WHY TEACH: STORIES OF SUCCESS FROM ALTERNATIVE
HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

A Dissertation by

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DEDICATION

We do not do anything alone. This work is truly a life's work as it really started for me in 1967 when I began kindergarten. I dedicate this to those teachers who shaped my life. Three particular teachers had a true impact on my journey. Sister Michelle, my first grade teacher, was the first example I had of a loving teacher. She is why I teach. Harley Turner helped me to understand higher level math and showed me how learning hard things can still be fun. He is why I teach. Janine Stokes opened up the world of psychology and critical conversation. She is why I teach.

My parents always had high expectations for their children. Books were a normal part of life. I learned from my mother to be kind to those in need. She always had, and still has a place in her heart for the less fortunate. I learned from my dad to love literature and always have a good joke ready to tell. My brothers and sister have always been there as support. They are a true inspiration: Michael (1961-1969), Patrick (a teacher and coach himself), Mary (mother of 10 beautiful, kind, loving children), and Scott (refuses to let deafness hold him back). I love you all.

The six teachers who agreed to be a part of my study are a true inspiration. They had some difficulties in their lives and yet realized their dreams. These women are an example of resilience and courage. They are now making a difference in the lives of many students.

This journey would have been absolutely impossible without the support of Colleen. For over 20 years she has been my constant cheerleader, teacher, example, and partner in all. She has shown incredible patience the past three and a half years and this would not have even been a remote possibility without her love and counsel. I love you.

"The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any." Alice Walker

"Obstacles don't have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don't turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it." Michael Jordan

"Grown-ups like numbers. When you tell them about a new friend, they never ask questions about what really matters. They never ask: "What does his voice sound like?" "What games does he like best?" "Does he collect butterflies?" They ask: "How old is he?" "How many brothers does he have?" "How much does he weigh?" "How much money does his father make?" Only then do they think they know him." Antoine De Saint Exupery from *The Little Prince*

"It is, in fact, nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry." Albert Einstein

"The bureaucracy is a circle from which one cannot escape. Its hierarchy is a hierarchy of knowledge. The top entrusts the understanding of detail to the lower levels, whilst the lower levels credit the top with understanding of the general, and so all are mutually deceived." Karl Marx

"A teacher's day is half bureaucracy, half crisis, half monotony and one-eighth epiphany. Never mind the arithmetic." Susan Ohanian

"I've come to the frightening conclusions that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or de-humanized." Dr. Haim Ginott

"But life is a great school. It thrashes and bangs and teaches you." Nikita Khrushchev

"One of the most powerful tools for empowering individuals and communities is making certain that any individual who wants to receive a quality education can do so."
Christine Gregoire

"May the good Lord be with you down every road you roam. And may sunshine and happiness surround you when you're far from home. And may you grow to be proud, dignified and true and do unto others as you'd have done to you. Be courageous and be brave and in my heart you'll always stay, forever young." Rod Stewart from *Forever Young*

I cannot possibly give enough thanks to the six participants in my study. They live very busy lives and gave their time to help me reach my goal. Bless all of you and thank you for loving children.

Thank you also to my friends who understood when I said I can't come out to play. They stood by me and offered their support. Now I will be able to catch up on all the play I missed.

Last, but certainly not least, I love you Cohort 16: Kim Burkhalter, Bob Diepenbrock, Lisa Lutz, Steve Noble, and Robin Surland. We are "The Acceptables" and we are proud of it. You are the best family anyone could ask for. Thanks for your support, your shoulders, your hugs, and family nights.

ABSTRACT

This narrative inquiry focused on what six current teachers had to say about their high school experiences, first in a comprehensive high school and then an alternative high school. The narratives focused on the culture and climate of the two different settings and if their experiences affected their decision to teach. The theoretical perspectives of organizational culture, bureaucracy and empowerment provided the framework for this study. Narratives from the individual interviews and from the informal group conversation are shared. The participants told their personal stories of what empowered them to make the choice to succeed in school and become educators themselves. Their stories persistently convey the importance of building positive relationships with students and allowing them some individual choice in meeting graduation requirements.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS (continued)

TABLE OF CONTENTS (continued)

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Students whom the educational establishment has labeled "at risk" typically have

negative relationships with schools, especially large comprehensive high schools. At-risk is a

term used to describe students that are from a racial or ethnic minority group, reside with a single

parent, have limited English proficiency, have poor grades, are in the lowest socio-economic

quartile, and frequently encounter inadequate resources in the school itself. Students with two or

more of these risk factors were 13 times more likely to drop out of school than students with

none of these risk factors. The dropout rate among this group is high (Christle, Jolivette, &

Nelson, 2007; Hauser, Allen, & Golden, 2006; Horn & Chen, 1998). Negative experiences in

comprehensive high schools for these students include academic difficulties, undesirable student

behaviors, and a lack of positive relationships. Comprehensive high schools were established to

serve the needs of all students both in the academic and vocational realm. However, for many

students considered at-risk this is not a reality. If they do attain a high school diploma, most do

not go on to higher education, and they certainly do not pursue careers as teachers.

Alternative high school, for the purpose of this research, is defined as a separate program

within a school district designed for students who struggle academically and/or behaviorally in

the comprehensive high school (Leiding, 2008). Alternative high schools typically serve students

who are failing or who have learning disabilities or behavior problems. Alternative high schools

are distinguished from comprehensive high schools by their flexible schedules, smaller class

sizes, separate location, and smaller teacher-student ratios. Alternative secondary education may

also be defined by the desired outcomes for students. These outcomes include enabling all

students to participate in schooling, focusing on dropout prevention, and redirecting students'

lives. They are often thought of as an educational system that provides students with a second chance (Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998; Lange, 1998; Leiding, 2008).

Research Problem

The fact that comprehensive high schools are not meeting the needs of a growing number of students remains an issue in American public education. Many students are not prepared for college or the work place. There is obviously a personal need, a financial need, and a societal need to create an educational system that is relevant for all students. Unemployment and criminal behavior is high among dropouts, and as a result there are enormous costs to society as a whole (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Lochner & Moretti, 2004).

Current reform efforts and those of the past few years have not improved the graduation rate from regular high school programs at the standard age of 18 years. The bureaucratic characteristics of comprehensive high schools have been identified as a contributor to the failure of many students to complete their education. High schools have been criticized for their large size and commitment to efficiency rather than developing strong social and emotional relationships. Critics of large high schools further charge that teachers have been stripped of their professional expertise and have become largely unthinking workers whose product is the nature and amount of student learning. Schools are thought to be uncaring, autocratic, and not motivating (Katz, 1987; Wraga, 1999). Students who cannot succeed in this type of environment look for educational opportunities of a different nature. Consequently, alternative high schools have become an educational option for these students.

Alternative high schools are not a new idea although they have taken several forms throughout the years. Regardless, the goal of alternative high schools has stayed much the same: to meet the needs of students who are not successful in the traditional setting. There have been

several roles of alternative education in the past 50 years. Some schools were created to develop students' vocational skills when these programs were not offered in the traditional setting. Alternative schools were able to offer smaller class sizes with flexible programs and more choices for students. Another key purpose was to engage students who had once been unsuccessful by offering relevant curriculum that meets their needs and interests. Alternative schools of today still fill these roles (Leiding, 2008; May & Copeland, 1998). Leiding stated, "an alternative school is a school that differs from traditional schools in curricula, purpose, or teaching methods" (p. 33).

Contrary to popular belief, many at-risk students who attend an alternative high school high school aspire to and do attend college. Alternative high school students have been engaged in learning and believe they are prepared for post-secondary education. It is difficult, however, for these students to transition to college without strong support. The key for these students is assistance received from their teachers or other school staff. The supportive environment and smaller class sizes in the alternative high school allowed greater opportunity for staff to assist with the financial aid and college application process (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Horn & Chen, 1998).

The research is clear that alternative schools are an effective model for helping at-risk students to be successful in school. It would appear the unique organization and culture of alternative schools empowers students who might not otherwise be successful. Some alternative high school students not only go to college, they choose to go into the teaching profession. Previous research has revealed that students who may not have attended college decide differently after their alternative high school experience. However, there is no research relating reasons why alternative high school graduates choose to become teachers. This study provides

information concerning this issue. This raises the question why students who formerly had little success in school would feel compelled or motivated to become teachers in those same institutions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to collect the narratives of former alternative high school students, who are now teachers, in order to reveal the effects of schooling on their lives. The study discovered what role the culture and organization of a comprehensive high school played in a student's choice to leave that setting and attend an alternative high school. Second, the study describes how the culture and organization of the alternative school supported these students in successfully completing school and empowered them to make choices that led to a career in education in which they empower others to reach their goals.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1) How do alternative high school graduates describe their experiences attending a comprehensive high school?

2) How do alternative high school graduates' describe their experiences attending an alternative high school?

3) What influenced alternative high school graduates' decision to become a teacher?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is that it adds to the literature on characteristics of high schools that allow previously unsuccessful students to be successful and graduate. Participants tell their story of how they struggled in high school and then ultimately were encouraged and empowered to succeed. It presents information that compares the culture of large comprehensive

high schools with smaller alternative schools. This study can inform administrators and all educators about the importance of relationships and support systems in the lives of high school students. Further, it adds to the literature regarding why people choose to become teachers.

Organization of this Dissertation

Chapter one provides an introduction and background of the study, and, includes the research problem, purpose, research questions and the significance of the study. Chapter two consists of the theoretical framework that informed the study and a discussion of the common themes found in the literature. Chapter three describes the methodology, including the research design, selected for this study. Chapter four comprises the individual narratives of the research participates, and chapter five is the narrative of the informal group conversation. The final chapter provides conclusions and implications of the study as well as my personal reflections as the researcher.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter begins with a discussion of the theoretical perspectives that are the foundation of this study. This discussion is followed by an account of the common themes found in the literature that are associated with the research problem.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding organizational culture and structure, bureaucracy, and the process of empowerment are crucial for understanding the significance of the high school experience and later life choices. These theories inform the research and each is explained in the following sections.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is a central component of any institution including every American high school. Schein (2004) describes culture as a dynamic phenomenon that is with us at all times. Culture is created through interactions between people and shaped by leadership, routines, rules, and norms. Schein identified five steps to the survival of an organization: a shared mission and strategy, consensus on goals, agreed upon means to attain the goals, a system to measure attainment of goals, and consensus on remediating strategies if goals are not met. Schein further stated learning and change cannot be forced upon people in the organization. Participation and involvement by all in the change process is necessary.

Schein's (2004) work can be transferred to an American high school. Students, just as employees of an organization, ideally are active participants and completely involved in their own learning. When students and all adult members of a school organization believe the goals of the school are the same as their individual goals they are more likely to be committed to and

identify with the organization. Members seek to identify their role and degree of influence within the organization and have a desire to be accepted and respected.

Historically, schools have not met these assumptions. Many schools have failed students because of the rigidity of the standardized program and the lack of differentiation that would meet the needs of all learners (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001). Deschenes further wrote that students often fail because the culture of the school is so dissimilar from their cultural background. Schools often have a culture of punishment (Barth, 2007). Sanctions, such as repeating a grade are assigned when students do not learn. This produces students who are eager to be finished with schooling. I argue that a culture of bureaucracy is more likely to be found in comprehensive high schools whereas alternative schools are built on a culture of empowerment. In this study, I examined alternative school graduates memories of the traditional high school as compared to their memories of the alternative school they attended.

Bureaucratic Theory

Max Weber is the sociologist most commonly associated with bureaucratic theory. There are several key facets to a bureaucracy according to Weber. These include: a division of labor with predetermined duties; a clearly defined hierarchy of authority; a set of rules and performance guidelines for workers; an intricate system of procedures and record keeping; training in required skills for the particular work assignment; and the hiring of employees based on expertise (Ferguson, 1984; Marion, 2002). Governments, corporations, and public institutions, including schools, are thought of as bureaucracies. The explicit goals, rules, procedures and roles of individuals in an organization are what define its bureaucratic makeup (Burns, 1978; Marion, 2002).

The tenets of bureaucracy seem reasonable, because they are organized by function and procedure for a precisely defined goal. The responsibilities of each member are made very distinct. This is supposed to reduce redundancy and increase efficiency. Weber believed this model provided for efficient control of complex organizations. The structure of a bureaucratic organization is one of procedures, protocols, and rule following. Members have a defined and explicit place with differentiated roles. However, a bureaucratic organization values structure, continuity, predictability, and efficiency rather than creativity and principle (Burns, 1978; Ferguson, 1984; Morgan, 1997).

Weber defined three types of authority associated with organizations. Traditional authority is based on the inviolability of traditions. Rational-legal authority is concerned with rules and the right of those in authority to enforce the rules, such as in the legal system of a country. Charismatic authority is rooted in following an individual because of his or her character traits. Bureaucracy falls in the arena of rational-legal authority (Marion, 2002; Morgan, 1997). The power of those in positions of control is justifiable by the rules, policies, and procedures of the organization. Formal authority is concentrated at the top of the hierarchy with just a few members in those top positions. This elite group makes decisions about adding new members in the organization. As a result a bureaucracy maintains a social milieu of inequality (Ferguson, 1984; Morgan, 1997).

The bureaucracy, with its carefully formulated rules, procedures, and a distinct hierarchy, can be a force of domination. Individuals are responsible to the authority of those above them and ultimately to the person in the highest position. This leads to the notion that bureaucratic organizations have always been class-based, where one group or individual imposes its rules on another. A condition is created in which interactions between social classes, ethnic groups, and

genders are ultimately unequal (Burns, 1978; Ferguson, 1984; McAll, 1992; Morgan, 1997). Common norms in a bureaucracy are those the dominant group, those high up in the hierarchy, impose and follow. Items valued are particular to those in authority, such entities as language, behaviors, and complete conformity to the organization.

The impersonality of a bureaucracy creates the mechanistic qualities that are in opposition to a more humanistic type of management. The human aspects of work tend to become overshadowed by the goals of the organization and the means to reach those goals. Those in authority positions therefore lean toward a managerial role rather than a leadership role. Bureaucracy seems to contradict effective leadership through its traits of rigidity, impersonality, esteem towards authority, and the lack of importance of member needs and wants. Individual creativity is not honored (Burns, 1978; Marion, 2002). A bureaucratic organization is concerned that it will become inefficient if decisions are made on an individual basis rather than by following specific procedures. Those in authority who treat subordinates in a humane manner are often seen as a threat to the organization.

The values of continuity and predictability held in a bureaucratic organization do not lead to an intense desire to challenge the status quo. Bureaucracy certainly does not lead groups to enact social change. Often people are denied learning about how the organization works and are thereby unable to enact change. Rigidity of procedures contributes to slow or even impossible decision making. Evolution of old procedures and processes to new uses does not occur in a timely manner. Therefore bureaucratic organizations cannot adapt to the changing requirements and evolution of society (Burns, 1978; Ferguson, 1984; Pinchot & Pinchot, 1993). When resistance to change occurs it is nearly always predictable. Change is threatening to an organization's established norms and traditional way of doing business (Senge, 2006).

A bureaucratic system is often insensitive to the needs of the client. Service fails when organizations expect clients to conform to the structure of the system rather than the system responding to the needs and problems of the client. A culture of caring for one another, including clients or customers is often not seen in public bureaucracies. The organization is committed to rule following and both members and clients who defy authority will discover negative consequences. The key relationship in a bureaucracy is between the worker and the person in authority. The client's, or in the case of schools, the student's perspective is essentially not considered (Ferguson, 1984; Marion, 2002; Pinchot & Pinchot, 1993).

Bureaucracy and Comprehensive High Schools

The precepts of bureaucracy are evident throughout all levels of public education. National and state departments of education, state and local boards of education, superintendents, and building administrators make up the hierarchical order of public education. These are the leaders who establish school rules and procedures that allow for monitoring by those in authority. Yet, these leaders are not always involved in day-to-day interactions with students. This lack of interaction inhibits administrators from having a true understanding of student performance and needs. It also allows for the sense of impersonality common in bureaucratic organizations. The hierarchy in comprehensive high schools is much the same as other public organizations (Bohte, 2001; Ferguson, 1984).

