without having to interact with the teachers at the traditional high school, so she spends her entire day at the Learning Center.

Emma is not a traditional high school student either. Returning at the age of 19 with two children and no support system to help her, she is truly on her own. In her eyes she was set up for failure early on. Emma explained:

I got put into special education classes, which just put me further behind I felt, because now I struggle to do things that a 20-year-old should be able to do. Getting the IEP made me feel dumb like I couldn’t accomplish things. I couldn’t do things a ninth grader should be doing I had to do something a 5th grader was. It made me feel stupider so I started to believe it.

She was in and out of special education programs, which she believes created more barriers and put her in an environment that lacked support and positive relationships. Emma expanded on her perspective:

I know I felt that at the high school it was hurry up do your work and turn it in and get out of the school and if you turn in anything late then they would be like you’re getting an F for that and they wouldn’t want to work with you on things.
However, Emma is determined to get her diploma to prove to herself and her children that anyone can do it. Her goals are to go on to school to be a welder. She has one class at the traditional high school and the rest of the day she spends at the Learning Center.

**Research Questions**

The thematic coding aided in better relaying the students’ perspective of their overall experience in high school and at the Learning Center and allowed me to answer the research questions that guided this qualitative IPA study:

1. How do students who have transitioned from a traditional high school to a suburban Midwestern alternative school make sense of their high school experience?

2. How do these understandings and perceptions affect the students’ social, emotional, and academic needs?

**Results**

In response to the guiding research questions, four themes emerged that capture the way these participants make sense of their high school experiences and how these experiences play out with regard to how well their school experiences meet their social, emotional and academic needs. The four themes reflect both internal and contextual factors and are as follows: the interpersonal experiences and pace associated with the traditional school setting; the power of personalized attention; varied experiences with support and encouragement; and the role of community.
Making Sense of the Traditional High School

One of the ways that at-risk students make meaning of attending an alternative school setting is by understanding what they were missing or had difficulty with at the traditional school. The students talked a lot about what was wrong or what they have and had issues with, at the traditional high school. The students made meaning of the experience of transitioning to the Learning Center by comparing their experience at the traditional high school to their Learning Center experience. Their understandings appear to be formed by a blend of experiences with relationships, personal impressions of the traditional high school, their own maturity, and their social, emotional, and academic needs. Each student related his or her experiences differently, but the commonalities of respect and pace emerged.

Respect

Experiences, whether positive or negative, that were pushing these students to be at-risk and in need of an alternative learning program seemed to be happening without the students realizing what was occurring at the time. High school is supposed to be a time for growing and learning socially, emotionally, and academically; however, to some students it is not that way. Emma stated, “Well, my school experience was horrible. I didn’t want to be there at all. It was drama, drama all the time.” It became clear from her interviews that she did not have a positive outlook on the traditional school. Emma was able to speak very clearly about her feelings and how she was treated while in school, yet at the same time she understood the importance of a high school education. She articulated that her perceptions of the traditional high school were mostly negative, based on her own experiences. The traditional high school was perceived as a place where the adults only want to control you. She stated, “I don’t like how we get treated like prisoners…we always have to ask for
permission to do anything.” Emma shared an experience she had at the traditional high school. “I was always getting bad grades and yelled at by teachers because I wasn’t doing as good as the other students.” Emma did not experience positive relationships that included mutual respect with her teachers and peers that would have helped her to progress academically. In contrast, Emma stated that her teachers at the Learning Center were a positive influence on her and always a support to her and her learning. “They [teachers] tell me I can do it, this makes me think maybe I really can.”

Jessica was not at the traditional high school at the same time as Emma; however, they had a similar perspective on the traditional high school’s social impact. She stated, “They [the teachers] treated me like they were in control of me and I couldn’t be myself, like I was in prison up there.” Jessica viewed the traditional high school adversely, mainly due to how she felt she was treated and her perceptions of the adults’ interactions with her. She experienced a lack of respect from the adults at the traditional high school, and as a result she believes that the adults created a hostile environment in which she was unable to function, which ultimately led to her dropping out of the school. Jessica mentioned the strictness of the traditional high school several times and seemed to chafe at the ordered structure of the school. She specifically mentioned an incident that caused her annoyance when she was wrongly accused of parking in a different parking spot. She stated, “If the people at the high school weren’t so grouchy I probably would have stayed, but I was tired of being yelled at and put down.” She stated her opinion very pointedly: “I don’t really get much out of the teachers at the high school. I don’t really have good things to say about them.”

Aiden was very different from Emma and Jessica in his perceptions of the traditional high school, his place in it, and why he isn’t attending there this year. Aiden reflected on his
time by stating, “I just remember ending my sophomore year with maybe 8 credits and my GPA was maybe a 1.0.” To him, the traditional high school wasn’t the issue—he was. “The teacher didn’t set me up to fail; it is my fault.” Even with the perception of the traditional school that he has, he realized that the traditional school has its liabilities. What was consistent across the three stories about the teacher-student relationships was an absence of adequate support, whether or not it was experienced as disrespect.

**Pace**

Aiden contemplated his own failure and that of others when he said, “At the regular high school kids will get frustrated and it is too fast and you get left behind.” Aiden went on to say, “The high school has a lot of people so I guess sometimes if there are a lot of students that have trouble then it would be hard to keep up with everyone.” His perceptions were centered on his own experiences and those of his friends. He didn’t blame the teachers at the traditional high school for his or his peers’ inability to succeed; he simply understood that his own lack of ambition was what was standing in his way of graduating. At the Learning Center he has found that he is in control of his learning and is successful.

Andrew, like Emma and Jessica, felt the traditional high school had too many rules. “I still feel like I am treated the same way as in middle school, it hasn’t really changed.” Even with this perception that he wasn’t treated as mature or responsible, he didn’t have the same negative experiences of the traditional high school. He stated several times during the interviews, “you make high school what you make out of it” and that if he could go back he “would have tried harder in my classes so I wouldn’t have to come down here…I mean it isn’t bad at [the Learning Center], but if I could go back I would.” The only time in the
interviews that Andrew was negative toward the traditional high school was when he talked about why he wasn’t successful. He explained,

I felt like I didn’t have enough time to get all my work done. I had to leave school and then go to work till like 9 o’clock. I just didn’t feel like I had enough time to do all my homework and go to work.

Andrew believed he has the ability to learn and do the work, but just that he learns at different rates than other students, especially in the area of math.

Like Andrew, Emma and Jessica also had much to say about the pace of the academics at the high school. Jessica stated, “Most of my classes they don’t talk through it, they just hand you a piece of paper or maybe a slide show and have you fill it in on your own.” One of the three obstacles to educational engagement was the students’ perception that teachers are more concerned about covering material. Emma gave an example of this when she was asked if she thought the teachers cared. She stated, “No, I don’t think they do. They just want to hurry up and get them out because they have so many kids going through their class in one day, they don’t have time to care.”

All of the study participants found that they struggled academically, however they all found success at the Learning Center. The Learning Center gave them the opportunity to create their own learning pace and path, their goals for graduation, and most importantly to understand how they each learn.

Each student reflected on their time at the traditional high school, whether that time was good or bad. Perhaps having the time to reflect or having the experience of the Learning Center helped them move past the parts of the experience that were untenable and solidified their desire to complete high school and move on to other possibilities. Some common themes ran through their perceptions of their time in the traditional high school; however,
each of their individual experiences remains unique. Based on the interviews with the participants, I believe that reflecting on their experiences at the traditional high school is one of the foundations towards making meaning of the experience of attending an alternative school and allows them a better perspective on their own learning.

The Power of Personalized Attention

Another important theme for the participants was the need for personalized attention. Often students need help but either are not able to or do not know how to ask for it. Researchers such as Christenson and Thurlow (2004) theorize that components of a successful alternative education program address more individualized or personalized education. Closely tied to the previous theme of “traditional high school,” students described their experiences with a non-traditional or alternative setting such as the Learning Center. All of the students experienced the two environments as different, and some seemed to value the shift more than others. All of the participants agreed that there was more personalized attention at the Learning Center’s which seemed to stem from the flexibility of the learning environment and the positive relationships between students and teachers.

Flexibility

Andrew spoke the least about attending the Learning Center in general. His lack of success at the traditional high school, specifically in math, put him behind, giving him the opportunity to join other students at the Learning Center in order to graduate. When asked about his perception of the Learning Center, he stated, “Well, it [The Learning Center] helps you graduate, if you are struggling then you come here to get what you need to get done.” He went on to explain the benefits of the Learning Center: “I have more time to do what I need
Andrew in the traditional high school struggled academically; at the Learning Center he was able to work at his own pace and learn the material with support. “If you need to go back and redo a lesson you can. It gives you more of a chance to understand what you are doing.” Andrew also felt that the Learning Center program was more than just a place for you to get your credits to graduate. He stated,

It has given me a chance to do stuff on my own time instead of having to have a deadline to get it all done and I can take the time to actually learn it and know what I am doing.

When asked to reflect on the environment of the Learning Center compared to that of the traditional high school, he commented that at the Learning Center, “It is pretty laid back, it gives us a chance to get our work done and we don’t feel rushed or anything like that.” This flexibility is important to Andrew and his work ethic. He relates his success to his learning.

Aiden, similar to Andrew, doesn’t have a negative perception of the traditional high school; however, he understood why he needed the Learning Center. “The teacher didn’t set me up to fail, it is my fault.” He was very clear about accepting responsibility for his learning. He did find success, however, at the Learning Center.

It has kind of gotten me to realize I need to get my stuff together and I feel like I have learned a lot more than at the traditional school because it is at my pace and I can spend as much time as I need. I get distracted easily so since it is just me I can put in head phones and go to lala land.

Aiden is able to understand the impact that he has on his own learning and what he needs to do in order to graduate from high school on time.
If it isn’t one-on-one, then you can easily cheat off of someone and like I’ve done it before. I like one-on-one because it shows what you know and not what the class knows. It [the Learning Center] is benefiting me and a lot of kids.

**Relationships**

While Andrew and Aiden were focused on the personalized attention that the Learning Center brings to their academics, Emma and Jessica had more to say about the social and emotional outcomes that the individualized attention brings them. Emma explained her perspective: “I get overwhelmed really easy with a bunch of homework assignments and stuff…I get overwhelmed thinking I’m not going to finish so she (the teacher) will cut down to just one lesson and I can get it done.” Emma uses these small goals as a focus for herself and is then able to feel success as she accomplishes each task. When the teachers and the Director appreciate her hard work and praise her for it, she is given hope and support that she needs as she is attempting to get her world straight so that she can be the mom she believes her kids need.

[My teacher] understands my situation with my kids. I’m a single parent and I don’t have any family, so she knows that some days I come in and can’t do it and say there’s no way I can do this she understands and tries to be there to support me. She had a very pointed idea concerning her learning and abilities. “I guess you do your own learning way, you do you, you don’t have to go by the school’s correct learning way, you do you.” Emma feels a sense of pride in herself through the individualized attention that she receives at the Learning Center. “I feel down here that I’m doing really good, I’m successful.”
Jessica, like Emma, has found more success at the Learning Center through the individualized attention that she receives.

I like it here because they push me and tell me I need to get it done and if I don’t, there is no way I’m going to graduate… and if you don’t believe you can, then they tell you that you can and that makes you get a different perspective of it.