The impersonality of a bureaucracy has manifested itself in the realm of education in general, and the comprehensive high school in particular. As public high schools and districts grew larger, the regulations and rules of a bureaucratic organization were seen as a good fit. High schools, with their strict rules, were to be a moral compass, especially for lower-class children. Advocates of public secondary education in the nineteenth century believed spending to educate

lower-class children would lessen the high cost of adult crime. The primary goal of schools was concentrating on the regular attendance of students for an extended and very structured education. The aim was to improve public education by developing a standardized and systematic process including architecture, curriculum, and teacher training (Katz, 1987). As a result, schools, rather than promoting neutrality and classlessness, created an environment that did not take into account cultural and individual differences. As in other bureaucratic organizations, comprehensive high schools struggled to consider the individual needs of its clients, including students and parents (Katz; Meier, Polinard, & Wrinkle, 2000; Rocha & Hawes, 2009).

The bureaucracy of a comprehensive high school has a negative effect on student achievement (Bohte, 2001; Greene & Foster, 2003; Gross & Mitra, 2009). Chubb and Moe described public schools as subordinates in an education hierarchy that controls the institution of schools by formulating and enforcing policies. The bureaucratic system of education generates a lack of autonomy in decision making for teachers and students. This may create a lack of commitment from teachers who desire greater responsibility on how they instruct their students. An increased level of commitment on the part of teachers may be found with an increase in occasions for shared decision making. School quality and student achievement increase with greater teacher commitment (Bohte, 2001; Greene & Foster; Gross & Mitra, 2009).

A bureaucratic organization like a comprehensive high school may create in people a sense of having no control over decisions that affect their lives. The very structure of a school bureaucracy with rules, set procedures, lack of interpersonal relationships, and hierarchy of authority, does not allow for members to believe they are empowered to be a force in decision making. Empowerment is structurally based. That is, in a bureaucratic high school members can

empower themselves through individual strengthening of internal resources and support from significant persons in their lives (Marion, 2002; Turner, 1996; Zimmerman, 1995). I used these concepts to examine alternative school graduates' memories of any bureaucratic structures and practices they experienced at the traditional, comprehensive high school as compared to what they experienced at the alternative high school.

Empowerment Theory and Alternative Schools

Empowerment can be defined as a process where people gain control over issues that have meaning to them. It is the prospect a person or group has for making choices, taking responsibility, and having personal control. These choices are then transformed into a powerful sense of self, a developing awareness and knowledge of one's own realities and situation, and a nurturing of resources, strategies, and competence in order to attain the desired results. When an individual succeeds in attaining the desired goal he or she is often inspired to achieve even further, which is a significant characteristic of empowerment. Three interconnected facets of empowerment were found in the literature: a) the enhancement of a more affirmative sense of self, b) the expanding knowledge of one's own social reality, and c) the gathering of resources and strategies to support an individual in reaching his or her goals (Alsop, Bertelsen, & Holland, 2006; Turner, 1996; Zimmerman, 1995). An important component of empowerment is its focus on a person's strengths and capabilities rather than weaknesses or difficulties.

According to theorists, several assumptions exist concerning empowerment. One assumption is the earlier a person is provided opportunities for empowerment the more the person will become comfortable with the practice. The practice of empowerment involves the interplay between the ability to make choices and understanding the choices or options available depend on the context. A means exists to measure or track the empowerment process an

individual is practicing, which has three components: the existence of an opportunity to make a choice, the person taking advantage of this opportunity, and the determination if the choice brought about the desired outcome (Alsop, et al., 2006; Turner, 1996).

A second assumption is that in schools, empowerment must be practiced at all levels, which include students, teachers, and administrators. This is typically not the case in comprehensive high schools. Empowerment is not static; it is a dynamic process that often involves discomfort, as those involved are defining and redefining relationships. A third assumption concerning empowerment is the oppression that occurs resulting from a lack of power is environmentally-based. In order for a person who has suffered injustice and encountered obstacles to meeting his or her goals becoming empowered means there is a focus on changing the environment as well as the self. Further noted, those seeking empowerment must realize that along with empowerment comes responsibility and accountability (Lightfoot, 1986; Sergiovanni, 1990; Turner, 1996).

There are several elements, when addressed in a classroom, which ensure students are empowered to take control of their own learning. Educators, upon recognizing powerlessness in a student, can offer them a place of safety. Students at this stage are looking for trusting relationships with adults. Trust develops when students begin to realize that teachers believe in them. Dialogue and strengthening of student voice become important. The power of control over their own destinies comes with strengthening student voice and students begin to develop awareness of their own learning as teachers talk to them about what they observe. In order for empowerment to take place students need to learn the language of politics, including their rights and entitlements. When these elements are addressed in a classroom students can then take control of their own learning (Rees, 2003; Tomlinson, 2008).

A struggle students face in order to become empowered is the lack of opportunity to practice empowerment. Using the metaphor of banking, Freire (2003) defined education as an act of depositing information into the student by the teacher, the depositor. In this scenario, students are powerless; they are only passive recipients of information. Freire lists attitudes and practices in education that parallel oppressive society: the teacher teaches and students are taught; the teacher knows everything and students know nothing; and the teacher chooses the program and students adapt to it. Essentially the teacher is the subject of the learning process, while the students are the objects. Dewey's (1963) critique of education was similar to Freire's description. He described students as docile, obedient receptors of wisdom. Teachers, who are the agents of the communication of knowledge, transfer their wisdom to the students.

Freire argued in order for students to gain some control education must be liberated from this banking concept. Freire believed the relationship between teacher and student should be one of reciprocity, in which both are mutually responsible for the learning process. The teacher has a dual role: one who teaches and one who is taught. Education becomes an exercise in freedom rather than one of domination. Dialogue is necessary for the oppressed to reclaim their voice and to prevent dehumanization, thus the importance of quality education (Freire, 2003; Leonardo, 2004). People are empowered by their own knowledge and consciousness.

Schools impart knowledge and therefore should be agencies for self and social empowerment (McLaren, 1989). Emancipatory knowledge, as termed by Habermas, helps explain the distortion of relationships because of power and privilege. This kind of knowledge has the capability of playing a role in social justice, equality, and empowerment (Benjamin, Marcuse, Habermas, Horkheimer, & Adorno, 1998). Knowledge for the sake of just knowing is a reiteration of what already exists. In order for empowerment to transpire, real knowledge must

observe and reflect on the social conditions of the world. It must be a factor in the emancipation of those who are marginalized (McLaren, 1989). The study analyzed alternative school graduates memories of how empowered they felt in this setting, how their experience in the alternative high school affected their decision to become a teacher, and how those experiences influence their current teaching practices.

Review of the Literature

This literature review focus on six aspects related to the research. The review includes a history of U.S. comprehensive high schools as well as studies of high school organization and culture as it connects to participants' perceptions of the differences between comprehensive high schools and alternative high schools. Discussed are characteristics of alternative high schools and research purporting their benefits. An examination of student empowerment and voice in school decision making follows. Studies of student and teacher relationships as related to school success and student resilience are reported as well as what motivates teachers to enter the field of education.

Historical Context of U.S. Comprehensive High Schools

The term comprehensive has been used to define high schools because they offer, in one place, secondary education for all children in a particular community. The responsibility of a comprehensive high school is to provide all courses of study and educate those who plan to attend post high school institutions as well as those who will enter the workforce directly after high school graduation. A distinctive characteristic of the American comprehensive high school is that academic and vocational courses are offered in one institution. The intent was to recognize that young people have not made a decision concerning their career. Comprehensive high

schools allowed students to experience several different types of course work in order to make decisions about their future work plans (Austin, 1953; Wenrich, 1990; Wraga, 1999).

This model of secondary education materialized in the early 20th century when the United States Bureau of Education was deliberating on the model of public education that should be established. The question was whether secondary schools should model the European system of class-based educational opportunities or organize into a more democratic system. The primary concern became a question of what role the nation's high schools have in maintaining and serving a democratic society. A 1918 report from the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education (CRSE) became the design for the American comprehensive public high school and were known as the Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Wraga, 1999).

The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education were based on a premise that the process of education should be determined by the needs of society and those being educated, and the knowledge of theory and practice. Democracy was a key component of this document, as education was believed to be a conduit of knowledge for how to live in a democratic society. The purpose of education was to assist each person to discover their own knowledge, interests, habits, and powers in order to improve their own life and the life of all others in society (Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, 1918; Wraga, 1999).

The CRSE delineated the main objectives of secondary education in the Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education as health, command of fundamental processes, worthy home membership, vocation, citizenship, worthy use of leisure, and ethical character. Physical education and health instruction resulted from the first principle, which was health. Command of fundamental processes was the description for reading, writing, and math skills. Worthy home

membership not only included household arts for girls, but some fine arts as well. Vocational education was centered on boys and involved work outside of the classroom. The citizenship objective involved civic duties as well as history, government, and economics classes. Students were also to be taught how to use their leisure time effectively through literature, art, and music. Personal responsibility and character were also very important in secondary education (Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, 1918).

In 1918 the Bureau of Education recognized only a few groups of students' needs were being met in comprehensive high schools. The Bureau believed that for democracy to progress there needed to be specification in many areas. The CRSE, which was appointed by the Bureau, was made up of people in many different positions in education. There were principals, college professors, and teachers from all content areas, including art, agriculture, industrial arts, and all academic subjects. They believed it was also important for education to be a unifying institution. Students from all backgrounds, abilities, and ambitions would come together in school so they could learn to live with each other in a diverse, democratic society (Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, 1918; Wraga, 1999).

The Commission's goal in 1918 remains essentially the same as what is expected from comprehensive high schools today; that is to educate all students according to their needs in one place. This was unlike the system of education that existed in the last decade of the 19th century. The measure of success for a high school was the number of graduates that went to college (Austin, 1953). The emphasis on college preparation is prevalent today. For example, *A Challenging High School Education for All*, a 2006 government document, declared the essential purpose of high schools was to train students for college. The emphasis of this document was on offering challenging curriculum to prepare children for higher education. Courses such as

English, algebra, calculus, science, history, and foreign languages were mentioned (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The report's authors identified a secondary purpose of high schools was to prepare students for professional employment by teaching students to develop skills in leadership, time management, and responsibility through sports, internships, and community service. The report did not mention vocational type courses or any other non-academic class work.

Consequently, those students bound for immediate employment and those who struggled academically were neglected. As in the previous century, high schools are still mainly concerned with preparing students for college. High school graduation requirements in math and science have been raised reducing the choices students have in the selection of their courses. Students who struggle in these areas did not get the help they needed to be successful and many found it difficult to complete their high school education in the comprehensive setting (Mirel, 2006; Wenrich, 1990).

Research on High School Organization and Culture

Studies of traditional high schools have concluded that positive student culture and encouraging relationships between students and teachers increase student achievement. In a study of the culture of the traditional, comprehensive high school (Terzian, 2004), the culture seemed to be more about individuality than shared experiences. School spirit can be one way to define culture in a high school. Terzian listed three dimensions that typify the notion of school spirit and culture. First, student participation in academic, social, and athletic activities was a key factor for a positive culture. Loyalty to the school was the second dimension. An atmosphere of cooperation and social harmony, even to the extent being a civic duty produces a positive environment. The final dimension was that school spirit suggests a feeling of pride in one's high

school. When school leaders solicited the ideas and perspectives of all their constituents it increased the likelihood for school spirit to emerge and endure. School leaders who were cognizant of student perceptions and worked on creating a positive culture and positive relationships between students and teachers helped students feel more connected. The authors concluded that if students feel connected to their school there will be increased motivation, achievement, and confidence (Terzian, 2004; Weinberger & McCombs, 2003).

In several studies (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; Marks & Louis, 1999; Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003) the organization of the school day and classroom schedule were found to be factors in student disengagement and dropping out. Students spent almost a fourth of their classroom time listening to lectures, another fourth working individually, less than 10% of the time interacting with each other and the teacher, and only 1% of the time was spent working with the teacher individually. This left little time for active student engagement. It became difficult for students to participate and feel connected to the school when they were not meaningfully engaged. Students commented they needed to be interested in and realize the value of a task in order to be engaged. Student engagement increased with teacher support for learning. Perceptions that class work is valuable and authentic also increased student engagement. Students further indicated that teachers make a difference. Regardless of issues such as poverty and violence in their lives, if teachers created classrooms that promoted engagement students were more likely to stay in school.

An encouraging school culture positively correlated with the quality of teacher influence with students and the examples they set. Students reported when teachers set an example of fairness and respect, they responded to learning, even if they did not particularly like the teachers. Students expressed the importance of teacher influence. Respect and a sense of fairness

in relationships among the staff were just as important as staff relationships with students. Schools with clear expectations and mission, strong student support, and cooperation among staff had higher levels of achievement. Smaller schools were more likely to have this type of encouraging school culture (Cushman, 2003; Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; Lee & Burkham, 2003; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002).

Other research on factors of school organization and structure that made a difference in students finishing high school in a comprehensive setting included the school's responsiveness to the student and school safety from perceived gang problems, as well as family support and student involvement in activities. The resilience of students to staying in school is influenced by factors in the control of educators and policy makers. The school's response to discipline issues was also key in how students felt about their safety. Students who attended schools with harsh discipline policies felt less safe than students in schools with more temperate policies (Catterall, 1998; McNeely, et al., 2002).

Alternative High Schools and Their Characteristics

Alternative schools began in the 1960s with the free school movement, which was to give children the opportunity to learn according to their own interests and needs (Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998; Leiding, 2008). The free school movement evolved from the civil rights movement as critics of public education became concerned the needs of all students were not being met. By the late 1990s the U.S. saw tremendous growth in alternative schools. Concerns over increases in violence, dropout rates, drug abuse, and other crimes resulted in an increased focus on alternative education programs (Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998). Currently out of the 50 states and the District of Columbia only Alaska, Montana, and Vermont have no legislation related to provision of alternative education (Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2008). Lehr, Tan, and

Ysseldyke have predicted that the number of students attending an alternative school will continue to rise.

The tendency toward smaller enrollments in an alternative high school has allowed for more intense faculty and staff involvement with students. Faculty and staff are able to foster more positive personal relationship through counseling, individualized learning plans, assistance in developing social skills and a genuine concern for students' success and well-being. There is more of a sense of community, rather than an institutional atmosphere, because of the small size. Positive relationships encouraged students to find role models and mentors to help guide them in decisions about their future and prepare them for various roles in society. This kind of alternative school environment is effective in assisting students in developing their own talents through a curriculum that meets their needs and interests (Leiding, 2008; Saunders & Saunders, 2002; Tobin & Sprague, 2000).

Not only do students have a larger voice in their learning in the alternative high school, teachers reported a lower level of bureaucratization than what they experienced in a comprehensive high school setting. Administrators and staff share a great deal of control over decisions involving course offerings, instructional methods, curriculum choices, and student discipline procedures. Alternative high schools are given autonomy from the central office and therefore have more freedom to make choices based on their students' needs. Fewer bureaucratic restrictions have allowed for a more humane treatment of students, and an opportunity to be responsive to each student's interests and abilities (Lange, 1998; Leiding, 2008; Nirenberg, 1977).

Many students identified as at-risk for academic failure have experienced success in alternative high schools. According to research, there are significant differences between

comprehensive high schools and alternative high schools that contributed to this greater success. Students reported significantly more positive experiences in the alternative school, rating the overall environment higher than the comprehensive high school. A majority of students felt in their prior school the teachers did not understand them, care for them, or treat them fairly. They perceived teachers as not making class work interesting or helping when they had difficulty. Conversely, teachers at the alternative school were rated much higher. Students felt understood and cared for by teachers, counselors, and administrators. Adults in the school were more nurturing which generated an atmosphere of kindness, concern, and acceptance. Psychosocial needs were as much a focus as educational needs in the alternative setting (Lever et al., 2004; Saunders & Saunders, 2002; Spear, 2002).

Smaller schools and class sizes have been reported as helping students succeed in alternative high schools. Smaller schools were identified as having more of a community approach. Students themselves had more of a bond with each other, a sense of connectedness. As a result, students learned valuable lessons about acceptance and getting along with others that students in a larger school might not learn. In a larger school, students felt lost and found it more difficult to communicate with teachers. Personal relationships with teachers were easier to develop in the smaller setting. Students were able to receive one-on-one help and knew that teachers would assist them in reaching their goals. They were encouraged to develop long- and short- term goals and the staff helped to instill hope for a positive future. (Catterall & Stern, 1986; De La Ossa, 2005; Lever, et al., 2004; May & Copeland, 1998).