One of the areas that Jessica had problems with when she was in the traditional high school was attendance. She didn’t want to come to school as she felt she was being harassed by the adults. She missed a lot of school, but while at the Learning Center she feels this isn’t as important; she stated, “Your attendance doesn’t affect you getting your work done, you are able to work at your own pace.” The policies at the Learning Center are a little more flexible than those at the traditional high school in that they allow students more freedom and flexibility in their learning environment and time to complete their goals. Jessica has been able to find peace with the Learning Center and her own successes. She felt that her own success has been helped by the teachers at the Learning Center versus the lack of respect she felt from the traditional high school. “They [the teachers at the Learning Center] are there to help you. You don’t really have to ask, if they see you having a problem they are right there 100% to help you.”

Since transitioning from the traditional high school to the Learning Center was such an important part of students making meaning of their learning, it is not surprising that the need to adjust their expectations was also important. Whether they were aware of what they expected when they decided to attend the Learning Center, each student was able to discuss how their expectations had or had not been met. For all the students it was a positive experience where they found the individualized attention that they needed.
Encouragement and Motivation

Once students were at the Learning Center and were able to receive individualized attention, they also found the motivation and encouragement they needed in order to become successful. It seems like some of the participants in this study had not previously felt engaged personally and socially, which interrupted their motivation to achieve academically. Students need encouragement, and school tends to work well for students who have positive experiences, support, and encouragement from parents, teachers, and school staff. Each of the participants has the ability to learn in school, and describe the role that the relationships they have developed at the Learning Center play in their success.

Positive Relationships

Emma was the most outspoken of the students when it came to her beliefs. For such a young woman, she has seen life in a very different way compared to many traditional high school students. She believes that what motivates her is different from what motivates others; however, what she is expressing about her emotions is in alignment with many youth her age. When asked what held her back, she answered simply, “my personality” then went on to explain:

I feel like I can’t do things I put myself down so much that I believe that I can’t do it and then my grades start to slip and then I get depressed because I tell myself I’m not going to be able to do it and it shows that I just have that low self-esteem and I feel like I can’t do it.

Emma is capable of succeeding when she has the support of others around her. She relies heavily on the teachers and administrator for support and to motivate her. “When I actually try and do it then I feel like I get told I’m doing a good job by a teacher then I work a little
harder and I know I can do the work that I’m given.” She wants to graduate and move on. She states, “I want to finish school because I want to be able to tell my kids I had both of you and you have no excuse to not be finishing school.” She went on to say,

I try to ignore all the drama and believe in myself because all I’ve ever done is screw everything up. So maybe if I believe a little more and try a little harder that I can graduate on time late but on time.

Jessica, unlike Emma, was motivated more by the need to move on with her life (“graduate high school and go to the Marines”) than with responsibilities or personal feelings. “I like it here a lot better…they help you as much as they can and it feels good to accomplish something.” She explained how the Learning Center helped her get back into the game of school. When asked what made it easier to come back, she said, “because I have the Learning Center teachers that are actually there for me and they want me to graduate.” When she talked about the difference between the traditional school and the Learning Center in regard to motivation and encouragement, she says:

I like it here [at the Learning Center] because they push me and tell me I need to get it done and if I don’t, there is no way I’m going to graduate. Mrs. Harper tells me I do a good job when I finish something. Even if I’m not done she still tells me I’m doing good and that she can’t wait for me to succeed.

Jessica goes on to say, “At the [Learning Center] I can be myself.” She explained that she felt more like a family at the Learning Center and was able to relax with the students and teachers. “They have these little Wednesday things where we talk about what we want to be and everything… they have helped me get along with the teachers and stuff.”
Different Kinds of Support

Positive relationships and encouragement led to both Jessica’s and Emma’s motivation to complete assignments and work towards their goal of graduation. For Andrew and Aiden, however, their motivation emerged from different sources. They saw themselves as the reason for attending the Learning Center, and they also saw themselves as the way out. When speaking of encouragement at the Learning Center, Aiden explained,

I would say in a way it is a second chance… kind of a wakeup call…they didn’t baby me and said like hey, you have to get your grades up I just didn’t listen…they constantly bug you and give you another chance so I think it is like the real world. To Aiden the teachers were not the reason he was working to graduate, they were there to support and encourage. “We kind of make our own decisions cause it is like our choice on how we want to see our futures go, so you get treated like that.” He explained a time when he felt encouraged by his teachers.

Between quarters on day (the teacher) will say I have these goals for you and will say this class this class and this many things in this class. Then on like a half day we will bring x-box and have a play day and certain people that hasn’t met their goals has to go on this side and finish their stuff and once they finish then they can go over there.

Andrew did not talk much about encouragement or motivation. He seemed to be very reserved about his opinions and needs. He talked during the interviews about just getting his work done and not worrying about too many other things. He was adamant that he was still treated the same as at the traditional high school and that it had not changed what he does. However, when questioned more closely about his experiences, it was clear he did find that
the Learning Center teachers encourage him and he is motivated to learn and graduate. He stated, “We are encouraged to do what we are supposed to do, but that is pretty much it.” When asked if he felt the teachers took his feelings into account, he said, “I think they do, because when I say something they listen to me and try to do things I want to graduate and put me into classes I’m interested in.” It was clear that Andrew saw the Learning Center as a means to an end. To him the Learning Center was “pretty laid back; it gives us a chance to get our work done and we don’t feel rushed or anything like that.”

When students feel that they can do what is being asked of them, when they feel that they have some control and can make meaning of their experiences, then they have the opportunity to be successful. The students at the Learning Center in this study experienced the different kinds of encouragement and motivation that the teachers and staff offered differently, but in all four cases their needs were being met and each student was acting upon their strongest and deepest desires to be successful and accomplish their individual goals (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012).

**Sense of Community**

The students and teachers create the learning environment at the Learning Center together, and the students are afforded the opportunities to reach their individual goals at their own rate, drawing on their own strengths. The social community that has been created at the Learning Center is an integral part of these students’ success. Social pathways help students make meaning of information, which in turn shapes decision-making. Feeling welcomed into, included in, and validated by school can exert a profound effect on a student’s capacity to engage and increase their efforts to achieve (Toshalis & Nakkula,
Part of making meaning during the transition to an alternative school seems to be developing an understanding of how the social atmosphere is changing and how to adjust to the environment.

The students spoke a lot about the importance of respect, and most reflected upon and spoke about how they learned to manage in the smaller environment. The students talked about developing the skills needed for handling their academic needs, and the social requirements of interacting with different people. This process is linked to their experiences of support and encouragement, but it addresses more than just the challenges students faced. Using their words, it is clear that students need to actively change some of their habits and their attitudes from the traditional high school to be successful at the Learning Center. The two boys in the interviews shared different experiences with the social aspect of school than the two girls. The girls were more caught up in the drama of high school, and the boys were more affected by the social culture within their groups of friends. In either case, the participants’ social worlds mattered and changed when they arrived at the Learning Center.

Social Identity

Andrew was the least open with his experiences. He did mention several times how he is treated at the Learning Center, that it is the same as the traditional high school and even middle school. When asked if he thought the teachers noticed if he was having a bad day or not, he thought about this for a moment and then stated, “Probably not.” However, when Aiden was asked the same question, he stated,

Yeah, because it isn’t like they just say hey how are you doing and you just answer yes or no and then they walk off, they ask you about details and walk through stuff
and help you out on stuff and like talk to your parents so I feel like it is actually caring.

Aiden, like the two girls, has thrived in the Learning Center environment. He enjoyed the personalized attention that he gets from the teachers and the fun atmosphere that helps the students. He explained that the students enjoy playing hacky-sack together during breaks, listening to music and playing games during free time. Aiden summarized this by saying “Everyone kind of knows everyone down here so you trust and feel comfortable.” When asked about the teachers, he explained that the teachers were there to help and support you as well. “They always go to you individually one-on-one or they will take you to a separate room and talk to you.” Aiden was positive during all the interviews that the community that was being built at the Learning Center with the students and teachers was very important to him and to his success. He says, “It is benefiting me and a lot of kids…this gives them a place to show what you know, not what the class knows.”

**Relief from Drama**

Emma was very clear about her expectations of what school should be like as well as what she did not want to deal with. “I got a lot of stress and drama in my life so I just want to come to school here and do what I gotta do.” She clearly understood her place, her life, and her needs; and in the middle of attempting to make something of herself, she was able to look around and appreciate the Learning Center. She explained,

I feel like when I’m down here that it’s where we are all struggling in some way or we wouldn’t be in this program and that we all understand that and that we all try to help each other whether they need a friend or they need someone to talk to or if they need help with their work. We all try to help each other out.
Through all of Emma’s struggles and life experiences, she is still able to be positive about her future. “I feel down here I am doing really good, I’m successful.” The students in general spoke about their social groups or friends, and Emma spoke about all the drama at the high school and how she did not have time for “that stuff,” but she also talked about something new she has because of the Learning Center…a friend. “I come into [the Learning Center] and I get a friend, I have never had friends before.” This revelation to her was such a foreign concept that she repeated it several times, almost as if she was in awe of what the community at the Learning Center had given her.

Conclusion

Each student brought a unique perspective and experience to the interview sessions, yet by conducting two interviews with each participant, I was able to discern some patterns to understand how these students made meaning of their transition to the Learning Center. The students’ behavior and attitude toward school changed in response to context. The traditional high school environment and/or the adults who worked there contributed to the downturn in each of the students’ experiences of school. As the students entered the Learning Center, their experiences helped to shift their perspectives about school and helped them to develop a more positive learning experience. The adults in the Learning Center program are an integral part of this transformation. Students mentioned teacher after teacher that either noticed when they were having a bad day or told them they were doing well; but Mrs. Harper, the director, was specifically mentioned by every student. She was the central point, the main part that kept these students moving forward, moving in a positive direction towards their individual goals, with positive reinforcement and love.
The purpose of this IPA was to understand the perceptions of students enrolled in an alternative program. The information gained from this study will assist alternative schools in achieving success with at risk youth. The themes and subthemes along with the data that support them, helped me better understand the problem of at-risk students’ negative experiences of schooling and how we can help to reengage them in the learning process.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

This research study was guided by the central research question: How do students who have transitioned from a traditional high school to a suburban, Midwestern, alternative school make sense of their high school experience? This phenomenological study was designed to capture students’ voices about the experience of high school, transitioning to an alternative school, and finding success. Including student voices in the conversation about alternative education is essential if we are going to improve student outcomes and reduce drop out rates. The data collected were analyzed to highlight the experiences one group of young people describes of an alternative school program that has provided them with new opportunities for success. Following are discussions of findings from the study as they relate to the foundations of my project: the theoretical framework, the literature review, and the research design.