Teachers took a stronger role in mentoring students in an alternative setting. Students perceived that teachers in the comprehensive high school were not responsive or helpful with their academic needs. In the smaller alternative school, there was time for increased attention to

individual student needs. This allowed teachers to take more responsibility as a mentor and role model. Students indicated that teacher mentoring, commitment, and involvement with students were related to school attendance and performance. Peer and family relationships contributed to perseverance in the alternative school however teachers held the most influence. Teachers were role models and created a sense of family in the schools. Teacher characteristics especially noted by students included an active teaching style, positive attitude toward teaching, realistic expectations, and increased individual attention (Leiding, 2008; May & Copeland, 1998; Saunders & Saunders, 2002; Spear, 2002).

Research on Student Empowerment

In the literature, student empowerment comprises three main dimensions: academic, political, and social. Empowered students were able to develop the skills needed to succeed academically. A demanding curricula, high expectations, and student participation in developing the curricula encourages academic empowerment. Political empowerment is based on students enacting power and influence within schools. This could be formal power such as serving on a committee, or informal such as a protest of some sort. The basis of social empowerment is dialogue between teachers and students. The school's climate is one in which everyone feels safe to speak and all voices are respected (McQuillan, 2005).

Researchers have demonstrated how schools habitually silence marginalized youth. These students have been excluded from the wider school population, and are often labeled at-risk. In such studies, the comprehensive school setting did not allow these students to believe they had a role in decisions that affected their future. Marginalized students struggled with empowerment in a setting where they were the minority. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms. The informal rules established by students are the rules of the culture of those who have the power, those who

23

are not marginalized. As a result alternative kinds of institutions are becoming choices for more of these students (Delpit, 1995; Weis & Fine, 2005).

One of the earliest movements in the United States of students working together towards empowerment in their own education was the Black student empowerment movement in Chicago in 1968 (Danns, 2002). The racial make-up of the city was becoming increasingly Black and school officials were not recognizing and reforming the public schools to meet students' needs. School leadership was predominately white and Black students were tracked into lower level classes. Students organized at their local schools and collaborated at the city level for educational reform. Though their efforts may be considered a failure because not much changed, this movement showed that students were paying attention and had an interest in their education. It is a reminder of the importance of involving students in order for reform to take place today.

Students themselves have spoken out for greater leadership roles and shared decision making in their high schools (Cushman, 2005; Mitra, 2004). Many students interviewed in Cushman's and Mitra's studies felt herded around by the school staff and had no decision-making opportunities. The researchers concluded that including students in conversations about school improvement could make clear differences in the school climate and culture. Students stated that if school leaders tried to understand their point of view, they would make a greater effort to do the same for school leaders. Students began to believe they were partners in their education when school administrators were willing to institute a democratic process. School districts saw increased energy and involvement when students were allowed to take ownership in their learning and in decision making at their school. Active engagement helped students see they can make a difference.

Other studies found that students responded in a more positive manner when school work was meaningful to their needs and interests. They felt resentment when expected to do what everyone else did. The canned program of the comprehensive high school was not a good fit for every student. Dropouts reported they would have been more successful if the high school program had been individualized to fit their needs. The importance of meeting individual needs was true for extra-curricular activities as well as the academic program. High schools with the lowest dropout rate had extra-curricular activities that were geared to the interests and needs of the students (Christle, et al., 2007; Gallagher, 2002).

Giving students a voice in school decisions improved academics and motivation to succeed in school. Going beyond just academic improvement, empowering students also increased student meta-cognition levels. In a study of high school teachers and students involved in collaborating for school improvement, students had a greater understanding of their own learning process. They felt a sense of ownership of their learning which personalized the educational process so the learners could make decisions (Mitra, 2008). Efforts to increase student empowerment and voice instilled in students the belief they could improve their own performance and that of their school. The researchers reported that allowing collaboration between students and staff encouraged students to develop skills needed to work towards change. Students who do not have a voice in the classroom may actually be at an educational disadvantage due to not finding meaning in their schooling (McQuillan, 2005; Mitra, 2004; Wallace, 2008).

Suggestions for ways teachers could increase student involvement in their own learning include letting students determine course options, relating academics to student interests and needs, connecting students with learning and work opportunities in the community, and treating

25

non-academic activities with importance. Students also find school more meaningful when they have some opportunity to decide how they will use their time, including choices on tasks and work location. Students stated that teaching with only the book was boring. Their interest increased when teachers found ways to bring the subject alive (Cushman, 2003, 2005; Guskey & Anderman, 2008).

In other research, increasing the level of student empowerment and student voice in school decisions had implications beyond individual students. The entire school community benefited when students were asked for their input. Collaboration between adults in the school and students was very powerful. Student perspectives assisted in identifying areas needing the greatest improvement. Opportunities provided to increase student voice in decision-making instilled in students the belief they could transform their schools. Alternative schools that accepted and invited student empowerment have been very successful in the academic realm. The key was allowing student input to school leaders and continually reflecting upon and revising policies and practices (McQuillan, 2005; Mitra, 2004, 2008). These schools had built a culture of acceptance and intimacy. Students as well as school leaders felt accepted and respected in the relationships built through collaboration.

Student and Teacher Relationships

The importance of building relationships was noted as integral to a positive school culture (Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, & Hambacher, 2007; Rodriguez, 2008). Urban high school students discussed the connection that mutual respect between teachers and students has to learning. Rodriguez found schools that put a priority on respectful relationships improved student engagement. In order for students to succeed they had to feel supported; and teachers reported that for students to feel supported they had to feel comfortable with the teachers

(Bondy, et al., 2007). Bondy continued by stating a safe place for learning is created when students and teachers know and care about each other.

Research has demonstrated that trust is an essential component of the teacher-student relationship. Students who trusted their teachers perceived the educational process as a partnership and were more likely to complete high school. Trusting the teacher was an important component in a student accepting the teacher's guidance. This was particularly true among socially at-risk students and those who entered high school with low academic expectations and a history of problems in school. Teachers are especially important in the lives of students who are at risk for academic failure. Informal conversations beyond the classroom were found to be the most beneficial. These daily interactions encouraged students and provided them with emotional support. Direct guidance and support can have a significant impact in a student's willingness to persevere through graduation (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Cushman, 2003).

Students who do not feel noticed at school are more tempted to stop attending. This is especially true in large and crowded high schools where students felt lost in the crowd and painfully alone. Students in various studies reported feeling ignored by peers and school staff. The school and staff did not appear to them as being hospitable. These students believed they were not missed when not in attendance and staying home from school protected them from humiliation. Students described behaviors they exhibited when feeling alienated from teachers and peers, including hostility, refusing to work, a smart-mouth attitude, and challenging teacher directions (Cushman, 2003; Gallagher, 2002; Hersch, 1998; Lessard et al., 2008).

Student Resilience

Research has identified factors that have contributed to at-risk students successfully completing high school. The term resilient describes students who successfully navigate

schooling although they have many negative factors affecting their lives. Students had greater resiliency if they were involved in athletics, clubs, and other organizations. Conversely, students of all ages with lower engagement in school activities were more likely to drop out. Participation in extracurricular activities also allowed students to identify with their school. Involvement in extracurricular activities not only increased the likelihood of graduating from high school, it also had a positive effect on enrollment in postsecondary education (Catterall, 1998; Horn & Chen, 1998; Marks & Louis, 1999).

Research has demonstrated that resilient students held a strong belief they have influence over their environment and they continually engaged with the world around them. Choices do not always turn out as they wished but resilient students always learn from them. In school these students are more likely to feel a sense of control over their environment by engaging in appropriate school behaviors such as being on time and prepared for class. Resiliency can exist with inappropriate behavior on the part of students. The difference between resilient students and non-resilient students is those deemed resilient learned from these inappropriate behaviors. The key was that resilient students reflected on their choices and actions and endeavored to make changes to manage their lives (Nirenberg, 1977; Smith, 2009).

The importance of relationships in developing resiliency cannot be overlooked. Resilient students did not by chance find a positive relationship with an adult; they actually sought relationships. Even when relationships in their lives had not gone well in the past, these students continued to look to form new relationships. They did not give up. Building these relationships had a long-term effect on their success in school and life after school. Students who were supported by teachers and peers were more likely to cultivate positive relationships and emotional ties to school. Because of these relationships lower crime rate and less drug abuse was

reported among students considered resilient (Armstrong, 2006; Nirenberg, 1977; Stewart, 2008).

Motivation to Teach

The importance of determining what motivates people to pursue a career as a teacher lies in the fact there is an ongoing state and national crisis that could weaken the quality of education for all children. The state and the nation are in the midst of a teacher shortage. In Kansas 36% of teachers are eligible to retire within the next four years, which is more than 13,000 of the 37,000 currently teaching (Associated Press, 2008). Additionally, fewer Kansas college graduates are entering the field of education. Nationally, critical teacher shortages are confronting elementary and secondary schools (Ingersoll, 2009). This shortage is due to two factors, an aging teaching force and increasing student enrollment. Lack of qualified teachers can overcrowd classrooms and reduce the time teachers can spend with individual students. Understanding motivation factors is key in encouraging students to study in the field of education and especially those students from a unique alternative school background.

The literature indentified several satisfactions that teachers seek from the process of teaching. These satisfactions include allowing a teacher to gain a sense of immortality as lived through the lives of teachers' past students, experiencing and modeling a passion for learning, and making a difference in students' lives. The satisfactions of teaching went much beyond academics: the most important contributions involved restoring hope to a student. Often a person's decision to become a teacher originated from experiences in their own lives. At times, this decision came from a discontent with their own schooling. Teachers identified a desire to make up for bad experiences they encountered in school as a reason to teach. They also cited their own positive learning experiences as a factor in choosing teaching as a career. Having

inspirational teachers who were good role models was significant for many who decided to teach (Block, 2008; Eisner, 2006; Olson, 2009; Watt & Richardson, 2007).

Most teachers enter the profession for self-less reasons. When surveyed, university students choose noble, service oriented reasons for entering a teacher education program. These reasons included helping children and others, a desire to convey knowledge, and service to society. Teachers believed they were engaging in useful work that would benefit society. Altruistic reasons such as enjoying working with children and wanting to help others were other motives given by teachers for entering the profession. Pre-service education students expressed a desire to contribute to the growth of knowledge in others, to be an instrument of other people's success, and to leave a lasting impression on the world (Chan, 2005). Materialistic concerns were not as important altruistic motives. Teachers were not motivated by salary instead they saw themselves as change agents who were given the task of restructuring schools (Brookhart & Freeman; 2005; Hao & deGuzman, 2007; Krecic & Grmek, 2005; Roberson, Keith, & Page, 1983; Su, 1997).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLGY

This research considered the culture and structure of alternative high schools as compared to comprehensive high schools from the perspectives of teachers who graduated from an alternative high school. The study focused on whether the alternative high school experience empowered these individuals to choose teaching as a profession. Rich descriptions from the voices of the participants are emphasized in order to better understand the emotions that played a role in the decision to attend an alternative high school and the decision to become a teacher. Organizational culture, bureaucratic theory, and empowerment theory served as lenses for interpreting the voices of the research participants. These three theories framed the methodology and research design through a modified phenomenological perspective. Researchers operating in the phenomenological approach seek to understand the meaning of a particular event to their study participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Crotty, 2003). This study sought to understand the meanings of a series of events to the participants.

Research Design

This study was conducted within the qualitative research tradition that emphasizes understanding the social construction of reality. Qualitative researchers, through gathering personal stories and reflections, want to understand the meaning people have constructed concerning their social worlds (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Webster & Mertova, 2007). The most important point in qualitative research is recognizing the information gathered is from the perspective of the participants, not that of the researcher. Focus is placed on the meaning participants have about the subject. Qualitative research is highly descriptive in nature. The voices of the participants give rich description of their reality that cannot be reported

through statistical measures. Results are reported as words and pictures rather than numbers (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Lehr, et al., 2008) . Bogdan and Biklen describe the collected data as "rich in description of people, places, and conversations, and not easily handled by statistical procedures" (p. 2). This type of study lends itself well to narrative inquiry, a particular form of qualitative research that focuses on capturing personal stories and life experiences.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry records human experience through the construction and reconstruction of the significant events in their lives (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Narrative inquiry answers the question of meaning of an event or events. It is a way of reasoning and representing those events (Armstrong, 2006). A narrative approach is recommended by Rappaport (1995) for doing research on empowerment issues. The goals of empowerment are attained when people give voice to their life stories. There is a strong connection between narrative and empowerment in that narrative enables people to reconstruct their life experiences within a perspective of power and powerlessness. Narrative inquiry connects process to practice through listening to the voices of the research participants. The researcher and subject become co-participants because of the respectful listening to the stories of people's lives. Narrative inquirers are never just recorders of another person's experiences; they are also having an experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Rappaport; Rees, 2003).

According to Webster and Mertova (2007) the narrative research process is divided into three levels. First to consider are the tools or instruments used to gather data. These can include observation, documents, interviews, and transcripts. Second, a researcher also takes into account the criteria to meet when conducting narrative research. The criteria are concerned with the authenticity and truthfulness of the research. The third level is the structure of the research,

which involves time, place, and events. Each component of the research transpires at a certain moment in time. Understanding this is essential to understanding the meaning of events. The description of the research environment is place (Webster & Mertova, 2007). The research events form the outline of the research. The tools for this study were individual interviews and group informal conversations. The criteria considered are the authenticity and truthfulness of the reporting of the data. The interviews and conversations were recorded and transcribed, which allow a reader to locate the exact words of the participants. In consideration of the structure of the research, it was important to create a comfortable environment and an unhurried time frame. Participants were asked to establish the location and time of the interview in order to meet their needs of comfort.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) added three other considerations when designing narrative research. Theoretical considerations assist the researcher in sorting out the meaning given by the participants of their experience. Common theoretical approaches for narrative inquiry include phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory. This study considered participants experiences through a phenomenological approach. A second consideration is strategies for creating field text. Field text can be participants' stories, autobiographical writing, journals, letters, conversations, interviews, observation notes, and documents. This study created field text from interviews and informal group conversations. The final consideration, according to Clandinin and Connelly, is considerations of analysis and data interpretation. It is in the analysis and interpretation process that meaning is made of the participants' stories.

Interviews conducted during the narrative inquiry research process are a way of gathering the oral history of participants. In this way people connect their present to their past and begin to make sense of their experiences (Perks & Thomson, 2005). Dewey (1963) noted that experiences

33

of the past are connected to present issues. These events from the past facilitate dealing efficiently with the future. Gathering data from oral history is unlike using other sources in that it allows the researcher to discern the meaning of events, with the assistance of the participant, rather than just reporting the events. Participants assist the researcher in making sense and meaning of their stories by integrating the past with the present. "Orality, narrative form, subjectivity, different credibility of memory, and the relationships between interviewer and interviewee – should be considered as strengths rather than as weaknesses, a resource rather than a problem" (Perks & Thomson, p. 3-4). These characteristics are what make oral history different from other forms of inquiry.

Narrative inquirers find themselves in a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, which are personal and social, past, present, and future, and place. The personal and social dimension refers to the interactions between researcher and participant. The second dimension, past, present, and future is concerned with the continuity between those three entities, and place refers to the situation. Narrative inquirers work within this space with the participants and themselves (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). "Working in this space means that we become visible with our own lived and told stories. Sometimes, this means that our own unnamed, perhaps secret, stories come to light as do those of our participants" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, pp. 61-62).

Narrative inquiry was appropriate for this study for several reasons. It is a study of teachers' stories of how their experiences in the past have affected their current choices and circumstances. Polkinghorne (2000) termed this descriptive narrative research. Through interviews and informal group conversations participants had the opportunity to reflect on their perception of how the culture and organization of comprehensive high schools contrasted with an alternative high school. Furthermore, they reflected on if they believe their high school

experience empowered them to be successful in the alternative school and influenced them to

choose to become teachers. Narrative inquiry allowed participants to reconstruct the significant

events in their high school experience, giving voice to significant events in their lives and

allowing them to construct meaning from their stories.

A consideration for this study was the memory of the teacher participants. They were

asked to recall events that for some occurred many years ago. Casey (1988) used the term

reminiscing to describe the process of talking out what is remembered to understand it more

fully. Reminiscing is truthful to the individual, although it is his or her own interpretation of

events. Participants were asked recreate incidences and events from the past in order to

appreciate the relationship of the past to the present. The one with the memory or story has the

claim to know better than others exactly what happened. This may be referred to as

epistemological privilege (Cotton, 2001). It is this privilege on which the truthfulness of the

participants' stories was based for this research.

Context

When conducting narrative research it is vital to select participants who have stories to

tell. Participants for this study were graduates of an alternative high school who now teach in the

Hope City Public School system. Hope City is a large urban area in the Midwestern part of the

United States with a population of 356,564 as reported in 2006 (Taylor, 2009). The median

income is $42,536 compared to the median income in the United States of $60,374. The

demographics of Hope City are 68.8% White, 11.2% Black, 13.3% Latino, and 4.5% Asian. The

demographics of the school district contrast with those of the city, as it serves a student

population of 50,042 students that are 38% White, 28% Latino, 19% Black, and 5% Asian

(Johnson, 2008). Hope City Public Schools is the largest school district between the Mississippi

River and Denver and Dallas and the Canadian border (Smith, 2009)[1]. In the district are 56

elementary schools, 16 middle schools, two kindergarten through eighth grade schools, eight

comprehensive high schools, one magnet high school, and two alternative high schools. At the

time that this study began, there were three alternative high schools. One closed at the end of the

2009-2010 school year.

The enrollment at each of the eight comprehensive high schools range from just over

1100 to 2200 students, whereas the enrollment at each of the three alternative high schools range

from 130 to 150. The demographics of the alternative high schools vary in comparison to each

other and do not align with the demographics of the district as a whole. The three alternative high

schools range from 9% White to 54% White, 17% Black to 52% Black, and 12% Latino to 26%

Latino.

The Board of Education of Hope City Public Schools established the first alternative high

schools in October 1970 (Hardy, 1999). Early on, the district saw the need for offering an

educational alternative for students whose needs were not being met in the comprehensive high

school. As the waiting list to enroll in the school grew and transportation became an issue for

students on the west side of the city, Hope City Public Schools opened a second alternative high

school in January 1979. The need for alternative education sites continued growing and a third

high school opened in January 1989.

Participants

Participants were chosen for the clear purpose of obtaining as much information as

possible to contribute to the rationale of the study. This is referred to as purposive sampling

(Armstrong, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). The participants have a unique perspective

based on their background. These perspectives enabled an understanding of the central questions

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[1] Hope City is a pseudonym.

of the study. Though their own stories were unique, they can also be considered a homogenous sample as they have the same characteristics as far as high school attendance and career choice.

Six teachers from the Hope City Public Schools were asked and agreed to participate in this research. Participants were all women between the ages of about twenty-six and fifty-eight. Five were White and one participant was Hispanic. The participants all graduated from an alternative high school within the school district and they all are current teachers in the district. Participants were found by contacting current and former principals and teachers from the alternative high schools. These individuals were able to provide names of graduates who were currently teaching in the school district.

Protection of Human Participants

Ethical matters are always at the forefront throughout narrative inquiry. In this study, participation was voluntary and participants were aware they could withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were advised of informed consent and confidentiality in the initial letters of consent and in opening statements of all interviews and informal group conversations. All participants signed a consent form found in Appendix A. Participants were assured that any risks they might be exposed to were minimal compared to any gains they might receive. Their privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity were insured by the researcher (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Transcription of interviews, observations, and informal group conversations were coded in a manner that guaranteed confidentiality.

Data Collection Methods

To address the research questions data were collected through individual narrative interviews and an informal group conversation. These methods are described next.

Narrative Interviews

The narrative interviews with the six teachers were conducted in the Fall of 2009 and the Spring of 2010. Each interview lasted between 80 and 90 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured in that there was a mix of structured and unstructured questions. At times a participant's response led to a question not in the original plan (Merriam, 1998). Interviews conducted during the narrative inquiry research process are a way of gathering the oral history of participants (Perks & Thomson, 2005). Participants were questioned regarding their experiences of the structure of comprehensive and alternative high schools and how those experiences might have empowered them to take control over their own life choices and decide to become teachers. The interviews began with a general question encouraging participants to introduce themselves. All planned questions were asked as well as probes when deemed appropriate. Interview questions may be found in Appendix B.

The interview is a widely used tool for data gathering in the narrative process. In this study, it was the dominant strategy used for the collection of data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1988; Webster & Mertova, 2007). The purpose was to gather the oral history of the participant's high school years. The questions were purposefully designed so that probes would develop naturally in order to allow the participants to fully tell their story. Participants were considered collaborators in the research process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2003). They were actively involved as experts of their own experiences. Participants were asked to validate and confirm their story in order to be assured that the retelling is presented as intended. They were provided a copy of the transcription of their interview.

Informal Group Conversation

The purpose of informal conversations for this study was to probe deeper into the shared experiences of the participants. Sharing of one persons' story may prompt a memory in another. In the Fall of 2010 one group conversation of 90 minutes was conducted. Three of the original participants attended. Group interview questions are in Appendix C.

Characteristics of informal conversations include equality of participants and the freedom to explore topics fitting to the needs of the group. A conversation may provide an avenue for probing deeper into an experience than can occur in an individual interview. Group conversations can generate further information on the topic. The listener's response allows for a probe into the speakers experience when the conversation takes place in a situation of mutual trust and identification with the experiences described by the other individuals. The informal group conversation helps develop a community narrative, a common story among a group of people (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Patton, 2002; Rappaport, 1995).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis is organizing collected data into manageable units and data interpretation is making meaning of the findings and connecting the findings to the study of the literature (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Analyzing data involves identifying common threads in participants' stories, determining which threads are important, and tying the common threads to the theoretical framework (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The data collected in this study consisted of audio recordings of teacher interviews, audio recordings of the participants involved in a group informal conversation, and written transcripts of both. Once the data was gathered I repeatedly listened to the recordings, transcribed the interviews and read the transcripts in order to interpret what participants said and determined the common narrative threads and themes that were woven

through the different stories told by the participants. The interpretation of data in a narrative

inquiry is "trying to make sense of life as lived" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 78).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe a three-part lens for analyzing data gathered in a

narrative inquiry; interaction, continuity, and situation. An interview transcript is analyzed for

the personal experiences of the participant in addition to their interactions with others. Continuity

takes into account the past and the present. The transcript is analyzed for both past and present

experiences. Analyzing situation is concerned with the context, time, and place in the events of

the individual's life story. This complex analysis process involves reading and rereading the text

in order to find common threads, tensions, and patterns in each participant's story.

In narrative inquiry, the crux of the analysis and interpretation of data is understanding

experience. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to experience as "the stories people live" (p.

xxvi). A modified phenomenological approach was utilized to analyze and interpret the stories of

experience told by the participants. This approach provides insight into the sense a person makes

of an experience that has personal significance (Merriam, 2001; Smith, 2009). This study

analyzed a series of events rather than one given phenomenon. The central concern of the

phenomenological approach is the meanings those life experiences have for the study

participants. The researcher explores the person's perception of the events rather than attempting

to construct an objective account (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Merriam, 2001; Smith, 2009). During

the process of analysis, the researcher becomes aware of his or her own prejudices or

assumptions in order to see the experiences from the participants viewpoint. As the researcher

becomes aware of any preconceptions, he or she is able to shelve these so focus is on the

meaning participants assign to events (Merriam, 1998; Smith, 2009).

Narrative analysis starts from the viewpoint of the participant. It is focused on the person not on categories of themes. After the collection and transcription of data, the analysis of each participant's story began by focusing on the persons own experiences and their interpretation of these experiences. The analysis linked the experiences of the participants into a whole account in order to explain how the events of the past were significant in their decision to teach. With a multitude of data gathered from interviews and informal group conversations the analysis will involve determining what information is significant in answering the research questions (Casey, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999).

Research Quality

Data analyzed in a narrative study is primarily linguistic data. The importance of repeated listening to or rereading the narrative in order to understand the meaning given to an event cannot be underestimated (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1988). The meaning of language is contextual and statements by participants can lose their meaning when considered in isolation. Analyzing narrative data is not a series of steps but rather a complex examination of the images and ideas revealed in the stories of the participants. As a result of this linguistic feature, narrative research is not able to assert exact correspondence with the events that were shared by the participants (Polkinghorne). Truthfulness can be a concern in narrative inquiry. In narrative research the researcher aims for verisimilitude, that is, results that give the impression of veracity. The trustworthiness of the research is substantiated by the participants in the telling of their stories of experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Reliability in narrative research was realized through the dependability and trustworthiness of the field notes and transcriptions of the interviews. It is in the details of the procedures that ensure the trustworthiness of field notes and transcriptions. Procedures are

constant from person to person. Interview questions are standard for each participant so that any difference in responses can be attributed to the different experiences of the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1988). Clandinin and Connelly use the term wakefulness to describe narrative inquiry. Researchers must be wakeful of what they are doing and thoughtful about all inquiry decisions.

Reflections of the Researcher

In the data analysis process, a specific technique to bear in mind is epoche. This is the process in which the researcher becomes aware of her own prejudices and assumptions regarding the experiences of the participants. "In doing research it is important that researchers are considerate of both the similarities and differences between themselves and the research participants" (Blankstein, 2004, p. 388) . A suspension of personal beliefs and viewpoints is critical in order to see the experiences of the participants from their perspective (Merriam, 1998).

I have a different school experience from the participants in this study. I was sure to be very aware of this as I had conversations with the participants and analyzed the data. Participants were considered co-researchers because of my limited experience in an alternative setting. Though I felt unchallenged and bored at times, I was successful in the comprehensive high school and was not a student considered at-risk. I had positive relationships with most of my teachers in high school, however I was not from a privileged family and often felt treated differently as a result. This was critical to reflect upon throughout the research process. However, as an educator for over 26 years as a teacher and an administrator I have had experience with students of all types in both alternative and comprehensive high schools. I have witnessed at-risk students experiencing success and at-risk students struggling with school.

One survey in a Wisconsin school district reported that just 24% of students believed their school had a caring climate and only 19% thought they were valued (Blankstein, 2004). I must confess that I probably would have said the same about the schools I attended. A teacher or two might be called out as caring but as a whole I don't think the climate was caring. Therefore, in a way, I can put myself into my participants' shoes; I just reacted different to a somewhat cold environment.

The stories of these teachers have enabled me to reflect on my practice as well as answer for myself the question of why I teach. Three questions from Blankstein (2010) came to mind as I became immersed in conversations with the research participants. Why did I become a teacher? What do I stand for as an educator? What are the gifts that I bring to my work? Three teachers had the most influence on my life. My first grade teacher was kind and loving to each and every student. That is when I first thought I wanted to be a teacher. My high school math teacher was the kind of teacher that made each of us believe that we were his pets. I learned about engaging conversation and intense discussion from my high school psychology teacher. These three were intent on building relationships with their students. I wanted to teach so that I could be the kind of person they were, so that I could make a difference in a life. I hope that is the gift I bring, that I make a difference.

CHAPTER 4

INDIVIDUAL TEACHER NARRATIVES

In this chapter, the six participants tell their stories. The words are their words, the stories their stories. Their voices were strong and open about their experiences in high school. To ensure confidentiality pseudonyms have been used in place of real names. This includes the participants as well as teachers, administrators, and locations named in their stories.

Melissa

Melissa is a white female in her late twenties and is a 2nd grade teacher in the Hope City Public Schools. She seems quiet and somewhat shy. She had been teaching for five years at the time of this interview. Melissa began high school in a comprehensive setting and attended there for two years. She graduated from Metro High School in 1999, attended community college for two years, and then graduated from a large state university. She has been teaching at the same elementary school since graduation.

Comprehensive High School Experience: Waste of Time

I started at Hope High School. I went there for two years, and basically I felt that it was a waste of time because they would have us do study hall or seminar for like an hour and a half a day. A lot of times I didn't have anything to do. So I'd just be sitting at school for an hour and a half. It was too much time being wasted. I wanted to work at my own pace, you know, go to school, work, and then leave so I could have a job. The main reason I decided to change schools was because I wanted to work more.

I always got good grades, but I didn't feel like I was being challenged. I believe the curriculum was different. In some ways I just felt at Hope High School I was wasting my day away. I'd end up leaving, because should I stay at school or I could be doing something for an

44

hour and a half instead of just sitting in this desk. So I would just end up leaving and sometimes I wouldn't come back and I'd miss another class. So that's why I stopped. I was going to end up failing classes if I kept leaving. In my mind I could be sitting here in a class doing nothing every day or going and getting paid.

Alternative High School Experiences: Projects and Choice

At first I was kind of skeptical of going there. I'd hear from other people that if you go there, an alternative high school, it's because you got pregnant as a teenager, or you skipped too much school, or you were failing everything, or you were doing drugs. I was like, I don't really fit any of these categories. So I don't really know how I'm going to fit in. But, I really liked it. I liked the small school. I could work at my own pace. They just gave you a folder of everything that you needed to have completed by the end of the class. They'd give it to you on a daily basis or a weekly basis. I liked knowing that this is what I needed to do and once this is finished I'll be done with the class. So if I wanted to get through it faster, I could. I didn't have to wait for everybody else. The assignments they had at Metro were more like open response, like it wasn't one right answer. It was like, here's a project and they gave you more choices about how you wanted to complete it, more creativity.

Here I could work at my own pace. I guess I'm just more independent. If you are a more independent person, an alternative high school will work for you. If you like having people around you and working in groups then it probably won't. They had a thing at Metro, a class that I took. I would go there in the morning to this class and you had to have a certain number of hours that you worked a job. You'd get credit in a class and then you also get to have your job where you get paid. So I only had to go to school for about 2 hours a day and I still graduated early.

I just think that teachers should know that students need someone to care about them. They need to be told and shown that they're cared about. That their opinion matters, that how they learn is important. If they want to do something a certain way, students should have a voice.

I would probably want to add that I really did feel safer at Metro than I did at Hope High School. It's just something people wouldn't think about. From people I've talked to it always seems like the alternative high school is looked down on. I kind of thought that too, before I went. And then realized it's great. There are not horrible people there. It's not full of just gangs and pregnant teenagers. It's really not that bad. I just really liked it. If I had a choice, I would have liked going there all 4 years. My mom was even trying to get my sister to go there. But they told her you have to go to a regular high school first.

Part of the Family at Metro

The teachers at Metro, the relationship was different. First of all they had us call them by their first name. So it wasn't as formal. I feel they had kind of a different gift than regular education teachers, at a regular school. They were used to working with a lot of kids in gangs, or who did drugs, troubled kids. They just had more of a compassionate side to them. I just liked it a lot better because the teachers seemed to care about you more, they knew you more, it was a smaller school. But I can't say that the teachers at Hope were . . . because my best relationship through high school was with a teacher from Hope High. And he was, for the two years I went there, the best teacher I ever had. There were good relationships at both of them, but overall I would say that the teachers at Metro just seemed to care more.

What I remember from Hope High, there was a counselor, I don't know if he had a title, I know he was the school counselor. I don't know if there was something else that he did. I would go and talk to him sometimes. Also, the journalism teacher that I told you about, he was also like

a support system that I had, just because he was very easy going. He did creative writing, journalism, that was my passion. I liked his classes and I liked him because he was more of the critical thinking type of guy. I do remember one incident when I was talking to the counselor, and he kind of . . . I kind of thought it would have been handled differently at Metro, because I had a boyfriend at the time that he knew wasn't the best person in the world to be around because he had a bad reputation or something. And the way he went about it, I don't really remember any details, but I do remember he was basically like, "You shouldn't be with him" and that's it. "If you want to make anything out of yourself, this isn't the guy to be with." I really liked him, but I kind of felt like telling a teenager, "don't date this guy", looking back on it, that's like the completely wrong thing to do.