Underpinning these findings was the theoretical framework of my study, which was the situated learning theory. According to Lave et al. (1997)

…learning as it normally occurs is a function of the activity, context and culture in which it occurs…social interaction is a critical component of situated learning—learners become involved in a ‘community of practice’ which embodies certain beliefs and behaviors to be acquired. (p. 17)

Using this lens to examine my findings, I found that the students clearly were influenced by individual and contextual factors: their environment, social interactions, emotional relationships, and academic success.
Discussion of the Research Findings

There are a plethora of programs and interventions labeled as alternative; however, there is neither a set definition nor a set of guidelines that help schools determine if they are doing what most effectively meets the needs of their students. The Encyclopedia of Children’s Health provides the following definition of an alternative school: “[an] alternative school is an educational setting designed to accommodate educational, behavioral, and/or medical needs of children and adolescents that cannot adequately be addressed in a traditional school environment.” This definition begins to lay the foundation for alternative schools’ role to help all learners, as a result there is not a one size fits all solution. Evers (2009) identified in a report titled “Alternative Education Programs” that the terms alternative school and alternative education program are used interchangeably. An alternative program, whether on-site or off-site, is operated by the school and students remain connected to their sending school (Evers, 2009 p. 2). The report continues by stating that while the short-term goal of alternative education is to meet the needs of some students, the long-term goal must be to identify successful alternative education strategies and use these strategies as a basis for improving learning opportunities for all children (p. 1). Though alternative schools and/or programs appear to be a popular form of educational delivery, they differ in their definition and application across the nation, thus making generalizations difficult. The term “alternative school or program” is used generically, but is operationalized quite differently (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p. 20). Alternative high schools across the nation are implementing unique programs designed to best support the social, emotional, and academic needs of their students who are at risk for failure in traditional high school settings; this
shows the why but the voices of the students will tell the complete story. Without hearing these voices, it is difficult to determine if the programming being offered by these alternative schools are best meeting the needs of their student constituents. As a result of this study, the researcher has uncovered several essential findings related to the situated learning theory and other studies completed prior to this study.

**Traditional High School.** Alternative education students said to be at-risk have multiple failed attempts at traditional methods. However the traditional school often ignores the needs of students to be able to learn information in a variety of formats in order to accomplish their goals and desires to complete high school. The research of Suh & Suh (2007) stipulate the need to support youth in crisis; while Wehlage et al (1990) and Leone & Drakeford (1990) both focus on academic engagement with a clear focus on academic learning.

**Personal Attention.** Alternative education student perceptions of their learning, the environment, and their peers play an integral part in their success. To situate means to involve other learners, the environment, and the activities to create meaning. Bridgeland et al (2006) using qualitative surveys of students found that student support, academic environment, real life events, personal motivation and external factors play an integral part in their engagement and success. Wehlage et al (1990) also supports this in stating their research found that students desire to feel connected to school.

**Engagement and Motivation.** Alternative education students place a great importance on their learning environment. The situated learning theory as well as Brown et al (1989), Tobin & Sprague (1999) ties the idea of what is learned is specific to the situation in which it is learned and the location where it is learned. While Suh and Suh (2007) emphasize
that engagement in meaningful learning and preparation for college and career is specific to what is learned.

**Sense of Community.** Alternative education students have a deep desire to connect with the adults in their environment. In the absence of these relationships, the students feel out of place. The situated learning theory emphasizes that meaningful relationships help students become successful. Leone & Drakeford (1999) emphasized the importance of a sense of community in their study, while Brown et al (1989) add to the literature with the importance of making deliberate use of social and physical contexts with students.

By framing the research questions around the situated learning theory, I aimed to gather information concerning students’ perceptions of their transition from a traditional high school to the Learning Center in support of their social, emotional and academic needs. When conducting my literature review, I asked two questions, each connected to one aspect of my theoretical framework:

1. To what extent do contextual factors, including school environment, curriculum, and communities of practice, affect the students’ desire to successfully complete high school?

2. To what extent do individual factors, including motivation, engagement, persistence, and their desire to succeed, affect the students’ ability to successfully complete high school?

According to the body of literature, external traits appear to affect almost all at-risk youth, while several internal traits can equally affect them. I compared my findings to the literature to see how my work may fit into the larger context of scholarly literature.
**Contextual Factors**

Situated learning theory corresponded to the external factors—those said to be outside of the control of students—that I found in the body of literature about at-risk students and alternative school pedagogies. The literature suggested that students’ risk factors may include socioeconomic status, absences, behavioral issues, and academic failures that affected a student successfully graduating from high school. The participants of this study exhibited some of the contextual factors common with at-risk students: behavioral issues, excessive absences, and academic failure. I did not ask the participants about their socioeconomic details; however, one of the participants in the interviews stated she lived on the streets part of the time and another stated she lives only with her mother; so I do not know if that played a part in the experience of these students.

**Communities of Practice.** Through the literature review, the lens of students’ involvement in communities of practice is seen as an integral part of the academic success of the students (Leone & Drakeford, 1999; Wehlage et al, 1990; Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). Building a trusting community within the classroom promotes a safe learning environment. Both Emma and Jessica stated several times throughout their interviews that the relationships they were able to have with their teachers and other students improved their time at school. Yazzie-Mintz (2007) showed a direct correlation between student engagement and students relationship with the school community. Jessica was extremely negative during the course of her interviews when asked about the traditional high school; however, when she was asked to expand on her thoughts concerning the Learning Center she was relaxed and I could sense a level of comfort from her, especially when she spoke of the director of the Learning Center.
Jessica was able to relate several personal stories: her desire to go into the military; how the director would encourage her to do her best; and that the teachers would push her so she would get her work completed. She expanded on this when she stated, “Mrs. Harper tells me I do a good job when I finish something, even if I’m not done she still tells me I’m doing a good job and that she can’t wait for me to succeed.” Guerin & Denti (1999) found that a combination of core academics, responsiveness to student needs and engaging the learner are the key to successful students. Jessica was also a student who had many absences. She explained that she just didn’t want to go to school or deal with the teachers that were mean and didn’t respect her. Marzano (2007) stated, “If relationships between the teacher and the student are good, then everything else that occurs in the classroom seems to be enhanced” (p. 150). Emma asserted it the best: “Down here there are three or four teachers and they care if we graduate.”

**Curriculum and programming.** The research on alternative education shows that an individualized or personalized program benefits students. Along with this is the program’s location, choice of admission, low teacher to student ratios, flexibility in learning, and positive behavior management (Tobin & Sprague, 1999; Leone & Drakeford, 1999; Suh & Suh, 2007; Wehlage et al, 1990). There have been numerous quantitative and qualitative studies concerning the curriculum and programming of alternative schools; most correlate the quality of the curriculum or program with the success of its students (Bridgeland et al, 2006; Brown et al, 1989; Hosley, 2003). However, there is not a single conclusion stating one specific curriculum or program as the answer to the issue of alternative education and the success of at-risk students. Each of the participants also has a differing version of what works for them academically. Jessica and Emma are on the fast track; they are working quickly to
gain as many credits as possible in a short period of time in order to graduate. Aiden enjoys the environment and specialized curriculum; even though he would have done fine at the traditional school he has chosen to complete all his courses at the Learning Center. Andrew reaps the benefits of the Learning Center programming specifically in the area of time. Andrew was struggling with math concepts being taught too quickly, while at the Learning Center he is able to go much more slowly and succeed. Hosley (2003) and Guerin & Denti (1999) showed in their studies there is a need for flexibility and responsiveness to student needs for the at-risk youth to be successful.

**Internal Factors**

Though I did not look at their academic records as part of the data, most of the students revealed in their interviews that their performance while at the traditional high school was very different than the successes they were all experiencing at the Learning Center. Nevertheless, there seems to be a divide among the four participants concerning the level of need and success that they were able to find at the Learning Center.

Like many of the students in the Bridgeland et al (2006) study the participants cited absences, lack of interest and failing grades as reasons for their struggle. Andrew and Aiden were both academically in need of the alternative school setting. Aiden was in jeopardy of not graduating due to lack of academic credits, and Andrew simply needed more time than the traditional high school allowed to become proficient in math. However, their social and emotional experiences at the traditional high school were not detrimental to their well-being or sense of self. Even though they both stated several times that they appreciated the relationships in the Learning Center and the teachers were willing to help them in whatever areas they needed, they succeeded academically due to their own efforts and the ability to
learn at their own rate versus that of the other students in the class. Aiden said of the traditional school that he didn’t know he was far behind until the counselor told him he needed too many credits and would not graduate with his class. Andrew, on the other hand, knew that he wasn’t succeeding in math and needed the extra help he was getting while at the Learning Center. Andrew was not forthcoming in the interviews about his true personal perception of the Learning Center, and his lack of ability to share his experiences limits my understanding of his true sense of the high school experience, whether at the traditional high school or the Learning Center.

Conversely, Emma and Jessica thrived socially and emotionally at the Learning Center due to the sense of community and the positive relationships with the teachers and other students. They were also successful in their academic needs and are on track to graduate on time. Both students spoke highly of the teachers and especially of the director in regard to positive relationships and their sense of community at the Learning Center. Jessica is a very cynical soul and needs to feel that she isn’t being mistreated, that she is being respected by the adults at the Learning Center.

The research completed by Wehlage et al (1990) posits that the development of the child is influenced by his own and others social capital- the learned skills and abilities. This study as well as the lens of the situated learning theory allowed me to view the Learning Center through Jessica’s experiences as a positive not punitive school, that the students were allowed freedoms from the norms of the traditional high school in order to open the doors of the students’ perceived prisons. Emma also felt the traditional high school was a prison and she felt unable to cope with the drama and immature behavior of both students and teachers. Of all the students, Emma is the one who has benefited the most from the Learning Center.
Jessica and Emma both opted to return to school after dropping out solely because of the Learning Center program and what it could offer them: a place to learn without the trappings of the traditional high school, the relationships that they desired, and the emotional support they needed in order to feel the satisfaction of success.

My research question for this study was: How do students who have transitioned from a traditional high school to an alternative school make sense of their high school experience? This was designed to be an interpretative phenomenological analysis study, with the data coming from two interviews with each of the four participants. Once the interviews were conducted and transcribed several layers of information were developed and analyzed. While reviewing the interviews, I discovered that the participants in my study seemed to make meaning in specific ways as they developed as learners and looked towards their futures. The themes that I found in the interviews were interconnected and often very closely related to another, with enough distinction to merit separation. Each student’s experience was unique, but each student spoke about each of the themes to some degree.

**Social interactions and needs.** The first theme of making sense of attending the Learning Center was the social interactions and needs. Each of the participants came into the Learning Center for very different reasons however their interviews led me to understand that they each had similar social needs. The participants each attributed part of their discourse with the traditional high school to the social atmosphere. The female participants had a very negative feeling toward the traditional high school due to their own experiences there. One of the female participants dropped out mainly to the tension she felt from other students and teachers. The other female participant had difficulty returning to the traditional high school as she was now a mother of 2 and did not feel she was able to socialize with other high
school students. The 2 male participants did not have a negative social outcome with the traditional high school, but did find that they enjoyed the Learning Center more because of the social relationships they had established with both students and teachers at the Learning Center.

**Emotional needs.** The second theme was closely related to the first. Once the students were enrolled in the Learning Center they had to deal with their own emotional needs by determining their strengths and weaknesses. The participants, being high school students, were able to clearly articulate their strengths and weaknesses however they each had a different perspective on the why behind their lack of progress in the traditional high school that landed then at the Learning Center. The male participants each claimed their weaknesses had more to do with time management and their own lack of study skills than their content knowledge level; whereas the female participants both cited their weaknesses in the area of academics. One of female participants felt her being labeled a special education student early on hampered her progress from a very early age, which then fed into her own inabilities to understand the material being presented. All of the participants cited their strengths as the fact that they came back to school to finish and that they each will graduate with their high school diploma. They also referred to their own abilities to study and learn the material as it is presented to them in the Learning Center environment better than that of the traditional high school because it is on their time frames and levels versus the average student in a class.