Then when I went to Metro, I didn't feel like I was judged. I did talk a lot to the counselor there and the social worker who used to work at the school where I teach now a couple of years ago. And she was also my, when I got confirmed through the Church, she was like my mentor. So her relationship with me continued after high school too. I just felt that at Metro, the relationships with the counselors or any teachers that was a support system to me, I felt was more sincere and real. At Hope High School there were so many more kids that if you're not in a teacher's class they're not going to know your name. But at Metro, my class, we graduated with a class of like fifty, they knew everybody's name. It just felt more comfortable, like you were part of the family. Like you didn't want to miss school, you knew that you would be missed.

As far as discipline from administrators or things like that, it was a lot different at Hope than Metro because the administration at Hope High seemed to really be a little more strict and you wouldn't think that because the alternative school has more "bad" kids. But as far as the day was run, they were pretty much similar, you'd have blocks of classes, you'd have assignments in

classes. The same you would have in a regular school. Lunch was different because it was a really small school and we didn't have a cafeteria, although I didn't stay for lunch because I was gone [to work] by then. But the building was just smaller. As far as the environment - everyone was just more close-knit, since it was smaller. They felt they didn't have to be as strict because it was more like a family and not a boot camp or something.

Why Teach: I Want to Prove I Can Do It

I really didn't think I was going to college. I really didn't have a desire to go to college. I really don't know what made me think of teaching. Probably like two or three months before I graduated high school I thought about becoming a teacher. It wasn't because of any teachers at Metro or really high school at all. I really enjoyed middle school. And I had a lot of good teachers in middle school. I think they kind of made me want to be a teacher. But I don't know if I had stayed at Hope High School if I would have decided to become a teacher or not because I really did not think I was going to go to college. Something came over me my senior year, and I'm like, I can do this and I want to prove to everyone that I can do it. And I did.

I try to relate to the kids as much as I can, try to bring whatever is popular with them right now, I try to bring into my teaching, into our activities. Like background knowledge, tap into that by talking about what they know, what they like. And just really letting them know that I care about them. Not just as a whole group. What I really liked about my teachers at Metro they wouldn't just tell the whole class – you know – I care about you or show it. They would make a point to talk to you individually and make you feel special. I thought about journalism, but it's just not that exciting. With teaching it's different every day.

What Teachers Should Know: Students' Opinions Matter

I just think they should know that students need someone to care about them. They need to be told and shown that they're cared about. That their opinion matters, that how they learn is important. If they want to do something a certain way, students should have a voice. It was really nice because when I first went to Metro my mother didn't just go there and enroll me. I think it's a requirement that they all sit down with the parents of the student with the principal. We just kind of sat and talked for a while. That's just another example of even the principal, just showing that she cares enough to have the parents come in and meet her individually. Then just talking about my individual goals, and, you know, what I'm needing.

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Jessica

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Jessica is a white female in her late twenties and is a third grade teacher in the Hope City Public Schools. She is the single mother of a young son. Jessica is outgoing and very open about the struggles she had as a teenager. She is teaching at the same location in which she completed her student teaching. At the time of this interview, Jessica was in her fifth year of teaching. Jessica began high school at a magnet school and was there for almost one and a half years. She then attended a school for expelled students for 186 school days. After the term of her expulsion was over, Jessica attended and graduated from Metro High School in 1999. She graduated a year early. After high school, Jessica attended a community college for two years and then graduated from a large state university in 2005.

Comprehensive High School Experience: Boring and Not Engaging

I was at Chance High School all of my freshman year and not quite half of my sophomore year. I liked going to a regular school but, it just didn't work out. I liked it, the experiences were good. There were a lot of people, a lot of activities to do. I liked it, I just

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49

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thought I knew everything, but I didn't. The class sizes were good. I didn't like it how the teachers were like worksheet teachers. They didn't engage me, so I got bored and decided to do other things. It wasn't engaging at all. I got kicked out of there for fighting and on drugs too many times. And then, I was kicked out of school for 186 days. I had to go to Gate Academy after that. Then after I left Gate Academy I went to the high school that I could go to because I couldn't go back to Chance High School.

Chance was a typical school setting, started at 7:15 got out at 2:25. It was just a normal school, what I had known from middle school, just the same kind of structure. It was just boring and they allowed too much leeway, like leniency for somebody who had my kind of personality. Someone that did the kind of things that I did. Had it been, at that age when I was going through what I was going through, structured differently, I would have probably made it. That's why I made it at the alternative school.

No Escaping a Bad Reputation

At the regular school there was like a zero tolerance. There were so many students, maybe. I kept being a nuisance to them. You never get to tell your side of the story. It was always automatically you had done something wrong. And once you do something, once I had done something so many times, even if I didn't do it, I was always being blamed, because of the reputation that I had. So it eventually was not fair and I was getting strikes against me that, not that I didn't cause it, it's just that they added up a lot quicker than I felt that they should have. Other than they just throw the key and lock you away. That was it, they weren't having nothing. Not that they should have. They handled it a lot different. You were like a number. You weren't a person to them.

Then at Chance High School, they fight you from the get go, no matter what, because of things you had did, even when I liked them. I never felt like I had a chance, not that I deserved it. But I never felt like I did. Even, you how people say a new year, it didn't matter there because I was already in trouble. I tell them today I know I did it. Then it didn't matter, it didn't matter. I could have gone back to school and been the best kid ever and I still would have been . . ., it didn't matter. It didn't help that the principals hated me. Not that they didn't have a reason, but that didn't help either. Then I just didn't care. It was like whatever, I don't want to be here anyway and then I got my wish and I got kicked out. God, it took forever. I was like, "how long is this going to take?"

Alternative High School Experience: A Self-paced Individualized Education

At Metro they didn't stand up and teach. You had a folder you worked out of and it was everything that you needed. The teacher would just kind of lay low. Then if you had a question you would go to them. Everything was on your own pace. I got to do the credits I wanted to do when I wanted to do them. I worked out of a folder. I had Pat Davis as one of my teachers. She was like, "this is everything you need to do". If you got stuck or you didn't know, that's when she would teach you one on one, or me and two other people who were at the same part of the folder. And when you were done, you didn't have to wait or be bored or get into trouble, you just exited out of the class and went to another one and just picked up where it was because everything was in a folder. It wasn't a power struggle because they weren't up there doing anything un-engaging. There was no room for mischief because I had my own folder and I knew what I needed to do. My personality clashed with the regular school setting. It just didn't work out.

At the alternative school, they already knew what strikes you had, they already knew where you came from. So the way that they handled things was a lot different. You got to tell your side. They knew that you had a boiling point. They knew that you had to back off. And your punishment was for exactly what you had done. They would go through and say this is what you did, this is the rule that you broke, and you could actually see it. And so could the other person. So you could see that this person is getting it and I'm getting it as well. I felt like it was more done on a personal level to where you could see success. Because there's lots of times I had done things and Ms. White, the principal, was like, this isn't how we do it, this is how you are going to do it next time. And it was like a teaching thing.

Metro was Like Being at Home with Your Family

You'd call the teachers by their first names. You'd talked to them about other things. It was like being at home with your family. They all had their own personalities. They made you feel comfortable, if you had a question. We called Pat (teacher), "Pat". She would help you. It was a different kind of thing. People would come in, people would leave. It just worked a lot better. It was never, I don't remember anything negative about that school. I got into trouble. I got in trouble there too, but not nearly as much. I never felt like I didn't have a chance. I started every day with a chance.

At Metro you knew that people came first. I just remember thinking that they were always excited when you walked through the door. They'd be like "how was your weekend?" "This is what you need to do." If you weren't getting it done they'd refocus you. It was more like, kind of like they were your mom. They knew what you needed to get done. All the evidence was there. The support, you could see it – that they really wanted you there. They wanted truly to see you succeed.

There was no support system at Chance. I don't think I was aware of any. You switched hours so often I don't even think they knew my name. They knew my name because of the reputation, but after that – I don't think they knew my name at all. I can remember them just saying seat numbers, like seat 1, seat 2, seat 3. That's how your files were at Chance. I guess because there were so many of us and they don't have time to deal with kids like me. There was nothing that made you feel like you were wanted in school. They were just there to do their job. They were job teachers, 7:00 to 2:00 and they were done.

I can't think of any good experiences at Chance. I was always in trouble. Not that I blame them. I see a lot of them now when I go to inservices. Some of them won't talk to me. I agree, because now I'm on the other side of it. They never know what to say and I don't blame them. I don't blame them. It wasn't their fault, it was mine. But oh, they're not happy to see me. They're like "oh, you're a teacher?" Then most of their comments after that are "I hope they are giving you everything you gave us." Then we laugh about it because we're all adults now. I don't blame them. It's not a welcoming, you burn bridges. Some of them are very shocked. I remember thinking that I wouldn't want to be like that as a teacher.

The Metro part of it all of them Pat, Ms. White, they're all thrilled to death, even Carla, because I had Carla as a teacher when I was little, a cute little kid. They're all excited. The ones that, even Joe Hughes, the principal who kicked me out, he won't speak to me at all. I remember I saw him at the grocery store, I went up to talk to him, there was just, nothing there, same with Mr. McDonald. But that's OK. Whose fault is it mine or theirs, mine. You make the bridges you land on. What can I do about it? Most of them are just very surprised. They'll say stuff like "I

wouldn't want my kid in your class." I probably wouldn't either. They just say things; we have to laugh about it. You have to realize, they did nothing wrong. It was my fault.

Alternative School: Treated like a Person

Due to the school size at Metro they knew your name on a first name basis. They'd ask you "what did you do over the weekend?" They just knew things about you. I loved that school. You were just a person. Nothing mattered except were you learning. It was fun. It was just fun. And it wasn't fun because you . . . the environment was conducive to learning.

If you needed help the teacher was there, each table doing their own little lesson. You had your own little folder. And if you didn't know it and were about to get frustrated you could go over there. Everything was just free flowing. There weren't a lot of rules that make kids not want to go to school. There wasn't just that type of thing. Forty minutes of writing a paper, it wasn't that. Anything to get you engaged in learning. So that's what you focused on, and not everything else that teenagers go through.

At Chance we would just come into class during the hour, do the worksheet, and next class go in, do the worksheet, same thing every day. Teachers just went through the motions. Teachers at Metro loved their job. They loved the kids there, they were just happy. The whole atmosphere of the school made it, the morale was different, a lot different. The student was more important at the Metro, same with the teaching. Metro would be connecting more with students. And then Chance, I don't think either, and I loved that school. I loved going there I just didn't do very well. Sitting wasn't for me, I guess. But I loved going there. It wasn't that I hated that school. I loved it, it just didn't work out. So the teachers were all OK, because it was new. I didn't know there was anything better until I went to Metro. Then I could see the difference. It was more beneficial to me.

Why Teach? Always Wanted to Be a Teacher

The thing is, I always wanted to be a teacher. I just didn't want to do what I had to do to be a teacher. I remember, because I got into trouble, did I want to become a teacher. I remember thinking, all along, even when I was little that that would be a job I'd like to have. But I didn't want to do what I had to do to get there. And then at Chance there was a really awesome teacher that just made learning fun. But then, you know, you get the reputation and he doesn't want you in his class either. You know what I mean. But I don't remember it being a deciding thing, one school versus another school that made me want to be a teacher. I just always wanted to be one. I just didn't want to do what I had to do to get there. I always knew I had to go to college or I couldn't live at home. That wasn't an option. I needed a place to stay so I had to go to college. I didn't go to college with the intention of graduating. I just went until I turned 18 because I was 17 when I went, then it kind of fell into place.

As a teacher I think that I adapt to all the kids who struggle or have the same personality that I have. Like I feel like the other teachers give me the kids who are just like me, the loud obnoxious ones and the ones in trouble with the bad reputations. I get a lot of those kids. They don't faze me at all. It's like maybe if you can connect with one of them, maybe they'll see success later. Not that it was their fault, but I just feel if I would have had it earlier, maybe I wouldn't have took the routes I took. The kids, I'm just more lenient with them, much more focused individually about them. They're doing something because of something else. If I can find why they are doing it, they'll get an education if I can get to the bottom of that, because that's why they're here, to learn. It's my job to figure out which way they're going to learn best, if that's being their friend and then their teacher, that's what I need to do.

What Teachers Should Know: Make a Connection

Teachers need to see the student as a person. I guess if once they get into the older grades maybe they get burnt out, you know they don't want to do it anymore. There are all the other things besides teaching. The teaching always gets put on the back burner. Then everything else was out of boredom. I never felt like any of the teachers at Chance wanted to be there. It was so boring, just a worksheet. If anything, if they could just go one more step to know your name, to say hi how are you, to do anything that a student does see that a teacher is a person you'll make a connection to where you can see success in education.

If you knew that they didn't care, you're going to do what you can to get into trouble because it's not like it matters anyway. You know some teachers never cared what you did. I never got into trouble in their class; because they didn't even know I was in there. I just remember a teacher saying "she's great in my class," that's because she didn't even know I was there. Because she didn't care, because all she did was sit behind your computer. So it was easy. Once you get that leeway, education is not important to us, sixteen years old; I could care less if I was learning.

It just mattered that I was there, because I had to go. I guess just make the connection. Once you can see the connection learning is easy. I think of the kids in here, no kid wants to disappoint you, they don't wake up in the morning saying, "who can I disappoint today?" So once they come, once you realize they're not making the right actions, the kids don't want to do it on purpose, because they don't like that feeling of getting into trouble or having their peers not look at them the same. So it's not that I believe they seek attention like that, it's something else that they're missing. It's not that it's my job to find it, but as a person kids are all we have. If you

could just touch a kid's life and change it, why wouldn't you do that, whether you're paid or not? So I just felt like the love was gone.

I would say, when teachers automatically know, like kids will come to me from 2nd grade, and teachers know because we have to place kids in classes, I will be told every time that this kid does this, this, this, they're just going to be a hellion. That jades everyone's thinking. Not that the kid did not do it, he has caused all of the reputation that he has had. But then the child gets to where they're held down, they can never do anything good. So no teacher can make a connection after that because of the kid's actions. But before you get the kid minds are made up. And I've caught myself sometimes thinking "oh God I've got that kid in my class." And he turns out to be one of my favorite kids. And the other teachers ask, "why is he your favorite?" I don't know, because we have the same personality. The fourth grade teachers will come and say the kids enjoy school now. What did you do? His reputation before your class was bad, now he's better. I think it's because you have to decide for yourself. Even in 10th grade it was way worse for me at Chance, and I was like "what happened?" It was because the 9th grade teachers had talked. Not that they didn't have that right, but none of those 10th grade teachers ever decided that I was going to get a chance. Not that I deserved a chance, because I kind of wasted them all.

Leah

Leah is a white female in her fifties and is a middle school teacher in the Hope City Public Schools. She teaches in the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program. This program is aimed at increasing college attendance in students who are least served which tend to be those in the academic middle (Advancement Via Individual Determination, 2010). Leah was very passionate in telling her story. After almost 40 years, she remains very emotional about her experiences. She has been teaching for 32 years. She is the most experienced of the

participants. Her entire teaching career has been in the Hope City schools and the last 20 years have all been in her current location. Her father was a university professor and he and her mother made sure their children were culturally aware. She was a member of an all African American club in middle school and at the beginning of high school. The family lived in a small town in Illinois before moving to Hope City at the beginning of her freshman year of high school. Near the end of her freshman year, she left the comprehensive high school and attended Metro High School. Leah graduated a year early in 1973, attended, and then graduated from a large state university in 1977.

Comprehensive High School Experience: Square Peg in a Round Hole

I just, I didn't like the classes, I didn't like the kids. It was horrible for me. It was really horrible for me. I just didn't fit in. I just didn't fit in anywhere. The kids that I ran around with didn't fit in either, or at least the kids I chose to be with didn't fit in. You know my biggest thing there was Coach Long chasing me across the parking lot trying to catch me before I could get into somebody's car and leave campus. It was just like, I just hated it.

It was a whole lot different, but this town I came from was a little town and we had all grown up together. Summit High was a big huge high school to me and I had come from this little tiny town. I was raised quite a bit differently even though it was a small town I had come from. You know, my parents made sure that we were culturally aware. I suppose you could put it. I was a member of an all African American club in middle school and beginning high school. When I was in Illinois, the people who came through our house – we had artists and writers and things like that that came through our house. So for me to go from that to a school that was mainly a farming community school, where the kids were very conservative, teachers were very conservative.

I remember talking to, it was probably Coach Long, who interviewed us on dress code. And what we had to wear and how we had to look. I just couldn't understand how doing this and looking like this made us do so much better academically. It was just foreign to me. My dad was a professor at the university and we lived in the area that would be going up to Summit. The kids at that time still had their trucks with their gun racks in their trucks. The best way to put it is it was an agricultural school. The kids were all farmers' kids.

I couldn't stand the principal. The principal actually had several of us girls come in. I remember when he won the humanitarian award, and I thought "why didn't you ask some people who went to that school there?" He used to have us come in; that's when the girls didn't wear bras, and he'd have us come into his office and jump up and down to see if we wore bras. Yeah, I can remember being at this humanitarian award where he got this honor, and I'm like, "I can't even stand up and clap." It was some conference we were at and it happened to coincide with that. I thought, "This is a vile human being and you're having him up here. He's accepting this for being some great person."

That's when we had the race riots and that was a huge thing, the race riots. My best friends were African American. And it was the only kids at that time, during the riots, the only kids that got arrested. I broke a door. I broke a glass door in the building that day. They took me to the office and had me lay down. The other kids were arrested. They had me lay down until my mother could come get me because I was upset. It was just the disparity on how people were treated. It was just unconscionable. And I just couldn't fit in. I just got angrier and angrier. Truly it was, kids laugh about it now, but it was rage against the system. We really felt that way.

I just kept getting more and more into trouble. I think the last straw, at Summit High School, I don't think, I know, we staged a sit-in, my friends and I. They called my parents, and

literally dragged me into the office. I acted like an idiot in the office. I believe I lit up a cigarette in the principal's office while he was talking to me. I mean to show my utmost respect for him. And uh, that time they called my mother in. She didn't have a problem with me doing the protest. She had a problem with me being disrespectful. And at that time they suggested I try either not to come back to school, or try some alternative placements.

Alternative High School Experience: Supportive, Family Environment

The only place at that time was Metro. I think I was 15 years old. I was a little bit younger. I knew a couple of kids that went to Metro and they had me meet with Jan Ward who was the principal at the time, and I adored this woman. No Sarah James was the principal and Jan Ward was one of the teachers. They showed me what the school was like, they showed me what it was about.

Passing periods and breaks, the teachers came and sat in the hall. You have your passing periods, your breaks together. You all eat lunch together. It had just a very familial-type setting, just very comfortable. The classrooms were real small. We were just square pegs in round holes. None of us were fighters. None of us. You know we didn't, we wanted somebody to think that it was OK to be who we were. We weren't going to be on the tennis team, the football team, or the golf team, the cheerleaders, or whatever. You were still OK.

At Metro it wasn't only that you were OK, but that you were awesome. That's how they made you feel. I remember, one of my strongest memories, was I had started gypping (skipping school), running around with some kids there, and didn't go to school for a period of a week or two. Instead of calling my home and telling my parents that I wasn't showing up for school, they called and asked for me. And the teacher left the number. Told my parents that it wasn't anything to worry about they just needed Leah to call them back. And I called her back and she said, "This

is on you, at this school. You can either show up or not, but we are not going to waste a slot on you. I just wanted you to know that I cared enough to give you a call." I never missed another day. I can't believe I'm getting emotional, but they had enough respect. That's how you felt, you felt respected.

I was a screw off when I first started there too. And then I got the phone call from one of the teachers and it just clicked. It sounds like such a simple thing but it clicked to me that this was my school, this was on me. It was only going to be on me. It wasn't a matter of tattle telling to my parents, or saying this. And I could screw up or not screw up. If I wanted to go there they were going to treat me as an adult and be respectful of me or I could leave, and let the opening go to someone else.

They Would Push You at Metro

And I loved it. I loved the work we did, I loved the activities. It was at your own pace. If something happened, if you had to be gone for a period of time, you could take your work with you. A lot of the kids there were already parents or had difficulties at home that I didn't have. I didn't have the situation where they had bad situations. They were living on their own, they were supporting themselves. They were doing whatever. Work was made up specifically for you. This was what your work was. If you were bright and independent enough you could go as high as you wanted. They would push you. Some of us would go to college classes and speak to college classes. We would present, we would do different things. If you had abilities in a certain area, they made sure you shined in that area.

Like I said there were 75 kids in the whole school, it was very small. We all ate together, we all sat together. At that time you could smoke in the school. We all sat in the hallways and had our cigarette in between class. There was really camaraderie. You didn't think of the teacher

61

as your friend, but you did think of them as I suppose like a colleague or a mentor. That's probably a better way to look at it. You looked at your teachers as mentors and they were. That was a huge thing.

You went in and you completed a class. It may take me, you take a semester of government or a year at Summit, at Metro it might take me two months if you're really good at that. Then I could go on to another subject. There wasn't, you know, you didn't have to have a certain number of seat hours in the classroom to make it. You had to finish this curriculum that they had set forth, you finished that curriculum then you could go on to something else. So you could work as fast or slow as you needed to. I really liked that too.

School Culture, Relationships, and Support: Unjust Versus Equitable

The climate and how people were treated was so different at Summit. The black kids were treated so, so differently. It was just unbelievable how they were treated, unless they were an athlete. It was just unbelievable to me, I couldn't make it, couldn't make it the way they had it set up. They certainly didn't fit in at such a conservative school. Those teachers weren't used to having kids come in who were of a different flavor. And that was the problem. They were unaccepting and didn't have to accept. It wasn't differentiating, it was straight line. You toe the line, you buck up and you do what you need to do. And if you can't that's just a shame. As one teacher said, "They'll always need ditch diggers." Told my friend they'll always need ditch diggers. So that's how my African American friends were treated, told it to the child and the child's parents.

There were a few teachers at Summit, one of the art teachers there, the counselor, Deb Louis, Toni Adams was one of the art teachers there that I felt built relationships. Even though I couldn't stand geometry, Charles Harris was one of those teachers. He ended up, funny enough,

62

he ended up being one of the principals at Metro at one time. I mean, many, many years later, but he was my geometry teacher. Couldn't do geometry to save my soul, but he was an honest person, I mean, he was an honest person. I don't know why I picked that word, but he just, he was a genuine person, maybe that's a better way to put it. He was a genuine person.

I had the counselor at Summit. I knew I could go to her. I would talk to her. Later on, because I've been around so long, she and I taught together later on. She said, "My God you're still alive?" "Yeah, believe it or not, are you not terrified to see me walk in as a teacher?" She was pretty awesome. And I could talk to her but she wasn't enough, she was the counselor. You needed to know that there was someone who had your back. The others, I don't know, there was no connection to students. I felt like. The kind of student I was, there was no connection to me. But I didn't put forth the effort either. If I'm to look at it, I was as big a pain in the ass as anybody there probably.

I had relationships with these teachers at the alternative school. They invested themselves with us. You knew that if something was going on there could be phone calls, there could be conversations. You could talk to them. You felt safe talking to them. Like I said you felt that someone was your mentor. They were there for you. You had relationships. I may not have been best friends with these people but I knew I could go to Jan Ward and by God this would be taken care of. This was happening to me at school, or this was happening, or I needed to do this, or do whatever, I knew I could trust that person to help me out, or show me, or guide me, or tell me what was going on. But they also, if you screwed up they let you know. But somehow it was a consequence of what you did. It wasn't just because, I don't even know how to say it. You were held accountable and you knew you were going to be held accountable but that was OK.

It was equitable at Metro. It wasn't a matter of well he did this, or he did that, it was for you, it was equitable for you. And that's how they treated you. If it went down to the point where you had to go talk to Sarah you knew that it was going to hit the fan. She'd want to know. Why did it get to this point? Very few kids ever got to that point. Usually if something was so wrong that it got to that point, then there was something horribly wrong going on with that child. And she found out, and she took care of it. She was just an incredible person. They all were. And they all had their stories. And it didn't matter, you didn't need to know what their story was.

You just knew that they were there because they chose to be at that school. It wasn't that they were assigned there. All of these teachers, and that was a big thing too, you knew they chose to be at that school to work with you. That was their choice that they cared enough to be there with you. "So what's going on today, Leah? Why is that happening to you?" It just made a huge difference. It just made a huge difference with those kids. I understand, because my sister teaches there now, but it's changed over the years and they've had to take younger kids. That changes the dynamics completely. Or they take kids that have been, or trouble, that kind of thing. It doesn't have the same vibe, that you went there because you were a square peg. It's not square pegs anymore. That has changed the climate.

Why Teach? I Could Do a Better Job

Probably by the time I had finished at Metro I had decided to teach. They had me go to a lot of the education courses at the university and other different colleges. There was a group of us that would speak at them. And, I can't remember the woman's name at the university, she called me at home. I can't believe I forgot her name, she was a wonderful woman. And called me at home and asked me if that would be something I would want to go into, teaching. And she said, "You know if you hate what happened to you so bad, you could affect change." And I

thought I could, I could do a better job than what they did for me. And truly that's what I thought, and that's why I went into it. I knew I could do a better job, at my worst, than the teachers I had at Summit. I knew I could do a better job. Because at least I knew that my kids would know that I connected with them. And they do, to this day I'd be amazed if a kid didn't tell you, if I had a single student that didn't think I cared about them.

Most of my decision to teach was based on my experiences. My first year at the university, I remember they called my father who was a professor out there, and told him that they considered me a rabble-rouser or something. And he said, "Why yes, that would be my daughter." That was funny. He thought it was going to get me in trouble, and it didn't. In fact when the lady retired, that's why I can't believe I forgot her name, they had me interview one of her replacements. And that was funny because she said the same thing. They just needed shaken up a little bit.

My grandfather tried really hard to get me to go into geology because that was his profession. And I did give it somewhat of an effort because I did like studying rocks and things. But that wasn't going to be. That wasn't a happening thing for me. I can tell my kids about metamorphic changes and igneous rocks and stuff if they ask me, but that's about it. It helps a little bit in AVID. I like jewelry so I can tell them a little bit about stones.

What Teachers Should Know: Touch Each Kid

You have to touch each kid. I think I do, honestly. Because of my background, it's conscious in my mind all the time. I even still do things with the students every weekend. We have things that we do almost every weekend with the kids. I have my kids that are in Ramp-Up Math looking for college scholarships in their 8th grade year. They come in after school and work

with me. They need it. They just so desperately need it. These kids, at this school, they just don't have that.

Where at some district schools - middle schools - it's so expected that they're going to be going on to college, it's so expected that they're going to high school, it's so expected that it just becomes part of your life, like it was for me or maybe for you. It wasn't so much a conversation of you will be going to college. You just knew. It was just a part of your being. You knew that this was what was going to be. It was kind of a feeling in your home. But these kids don't have that. Most of them don't feel like they're going to be going on to high school. They certainly don't feel like they're going to finish high school. And to go onto college . . . you know.

A lot of people think the AVID program is elitist. But I don't see it that way. It just saves that many more kids. From when it started, from when I first came here we had three or four go on to AVID. We now have 30 or 40 going on to AVID. It really does come back to connecting to the kids. For those that fit in life is wonderful. Of course I think there is less and less of those kids that can keep up that façade or whatever that is. And I think most schools have something in place now for all kids. I really do. There's such a push to make schools connected. But at that time there wasn't.

Joan

Joan is a white female in her late thirties and is a middle school math teacher in the Hope City Public Schools. She had been teaching for 12 years at the time of her interview. The past three years have been in her current location. Joan began high school in a comprehensive setting on the West coast. Her family moved to Hope City in the fall of her senior year. She did not attend a comprehensive high school in Hope City but enrolled directly into Metro High School when told she did not have enough credits to attend Central High School. She had a chance to

66

change schools after earning enough credits but chose to stay at Metro. Joan did not attend college immediately upon completion of high school. At twenty-one she began taking courses at a community college and then finished her college education at a small private university.

Comprehensive High School Experience: Misfit at Many Schools

In the bigger high school I was probably a stand out, a lot, for a lot of different reasons. One, I'm very tall. I've been this tall since 6th grade. That doesn't lend itself well. I'm also, I'm just going to say it, I'm exceptionally bright. Like exceptionally bright. So when you're exceptionally bright that doesn't go well when you're in high school. They just don't tend to like those kinds of kids. Always knowing an answer, always being quick, that just didn't go over well. It just never has. And they've not known what to do with me because I was so exceptionally bright.

One year we moved to Texas, when I was in 3rd grade. And so, I have a brother who's 11 months older than I am. I'm a girl, he's a boy, obviously I was taller. Every time we'd go to a new school they always thought I was in the older grade. My 3rd grade teacher, I was taller than she was, she was really short. But they didn't know what to do with me. So they put me in the 6th grade class for reading. That didn't go over well. So I ended up going to the office and reading to the secretary out of a middle school book.

Then going from school to school, I've been to school all over. So by the time I graduated I had been to 13 schools. They never know quite what to do with you, because you don't have an opportunity to build up a rapport. They don't know what to do with you. It was kind of like that. So comprehensive high school and same thing with junior high, it was very difficult for that.

I didn't like the comprehensive high school. We had a lot of things going on at home. I really wasn't going to school that often. I just didn't care for it. I went to school in Anaheim. It is in California, it's a money school. I went to school with a lot of girls named Carrie, blond, just a lot of girls named Carrie, Amber, and Autumn. I just didn't find my niche there. Not having gone to school with these people in itself created a lot of that. I started junior high, 8th grade, I didn't start there, so I was there part of 8th grade and then I went on to 9th grade. That's tough when you've had kids who have gone to school together. But I was kind of used to it.

Alternative High School Experience: Finding a Place

I think at the alternative high school everybody was an odd duck for a different reason. I think they stood out for a variety of reasons. I graduated in 1991. So in 1991 Nirvana hadn't taken over so the grunge hadn't swung in yet. There were still kids who were gothic, and heavy metal, just didn't fit in for that reason. Then there were kids who were just very artistic and quiet. So just a variety of students where there wasn't a dominant clique where everyone aspired to be or if you were in that clique then – we're done.

People didn't know I was bright. We were on an individual plan. No one knew what anybody else was doing. Because it was small, I was able to edit the literary magazine, do the newspaper. Just really found a niche that I probably wouldn't have found at a comprehensive high school just because of the size. And not having been there as a freshman or a sophomore and then show up as a junior it would not have happened. I would not have been, there are just so many guidelines. So many things you have to meet, so many criteria that you have to reach. I never would have had that opportunity because they wouldn't know me, they wouldn't know my abilities. You're looking at 2000 kids, and we know who that group is, the popular kids. That group has already been determined and so that makes the difference.

I think because I could do my own thing, and you're not standing out. If you know what you're doing, not that I was applauded for it, but they're able just to hone in on my interests more, I think. It didn't matter that I hadn't gone to school with these kids since kindergarten, because no one had gone to school together since kindergarten. We're all coming together, it's not like we had all been together, and who the heck are you, kind of thing.

The pacing of the curriculum went fine. I managed to get through it with no problem. I was able to go on a close up trip to as a junior or senior to Washington D.C., so I did that. Pacing – it was a good time to be in school. The Berlin Wall was coming down when I was a junior, so it was very topical. Pacing wise it was fine for me because I could do the work. I may have not been able to start until like November 1st. I think that is right, now that I think back I think it might have been November, I was able to get the whole year done. I graduated on time, not early, drug it out. I did work studies and internships.

School Culture, Relationships, and Support: Different Kind of Thinker

I got along well with teachers; teachers liked me. That wasn't so much of an issue, teachers liked kids like me. I didn't misbehave, I got in trouble once as a freshman, because I wasn't very kind to a student teacher. Again, that was the result of my logic. I brought the wrong color of socks for P.E. It's dark, it's early, I have the wrong pair of socks – big whoppity-woo. She wouldn't let me dress out, she said, "You're not getting any points for the day," and she told me to walk the track. And so, I'm not getting any points, but I'm going to walk the track so I thought, "I don't think so." I went in and took my clothes off and got on my street clothes and went and sat on the bleachers. I'm thinking, "I'm not earning points, so lady you're crazy if you think I'm walking this track." So being a student teacher she was adamant that I was going to walk that track and I was adamant that I wasn't going to. She became belligerent and irate and I

was very calm. I told her, "Apparently you've decided to be a bitch today, it's not working for me and I'm not walking that track." And so I was sent to the office, that's the only time I was sent to the office.