**Overcoming academic difficulties.** The final theme was overcoming academic difficulties. Again, clearly connected to the previous themes, this related to how students found they needed to adjust their work habits to complete the courses needed to graduate. As
stated earlier the participants all noted in their interviews their need to work harder and that learning was not one of their strengths for various reasons. All four participants spoke of their own academic failures and their need to learn their material so that they can graduate. One of the male participants wants to go onto medical school so he is very focused on completing his assignments and courses at a very high grade and rigor level of content; whereas the other 3 participants are looking to simply complete the courses required so that they can move onto the next level. The one female participant that is a mother now merely wants to show her children that you can do anything as long as you put your mind to it and work hard.

These findings helped me answer my research question. The students seem to make meaning about attending the Learning Center and are all on course to graduate. Each participant had unique experiences but those experiences fit into common themes that all the students experienced. Using the phenomenological method allowed me to keep the focus on the words of the students and use interview analysis methods to uncover the themes between very different students. I better understood how students made meaning of their experiences as they continue to be successful and work towards high school graduation.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

The research on alternative education and at-risk students should not end with this study. Additional research should be conducted on a much wider scale to more accurately define the relationship between the at-risk student and their needs in an alternative school. This study was conducted in a small school with a very low minority pool therefore future studies should also include a larger grouping of students as well as a greater diversity of students.
**Implications for Practice**

The objective of this study was to go beyond looking at an alternative school to understanding the students’ perceptions of their education at an alternative school. By describing the context of the alternative school environment from the students’ perspective, a more complete understanding of alternative education has been offered to complement existing research such as the Bridgeland et al (2006) and Tobin & Sprague (1999) studies cited earlier in the literature review.

For school districts that currently have alternative education programs or those that are striving to design and implement effective alternative programs, a few implications for school personnel are suggested. First, in regard to curriculum and programming; instructional strategies and techniques as well as the environment must be developed to promote a sense of control, self-efficacy, optimism, and a sense of personal responsibility for the students (Guerin & Denti, 1999; Brown et al, 1989). Goal setting and reference points of achievement also should be included in programming. Second, in regard to students: school staff should be trained and encouraged to stress high academic achievement, facilitate time on task responsibility, and positive reinforcement to build students’ self-esteem and self-confidence (Leone & Drakeford, 1999, Yazzie-Mintz, 2007) Finally, students need teachers who are caring, honest, open-minded, firm, and who foster positive relationships (Wehlage et al, 1990; Suh & Suh, 2007).

**Conclusion**

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) identified two overarching themes that students claim as reasons they drop out of high school—factors associated with students, such as their grades, behavior, attitudes, and personal experiences; as well as factors
associated with students’ families and communities. (Pietrowiak & Novak, 2002; Rumberger, 2011). To address the matter of educators attempt to design programing to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of their students, without hearing the students’ voice, they are unable to be completely successful. It is less about finding a universal definition, and more about creating programs that are flexible and adapt to different contexts (i.e. urban, suburban, rural, low SES, etc.) This research study examined the experience of students transitioning from a traditional high school in a Midwest town to the alternative school within the same school district. In order to support the students in this Midwest school district, an alternative program was implemented to target the at-risk student population in achieving academic success, as well as social and emotional support through their learning process. By guiding this research through Lave and Wengers’ (Lave, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991) situated learning theory and a review of the literature on alternative education, the researcher was able to better understand the students perceptions of their lived experiences and how these factors impact the at-risk student population. As evidenced in the data, the participants collectively perceived the program to effectively assist them in achieving academic success, as well as make social and emotional gains. The key focus of an IPA study is on “personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context, for people who share a particular experience” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 45). This focus and resulting insights will help to inform alternative school pedagogy and the creation of learning experiences.
References


http://otec.uoregon.edu/learning_theory.htm#SituatedLearning


Appendix A

Permission Letter: Superintendent of Schools

Dear Dr.

As you are aware from our recent conversation, I am in the final phase of writing my doctoral thesis proposal at Northeastern University. I am writing to request consent to conduct an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) at the [Learning Center] alternative school. The purpose of this IPA study is to investigate the perceptions of several students enrolled in the [Learning Center] school in regard to their transition from a traditional high school to the alternative school and how the alternative school has met their social, emotional and academic needs. I will interview each student three times during the 2013-2014 school year. Prior to the beginning data collection, Northeastern University’s IRB will have approved all protocol cover letters, consent forms, and data collection instruments.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact me directly at (816) 935-4147 or via e-mail at reynolds.s@husky.neu.edu, or my advisor Dr. Kelly Conn via e-mail at k.conn@neu.edu.

Sincerely,

Stephani Reynolds
Appendix B

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

*NEU* letterhead.

Date

Dear Parent or Guardian:

I am a doctoral student in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University and Director of Curriculum and Instruction for the Platte County R-3 School District. I am conducting a research project on the [Learning Center] Alternative School in which your child is enrolled. I request permission for your child to participate in this study.

The study consists of three one on one interviews at [Learning Center]. Prior to the first interview, the project will be explained in terms that your child can understand, and your child will participate only if he or she is willing to do so. Only I will have access to information from your child. At the conclusion of the study, all responses will be reported using fake names only. At the conclusion of the study, summary results will be available to all interested parents and students. If you would like the summary of the results, simply indicate that preference on the attached consent form.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect the services normally provided to your child by the Smithville School District nor will it affect your child’s grade in any class. Even if you give your permission for your child to participate, your child is free to refuse to participate. If your child agrees to participate, he or she is free to end participation at any time. If your child agrees to participate, he/she will be given a $5 Quik Trip gift card to compensate for the time spent in the interviews.