I'm not a very friendly person, I'll be honest. I'm not anti-social but I worked so, I worked a lot, so I didn't really get that. There were a few people, every now and again, but not really, because like I said, I was busy working. I'm like that now. I'm at school, I work with these people, and I'm very friendly with them, and I like them a lot, we get along really well, but then I'm done. I worked, I had no homework. I was the kind of kid who could walk into a room and breathe and get a "C."

At a comprehensive school, I didn't feel like for me there were any support systems in place. You know, you come in, you need to do your work. If you don't do your work then there are issues, but if you do your work then we have no issues, kind of thing. I would say I'm maybe a different kind of thinker in some respects. I don't know if that was applauded at a comprehensive high school so much, as at an alternative. I was a very good kid, I never misbehaved. If I needed help I could tell the teachers. Terry, she's still teaching there, I could tell her, "Vocabulary sucks and I really just don't like it." She could look at me and go, "Yeah, probably not. Guess what you still have to do it," that kind of thing. Yvette is still there, she was the art teacher, Bob Green is still there, my science teacher.

Why Teach? Mostly Scheduling

I didn't go directly to college. I applied as a senior to four colleges. I was accepted to all four and had a full ride to all four. Then I took the ASVAB (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery) when I was a senior and I scored well enough that I was heavily recruited by the military. So I joined the Navy. I was set to deploy, it was like a year. I had a deferred

enlistment. Then I met my husband and then we got married, then we got pregnant. Then I didn't go into the Navy. So then I started college when my daughter was a year old. So I was 21 when I went back.

I don't know why I chose to teach. Teaching just lent itself well to having a family. I think that's kind of, you know, I thought of all the things that I could do, I chose teaching because of the flexibility with having a family. You know, I think it really had more to do with the scheduling than my own experience and like I said it'd be a good job with a family. But once I made that decision and going back and looking at the great teachers in my life and how that played a part with me, kind of sticking with that.

Those great teachers were all dedicated to the kids over the learning. The kids came first and the learning came second. I think every single one of them that's probably a key factor that they have, that learning is great and we really want you to learn, but really the most important thing is the kid, if the kid can come away with something or have a connection or anything, than that's just got to be good enough. It's kind of like you go into it, do no harm kind of thing. To me the kids come first and the learning is second – to me they all had that.

What Teachers Should Know: Kids Know More Than You Think

Kids are important and they are learning more than you think they are. I think sometimes we assume that they know nothing. Talking to Pam, the district math coordinator, she says, "You know they have seen this before, we're not giving them this foreign thing." It's not like we're sticking them on the moon and we're expecting them to do moon stuff, or whatever. They have had exposure and to just give them a little more credit.

I think a lot of times teachers take for granted what kids know how to do. They take for granted that kids know how to be social, and that kids know how to be kind to each other, and

that kids know how to interact with their peers, and that kids should be able to function as little human beings with each other. They take for granted that they know that. But when it comes to things like math or language arts, they assume they know nothing. In actuality it's the other way around. That's what I would say. The things that they're supposed to know, that you think they know those are the things that we really need to be teaching them. And the things we think they have no clue on – they know more than you think.

Suzanne

Suzanne is a white female in her late 20's and is a middle school language arts teacher in the Hope City Public Schools. At the time of her interview, she had been teaching for 5 years, the past two at her current location. Suzanne is married and has a young son and was expecting twins at the time of the interview. She began high school in a large comprehensive setting. She left this school during the first semester of her sophomore year to attend Metro. Suzanne completed high school a semester early, graduating in 2000. She took courses at a community college and then attended and graduated from a small private university in 2004.

Comprehensive High School Experience: Boring, Repetitive, Too Easy

I went from a Catholic school to Riverside High School, which was a big change anyway. I was doing most of the same work again. I had already done it, so I was very bored. And so I was doing the same thing I had been doing for years. It was nothing for me. I was bored, like I said, extremely bored by it. I had done it all already. I was having the same books I had before. It was very easy. School's always been kind of easy though so I've never had to really pay attention a lot. So going there and doing it again . . . it wasn't overly . . . I mean, I had some teachers I was close to at Riverside but it wasn't like Metro.

When I was at Riverside, there were 4 or 5 administrators. Freshmen and sophomores weren't supposed to go off campus to lunch. I went to lunch every day. They never even realized I was a freshman. They had no clue. That just shows how they didn't know their kids. I don't think they caught me until I got in trouble my sophomore year and they said, "You're a sophomore? You've been going to lunch for 2 years." So that just shows how they don't know.

I remember one time I was talking on a pay phone to my mom. I tend to talk very quickly and one of the principals came up to me and started talking Spanish to me. I said, "What are you talking about?" It was like just an assumption. Even here at the middle school where it's smaller, we know our kids pretty well. And over there they didn't have a clue. At Riverside it wasn't like any school, the kids called me by my last name.

The reason I went to an alternative school is, I really didn't get in trouble, I guess. A girl stole my coat at Riverside and we got into a fight because she stole my coat. She was in a gang, so if I came back someone else would want to fight type of deal. Riverside didn't like kick me out, but I was a big ball player so they wanted to freeze my grades for a semester so I could still play ball. But my mom thought I should be in school somewhere, so she sent me to Metro.

High school wasn't my thing anywhere, wherever I was at. I could have gone back to Riverside. I could have gone back the next semester but I didn't want to go. I wanted to stay where I was at, get myself done. Not have to mess with anything. I guess Riverside would have been OK if I wasn't bored. I look at these kids who say they're bored and I know how they feel. I've been there. I was a kid who didn't want to go to school every day because I had already done it. I was bored, why do I have to do it?

I was in bio-med at Riverside, advanced classes, but I was still bored. We did a lot of hands on. But for the most part I couldn't tell how it was preparing me to be in the medical field.

I wanted to be a doctor, I just didn't get it. There wasn't a connection for me of why am I doing all this extra? Because that was the only class I had to do homework in and stuff. Why am I spending all this time in this class and we're building contraptions to catch eggs, when I want to be a doctor?

Alternative High School Experience: Self-directed, Personal Education

I liked it a lot. Just because I could kind of do what I wanted. So when I went to Metro I was a sophomore. I already had enough credits that I didn't have to go all day because they wanted to keep me from graduating early so I could still play softball. I went from Riverside where I was doing stuff again to Metro where I was doing stuff again but could do it quickly and be done. In a traditional school you're in there for a semester and at Metro it is 60 days as long as your stuff's done. I was never in a class for 60 days and for most of them I was done after 15 or 20. So then I had 40 or 45 days to do whatever, essentially. So I only went half a day every day, when I was a sophomore on, which was kind of nice for me, obviously.

Another benefit of going there, I guess, was it being smaller, it didn't have exploratories, so I took multiple math classes. I took a lot more content-based stuff. And I took some classes my last year and thought these are going to be easy. And they were easy but I learned more from them than my other classes. It was like basic math, I don't even think it was basic math. It was real world math and we had to balance a checkbook and buy a house, and rent a house. And I've never rented. I haven't done that. I was like, I won't do that. Stuff that we would have never known I guess.

We called all our teachers by their first name with the exception of the principal. She always had her door open. You could always go in and talk to her if you needed to. There wasn't an assistant. So it was just her. And if she was gone one of the teachers took her place. All the

teachers knew every kid, even if they didn't have them, for the most part. All the kids knew the other kids. The teachers there, I guess there's not lecturing because there could be multiple students in multiple grades doing multiple things in one room. So you work at your own pace which was more my speed.

School Culture, Relationships, and Support: It Wasn't Clique

Just the atmosphere at Metro was different, I guess. Everybody knew everybody, everybody talked, it wasn't clique. The teachers were very friendly. It was a first name basis. They came to my wedding. A friend of mine, who is three years older than me, so he would have graduated when I was a freshman at Riverside, graduated from Riverside. He's a lawyer. He was already almost out of college when he came to my graduation. He was like if I would have known about this place. And just from seeing the graduation, with all of the teachers bawling. For some reason my class, a lot of us, had been there for three years, which was kind of odd. Usually it's a couple of months. But a lot of us had been there the whole time together. I was seeing the teachers breaking down, the kids breaking down. He was like, "If I had known about a place like this I would have went here in a heartbeat." I just don't think it's widely known.

It was very much like a family. My in-laws, because in high school I was with the same guy I'm married to, used to say I went to the bebe school. The bebe school, like the retard school. And then their daughter went there so it wasn't the bebe school anymore. When they came to my graduation they were like, "Oh maybe it's not that bad."

Like when I was at Riverside and started getting into trouble, which really wasn't so much me, I didn't get any kind of support. My parents were supportive obviously. They pretty much told my parents they were going to use me as an example. Because I had parents who cared, and I was white, and I wasn't in a gang. So that's what happened.

I mean I could have went to Riverside, but when I went to Metro I was very close with the office staff also. I worked in the office with them. You got supported educationally, but if there was a problem that kid was gone. Like the girl that stole my coat. She ended up applying there two years later and they didn't let her in because they knew I was there. There is an application process and it's based on how many credits you already have. So it's not how long you've been on the list, it's how close you are to graduating. The people that are closer get in first.

I didn't get a lot out of high school, other than relationships. Like I said, I'd only do my work for like 15 days. I was pretty close with some of my teachers. So I would just help them with their stuff because everything you did there was in packets. So I would help them make their packets, or help them get stuff ready. Like I said, a lot of people don't go there long. I started going there mid sophomore year which is pretty early. They were running out of classes because I had taken them all. So then they started making them up. It was independent study. They would just have me do whatever, which was fine.

Why Teach? I Miss Those Kids

I worked with the latchkey. I worked in the daycare over here at the church, and that latchkey program. I always wanted to be a doctor but then when I found out you couldn't just deal with trauma, like I only wanted to deal with people who came in with like their hand cut off, I didn't want to deal with a cold. When I found out you couldn't do that I was done. I just wanted to deal with the gruesome stuff. It was either that or I actually interned with the Kansas Bureau of Investigation and that was also through Metro I believe. It was some kind of program they had with the Kansas Bureau of Investigation. I really wanted to do that. It was like my second thing after a doctor. My first year of college I set it up for criminal justice and then I quit working at

the day care because it just didn't work with my schedule and I worked at a hotel at night. So I could do my homework while I was getting paid. It lasted like a semester and I was like, "I miss those kids," and then I switched.

At Metro I worked with this teacher, it was Social Studies. He would have me watch the videos and make up tests. I also worked at the daycare at school as a volunteer. I got credit for it. At graduation I got an award for that. I have done a lot of volunteer work. My dad is like 2nd in command for softball in the state. The Two Rivers Youth Club is his, the one out west. I've always been involved in youth sports. Mostly girl's sports obviously. He was also athletic director for St. John Catholic School. So I was always there, keeping score for him, doing something. If I had stayed at Riverside I wouldn't have had those experiences with children. I was a pretty big athlete and my parents rule was as long as she was playing in sports she didn't have to have a job. And so if I had stayed at Riverside I probably would have continued to play so it wouldn't have worked.

I've always taught middle school. I worked with kindergarten through 5th graders, mostly kindergarten. I wanted to be elementary, that's what I went to school for the whole way through. A couple of my classes, you had to go to a kindergarten room. I hated it. I kept trying to get them to let me do my student teaching in middle school and they wouldn't let me, even though I'm K-9. They wouldn't let me and they wouldn't let me. So I went to 5th grade because that's the closest I could get. The school I was at had SFA (Success for All), which is a reading program. Everybody has their own group, so it was 6 to 8 kids at one time. Every single teacher, including exploratory, instructional coaches, sometimes the secretary, everybody had their own group so they were very small. The principal had his own group and he was just swamped and he couldn't

do it. So he gave me his class and it was 1st graders. And I went, "No, no way." I love little kids, I love my little kid, but I don't want someone else's little kid.

What Teachers Should Know: Make Relationships

I would say to teachers, make those relationships with kids. I think they are starting to. I don't know if they still do it, but when my husband was a senior at Riverside they had to do the senior project. They had to have a mentor. It wasn't necessarily in their building, but a lot of them were. His mentor was one of the teacher's husband. He's still very close to them now. I even know this because with my own self. The kids that you make the relationships with, they're emailing you all the time. I get email from a girl I had at Mead, she'd be a freshman, all the time.

I'm very close to my kids, and it shows. People say, "why aren't your kids bad for you? They're bad in every other class." Well, because there's that respect I guess. I give them my rules and I stick to my rules, but I'm not mean about it or degrading. When I got pregnant these kids are very protective. You would think they are related to me, they are that protective of me. So I think if I didn't have that relationship, that wouldn't be happening. And they are so good. If I'm running out of the room, I've been very sick and running back and forth. It's like It's OK, we'll do our work. And they just sit there and do it. And it's every grade, 6th, 7th, or 8th grade. And my 8th graders go to my administrator almost every day and say send her home, send her home.

Angelina

Angelina is a Hispanic female about 30 years old and teaches middle school language arts in the Hope City Public Schools. She has been teaching for eight years, the last 4 in seventh grade. Angelina is married and the mother of a middle school aged son. Her career began as a third grade teacher. Angelina became pregnant her freshman year of high school. She left the

comprehensive high school to attend Metro. Angelina graduated high school in 1997 and from a small private university in 2001.

Comprehensive High School Experience: Drama among Peers, Unfocused

It was a lot bigger, a lot more students. The class sizes were big. There was not as much one on one help. There was just a lot of drama that kind of just went with you throughout the day in your classes and just kind of bothered you throughout the day. I didn't really have a focus in high school. I wasn't just looking towards graduation. At the regular high school I was more into just the drama. Whereas when I went to the alternative high school I knew I had a certain goal to meet. The comprehensive high school was just a lot bigger, a lot more things going on.

I felt that in some classes I was just a student. They didn't know my name. Some of the time I didn't know the teachers name. It took me a while to get to know the teacher. There were just a lot of students there. It just felt like they were presenting the lesson and then they were done, kind of like in college. You go to school, you get your lesson, and then you're done. I just felt there was more freedom to get into all the drama in classes. There were more students, like I said, and they would carry all their drama in and you would get tied up in all of that other than focusing on the teaching.

I just didn't want all the drama with the father of my baby. He was at the school. And he wasn't really ready to accept the situation. It was just the drama, all the other peer issues that go along with high school. I was ready to be done with it. I just wanted to focus on getting my schooling done. It was more the other areas, not necessarily my education.

Alternative High School Experience: Family-like and Accepting

I enjoyed being in the alternative school. Before I knew anything about it I thought, "oh they are bad schools for bad kids." When I was in high school, that first year, people that went

there you thought the worst. But when I went there for the interview, they were there to help me. I loved it. The class sizes weren't very big. The teachers were on a first name basis; they were really close to you. I still see my teachers. One of the teachers from the alternative high school was my college mentor. We still keep in contact. I just felt it was more family-like. The majority of you were there to get your education, and get it done. They were more accepting of you with your challenges or your situation. And they were just willing to help you, anytime you needed it, for anything.

It was kind of like a work at your pace curriculum. They gave you your syllabus. You knew what they wanted and you could go as quickly as you wanted or take as much time as you needed. And I liked that because I could get the stuff done and get it out of the way and then move on to the next class. And I really enjoyed that just because of the situation. I had a son. I had a job too, at the time. And so I was trying to balance all of that. And it allowed me to do that. I just really enjoyed being able to work at my own pace, see what I needed to do, and get it done instead of sitting through class lectures and going through the whole semester of waiting to get all the stuff done.

I think that knowing that being at the alternative high school, I was there to focus on my education. I had friends there, but it wasn't to the intensity of hanging out and doing all kinds of other stuff with them outside of school. I know I was there to get the work done. I think the way the teachers had, kind of, like a syllabus, what is expected of you. I could check off each item as I went through, knowing what I needed to complete and what was already done, helped me stay on track. I just felt that they were there to pick me up and push me out and say, "OK you are ready to go." Going to the alternative high school I was able to finish my junior and senior year in one year. So I graduated a year early and went on ahead to college that next year.