Should you have any questions or desire further information, please call me or email me at 816-935-4147 or reynolds.s@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Kelly Conn, at kconn@neu.edu. Please keep the first page of this letter and return the second page to me after you have completed it. A stamped, return envelope is included for your convenience.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Michigan Technological University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at 1400 Townsend Drive, Houghton, MI 49931, by phone at (908) 487-2902, or by e-mail at jpolzien@mtu.edu. This study (IRB #M000) was approved by the IRB on July 1, 2004

Sincerely,

Stephani Reynolds
Northeastern University Doctoral Student
Please indicate whether or not you wish to allow your child to participate in this project by checking one of the statements below, signing your name and returning. Sign both copies and keep one for your records.

_____ I grant permission for my child to participate in Stephani Reynolds’ study on the [Learning Center].

_____ I do not grant permission for my child to participate in Stephani Reynolds’ study on the Learning Center.

_____ I would like a summary of results mailed to me at the conclusion of the study.

_________________________________   _______________________________
Signature of Parent/Guardian          Printed Parent/Guardian Name

_________________________________   _______________________________
Printed Name of Child                 Date
Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting your child to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
Your child is invited to participate in this study because he/she was enrolled or is currently enrolled at the Learning Center.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of the study is to research is to better understand these at-risk students experience as they transition to an alternative school. With this insight, better programming can be developed and implemented to create the most successful support system for these students and others who may share this common experience.

What will I be asked to do?
If you grant permission for your child to participate in this study and if your child agrees to participate, he/she will be asked to participate in three one on one interviews. Prior to the interviews, the project will be explained in terms that your child can understand, and your child will participate only if he or she is willing to do so.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The interviews will be conducted at the Learning Center after the students school day as scheduled with each participant individually.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is no risk associated with participation in this study. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect the services normally provided to your child by the Smithville School District nor will it affect your child’s grade in any class. Even if you give your permission for your child to participate, your child is free to refuse.
Will I benefit by being in this research?
If your child agrees to participate in this study, he/she will be given a $5 Quik Trip gift card to compensate for time during the interviews.

Who will see the information about me?
Only the researchers will have access to information provided by your child. At the conclusion of the study, all responses will be reported using fake names only. This summary will be available to all interested parents and students. If you would like the summary of results, simply indicate that preference on the attached consent form.

Student responses will be collected via audio recording and researcher notes during the interviews. Individual responses will be transcribed into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and maintained by the researcher. Fake names will be associated with student responses. Names will only be collected in order to distribute the gift cards for participation in the study. The spreadsheet will be stored in an on-line “dropbox” to which the researcher alone has access.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a student of the Smithville School District.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
Should you have any questions or desire further information, please call me or email me at 816-935-4147 or reynolds.s@husky.neu.edu.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There are no costs associated with participation in this study.

I agree to have my child take part in this research.
Signature of person [parent] agreeing to take part

Printed name of person above

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

Printed name of person above

Sign here if you would like a summary of results at the conclusion of the study conclusion of the study

Date

Date

Date
Appendix C

Interview Protocols

Interview #1 Protocol: A Closer Look at Alternative Education:
An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of Students Enrolled in a Suburban Midwestern
Alternative School

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Part I: The following questions focus on the ways that you perceive your relationships
with others (students and/or teachers).

1. Explain to me how others (students and/or teachers) take your feelings into account
and/or consider how you feel about something.
2. Do you think that others (students and/or teachers) believe in you? Notice how you
are feeling? Care about you?
3. Do you think that others (students and/or teachers) appreciate what you have
accomplished? Support you in reaching your goals? Value your contributions? Follow
your progress?

Part II: The following questions focus on the way that you perceive your experience at
the traditional high school vs. The Learning Center.

Please tell me if you believe the following statements are true at the traditional high
school, the Learning Center or both. I may ask you to expand on your answer to
explain your perceptions.

1. Teachers want students to succeed.
2. Students play an important role in what and how they learn.
3. The teachers are enthusiastic.
4. There are many ways for students to be recognized for their efforts.
5. Students are treated as mature people.
6. Teachers show concern for their students.
7. Students are encouraged here.
8. Students feel successful.
9. The school provides many opportunities for personal development.
10. Students and teachers feel a sense of community.
Interview #2 Protocol: A Closer Look at Alternative Education: 
An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of Students Enrolled in a Suburban Midwestern 
Alternative School

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Questions:
1. Compared to previous years, how would you describe your performance in school last year/so far this year?
2. What happened at the Learning Center that was most beneficial to you?
3. How would you characterize your overall view of the Learning Center school environment?
4. Is there one particular aspect of school that you enjoy?
5. Is there one particular aspect of school that you don’t enjoy?
6. If you had to choose one important factor that you think led you to enroll in the Learning Center?
7. What life circumstances made it easy or difficult for you to complete school?
8. Tell me about your school experience.
9. Can you share with me some stories regarding aspects of school that you like and aspects that you don’t like?
10. You obviously persisted and stayed in school, what do you attribute to that?
11. Do you feel like a strong student?
12. How has the Learning Center helped you academically, emotionally, and socially?
13. What was it in your high school experience that best prepared you to pursue your future goals?
14. What specific area or areas do you feel need to focus on in order to best assist other students to stay in school or enroll in the Learning Center?
15. Looking back on your decisions to enroll in the Learning Center, if given another opportunity would you still follow through with this decision?
16. Is there anything about you and/or your school environment, and/or your circumstances that you feel would have possibly helped you to stay at the traditional high school?