School Culture, Relationships, and Support: There to Listen

I felt I had support at the regular high school. I was close to the teachers. I was in a program called career pathways. It was at Hope High School. But it was a pretty intense program. So I felt close to the teachers. I just felt a lot of pressure from students. It was the influence of other people that distracted me. I knew the teachers were there to help me at the regular high school. I just didn't have my mind focused. I wasn't ready. I knew I had to graduate high school, but I was thinking, "Oh this is high school let's have fun."

I felt that the teachers at the alternative high school were more interested in me succeeding in life. They were there, for anything, whether school related or in your life, they were always there to listen to you. To kind of help you, walk through your problems. I think in general I had a lot of help from different places. I was part of a teen pregnancy group. It was a small group. There was a lady who showed us what we needed to do to succeed in life, just kind of kept us on track. I knew the principal was there to help. She only wanted the best for us. No playing around. She made it very clear the day I went for the interview. If you mess up once, you're going to be out, because we want kids to really work towards getting their education. I knew that wouldn't be a problem. I just felt closer to the teachers, just supported more in that way. It was smaller, close-knit, kind of like a family.

Why Teach? I Wanted to Help Others

I wanted to be a teacher when I was young, like four or five. I always thought it was art; you did art. So I had this dream of teaching and just doing art activities. But I knew when I was little that I wanted to teach. I had great teachers growing up. I think in the alternative high school, more so than Hope, I really enjoyed the teachers I had. I saw them helping students who had challenges and wanted to overcome them and get their education. And I just felt like I could

do the same thing if I worked hard enough and went to college; that I could help others who might be in my situation. So just knowing that they were caring enough to take the time to get to know me and my situation and help me work towards graduating. That kind of just told me that yeah, I can do that. I wanted to help others.

I felt like, working with this population of students, Title 1 kids, I grew up in the same neighborhood. I grew up just down the street. I grew up with a single parent. My mom raised us. I kind of know what they are going through in certain situations. So I feel like I can connect with them on that level. And I can understand where they're coming from, if they're having a bad day, and what they need. Like if they just want me to back off and need some time to cool off, then I'll give them that time to cool off. But I think just growing up in the same area helps me connect with them. They're definitely going through a lot more than what I had to go through, even being a single mom.

It's been rough. Last year would have been the first year I actually enjoyed teaching. All the other years I was just questioning it, thinking, "What am I doing, am I really getting through to these kids?" And last year I felt very successful with them. So it's been hard staying in teaching. But I don't know what else I would do. I mean this is what I've done so far for 8 years, it's what I know. You have those kids that make you feel good, that you know you are really helping them out. In middle school it's kind of few and far between. They're not as loving as they were in 3rd grade. It's something I've always wanted to do. I mean, that's what I know. This year's totally different than last year. I wish it was going like last year, but you learn something new. It's different every day. And that's what I like. You never know what's going to come at you that day.

I had a lot of family support; my mother was a big help. She's always pushed education in our life. And I had my son and I knew I couldn't play around. I didn't have time to play around anymore. I've got to get serious. I just wanted to get my life going. Start college as soon as possible, just knowing that I had my son there, and that I needed to take care of him. I knew the statistics of single parents. Teenage moms don't usually finish college or have a degree. I really wanted to show myself and my family that I could still do it with having a son.

What Teachers Should Know: Get to Know Your Students

Get to know your students, not just their name. Get to know something about them, other than just their name. Let them know that you care. That you're just not there teaching them and then you're done, that you care about them and how they succeed through school and life. I know it's hard to get to know every single student and know things about them, just with the kids I have. There weren't very many of those kinds of teachers that really got to know me. I was in their class for the nine weeks and then I moved on.

One thing we do here, as teachers, we kind of mentor kids. I think if we mentored more of the kids that weren't such a behavior problem, maybe shy or just unsure of themselves, and kind of helped them, just get to know them and talk through things with them. I think that would have helped, like if a certain teacher mentored so many kids. I know that's extra work and I know it's extra time, but just knowing there's someone you could go to, turn to whenever you had a question. You just weren't lost, you know, didn't know what to do. Because you could go talk to the counselor, but he has, you know, how many kids to deal with? So just something like that where each teacher is paired up with someone.

Similar, Yet Different Stories

The stories told by the six participants illustrate that some students who are not successful in a comprehensive high school can still experience success in an alternative setting. The reasons for their lack of success in the comprehensive high school were different though their success in the alternative high school seemed to follow a similar pattern. To these former students, the alternative school had stronger support systems, a more caring and family-like atmosphere, and teachers who built relationships with students. When given the chance to send a message to educators each participant gave similar advice: make connections, touch each student, and build relationships.

School experiences did have an impact on their decision to teach for several of the participants. Melissa wanted to prove to her former teachers at the Hope High School that she could be successful and teach. Leah knew she could do a better job than the teachers she had at Summit High School. Suzanne had opportunities at Metro with work study programs that allowed her to experience working with children. She would not have at those experiences at Riverside High School. Angelina wanted to help others as the teachers at Metro had helped her. Jessica and Joan did not relay that either school was a factor in their decision to teach. Jessica expressed that she always knew she wanted to be a teacher. She just did not want to do what she needed to do to go to college. Metro did help her make the right choices to reach her goal of teaching. Joan's decision was based on scheduling. Teaching lent itself to raising a family. The participants' stories are very different, yet commonalities exist because they did share similar experiences in their high school years.

CHAPTER 5

INFORMAL GROUP CONVERSATION

The informal group conversation was conducted at one of the schools in which two of the participants are teaching. It was difficult to find a time for everyone to meet, because, as the teachers described they are busy and work long hard hours to help children be successful. Only three of the participants were able to come together for this conversation: Joan, Jessica, and Melissa. The purpose was to probe deeper into their experiences to see what they had in common. The participants were similar in that they first attended a comprehensive high school but were not successful. They then attended and graduated from an alternative high school, graduated from college, and are now teachers in an urban school district. Their differences lie in their personal stories of what led them to the alternative setting.

The group conversation was essentially free flowing with some guidance from the researcher. Initially each person identified herself and briefly told her story. The discussion then revolved around topics such as empowerment, student voice, the differences in the two high school settings, the bureaucracy of the school system, and if the culture of comprehensive high schools can be more like that of an alternative high school. As found in the individual narratives the flexibility, differentiation and pacing of Metro High School played a large role in their success, as well as the teachers' ability to build relationships. The bureaucracy of the comprehensive high schools contributed to their lack of success there and even teachers' inability to build strong relationships with students.

The following section is written as a dialogue. Although ground rules were not formally set up before the conversation, participants were told they could speak at any time, there would not be an order of commenting on an issue. They were also assured the conversation was

confidential and they only needed to share what was comfortable for them. All participants were very respectful of each other. Everyone had ample opportunity to speak on every topic. The transcript of the conversation was shared with the participants in order in ensure reliability.

Flexibility in the Alternative School Builds Empowerment

Joan: I think I know that in that empowerment piece when some kids did come in [to Metro] they weren't doing very well in math there was that flexibility where they could table math and build their success in other areas. I think a lot of times in high school they don't do that. You are going to do x, y, and z, regardless of your ability, regardless of your thoughts, your feelings. So I think Metro, back to the empowerment, it builds that. We want you to be successful, let's try this. We are going to table what you are not doing so well in and come back to it. I think that goes right along with the ownership piece.

Melissa: Yes

Jessica: I agree

Joan: Metro had flexibility, just working at your own pace. That just builds in flexibility. Working at your own pace you can have more movement between subject areas. Where at the comprehensive high school you'll have x amount of time at this, x amount of time at that and it will be daily.

Jessica: I think the expectations for classes were outlined smaller amounts. I remember on the folder it was listed like unit 1and then what I had to do. You could work backwards, forward. It didn't matter - I did what I did. When I didn't know something that's when the teacher was available to sit down and help because some people did get it. I don't remember ever at Metro that somebody stood in front and talked. I had a folder and if I didn't know it they came over. But they had smaller classes, not everyone is in that class because if she didn't need it she's not

in that class. She's in a different one. Sometimes there'd only be like 4 of us and in some there'd be like 25. But in a regular high school there's a good 30, lots bigger classes. And it didn't matter - we were all doing lesson A. If I didn't get it they're not going to know.

Differentiation at Metro: The Harder I Worked the Earlier I Got Out

Joan: You are doing your own thing at Metro. So the level of work I was doing, the person next to me didn't know what level I was on. So it wasn't like wow you're really doing that, and I'm doing this. That seemed to help. You are more accepted. Because if you are the smartest kid in the class you could be the freakish kid in the class, because you tend to be that way. Metro took that away. You were doing your thing, they were doing their thing, and there was no crossing. And those low kids, nobody knew. So we were all based on our personality. When you get into high school, it's very tracked and you know who's who.

Jessica: I'd say it's all about incentive. You got to work at your own pace at Metro. You get something done you go to the next one. You knew you didn't have to go all 9 weeks. So it was an incentive, the harder I worked the earlier I got out. You're recognized for what you do. In a regular class in a comprehensive high school you can sit there and they don't know if you do your work or not. In the regular class, I started to fall behind because I'm just a number to them. But once I have a name and a folder they checked and that made me accountable. They said, "you can waste your time and just sit in this class or you can work". And I thought, "Wow, the harder I work the sooner I get out."

Joan: If you are really good in one area you are not going to need all that extra support. So if you are really good in math, it's not necessarily going to take you 90 minutes to get the same concept that it might take someone who is lower. Then someone who's lower in math may be absolutely fine in language arts so they may need no time in language arts but extra time in math, it kind of

balances out. It was needs-based. Teachers at Metro were differentiating before that was the buzz-word.

Melissa: I would say the teachers at Metro give all the students responsibility. You are responsible for your own work, getting it done. The earlier you get it done the earlier you can leave. It was kind of differentiated. Like she said, we didn't have all the exact same work. It gave us independence.

Jessica: I think that's why they have success with alternative schools. You can get in there, work at your own pace and get out. You don't have to drag it out. Other schools they drag it out all 7 or 8 hours a day.

Building Relationships: I Saw them as a Person

Jessica: Everyone that I can think of that I connected with I saw them as a person. And so I try every day to tell the kids something personal about me. Like something my son did, or something I'm going through at home, or something from the car ride, because they go through the same things. If they see me as a real person and not just as the person they have to listen to, the more likely I can feed them out of my hands. If I can earn your trust then I'll go to you. It's like they lead you to the war zone and then drop you off. The more that you can be not seen as like a statue and earn their trust the more they can see you as a person. They have to see you as important like their mother or pastor at church not just a lady who yells at them. Those are the teachers whose class I wouldn't cause trouble in because I liked them.

Joan: I think when they see you as a person they perceive you as teaching them as a person as opposed to teaching math. There was one teacher at Metro, couldn't stand her because she was teaching history. I felt like all the other teachers were teaching me. There was no connection with this woman. I think we all felt that.

Jessica: We were important to them at Metro.

Melissa: My best relationship was the journalism teacher at Hope High School. So it was an elective not like math or reading or science. I guess he was more like me, he related to me. I really liked writing. He was just real. He didn't just stand up there and talk to us. He gave us our assignment and we did it, kind of like Metro. You have this, this is what you need to get done, these are the stories that need to be covered. He was just real, I guess.

Jessica: If you don't build the person in first I could care less. When I think of the kids I get today, the troubled ones, I get so many of them because I have the reputation now for making a connection on a personal level with the troublemakers.

Melissa: I think they go in there and think, "she's one of us."

Jessica: We watch all these movies about successful teachers and I thought "what do they all have in common?" They all told their life story, they all were a person to the kids and academics came second. Why are they famous now? What did they do that we don't do. Because they were all a person, that was kind of like the settings that Metro had, not the comprehensive high school. But I do think they would get a little further if they just took 10 minutes of not doing academics, like 40 minutes academics and 10 minutes get to know your teacher. Because every one of those movie people got to know their kids and look at the success they had.

Voice: Ownership Comes With Responsibility

Jessica: I don't know if it's voice or leeway in what's expected. It wasn't like I went to Metro and said "this is all I'm going to do," so my voice wasn't really heard. I still had work that had to be completed to graduate. It was more like "this is what you need to know, can you show me that you know this, this is what you don't know, so this is what you need." They didn't waste your time. If you knew it, you finished the assignment and you were done.

89

Joan: The voice came in, in that you know the finish line. You know every single step what it's going to take to get to that finish line. Your voice comes in when you think, "Well I can do the first 4 legs of this and be absolutely fine."

Jessica: I wouldn't agree with the word voice. I think I was guided and we worked together to get there. It didn't matter if I wanted to or not. But the incentive at the end was to get out.

Joan: The ownership to do the work, we just didn't have the behavior issues. You're not being picked on for being too low or too high. And you were responsible for your own actions. That ownership that comes with responsibility, we just didn't have behavior problems, like fights or anything. It wasn't a volatile environment like in the comprehensive high schools.

Melissa: I don't remember that happening. We didn't have fights or arguing.

Comprehensive High School: We Leave a Lot of Kids (and Teachers) Behind

Jessica: The setting at Metro is what made it more productive. That's what made it what it was. You could probably take teachers from the comprehensive high school and put them at Metro and they would be like the teachers we've described. It was how it was set up. They have no leeway at the regular schools because they're doing just like we're doing. I have to get this and this done. My name is on those state scores. No one else's name shows up. So they judge your teaching. I think they did the best they could it's just the foundation wasn't set up the same so for children like us they didn't have much of a chance to reach us because of the requirements. I think the high school teachers are busting their butts to get people to graduate.

Joan: I think we were all in high school way before No Child Left Behind. So when we were going to school that top down ridiculousness wasn't there. I remember I was teaching when Kansas chose the test for No Child Left Behind. I thought how ridiculous to choose a test that we can't pass now. And that was prior to this influx of students who are English Language Learners

90

(ELL). They are doing the best they can do. They are learning language while they are trying to go to school. And they're still held to that standard. That was before that influx. They choose a test, that predominately the white kids, let's just put it out there, that test the best, couldn't pass. I'm glad I don't go to school now. I'm glad I don't have these pressures on me, and you ladies in elementary, my word, what you are trying to accomplish.

Melissa: Teachers are working hard.

Jessica: I don't know one teacher in this building who's not working hard.

Joan: I think that rate is the most important factor. We as a district are ignoring rate. You can expect a kid to make a 1.25 grade level gain. So if they come to you and they're 4 grade levels behind. When they get to high school that's where we break them. Those are the kids that need shop, that need P.E., that need to have art and we take it from them and cram math down their throat. Or we take something else from them and give them more reading. I think that's where the comprehensive high school is messing up the most. It's by taking the hook those kids have that keep them in school. And we budget cut and there's no more drivers' education. So why are these kids coming to school?

Jessica: We leave a lot of kids behind because of that.

Joan: I think we're also leaving behind the kids that can do the work. You're wasting their time. You are losing all of their buy-in. You know – this is how I'm supposed to be, this is how I'm supposed to learn. I already know this. You lose the buy-in from the higher kids. And the lower kids they're like, "Are you kidding me?" They are constantly trying to catch that bus.

Jessica: They're worn out.

Joan: They're running to catch the bus that all on-grade level kids are on. They can never catch it. We keep throwing stuff at them. Well you've got to take this test, you've got to be here. I'm

sorry, we've had 21 days, you haven't mastered this in 21 days, just keep running. They spend their time running and chasing and trying to do catch up and they never can get there.

Federal and State Education Policies: Taking Decisions Out of the Teachers' Hands

Joan: There's no way you are going to take a comprehensive high school and give it the feel of Metro because of all the state and federal mandates. So for those kids that need Metro I hope they stay open.

Melissa: I don't think there is anything the teachers can do. I think it's out of the teachers hands. Because of the scope and sequence, the pacing guides, the number of students in the classroom - factors that teachers have no control over. I think that those things make the biggest difference.

Jessica: There's too many kids.

Joan: From a standpoint with scope and sequence being what it is and the ability to meet this test when we are supposed to meet it, this unit can only be this many days long, you only have 3 wiggle days. It's not so much in comprehensive schools that kids aren't important to them, they really are. But they are mandated so much as to where they have to be at a certain point in time that it's just a time issue. Though I would like every single kid to be that important to me, I have a scope and sequence I have to follow. I have directives from downtown that I have to meet. So that's going to come first.

Joan: At Metro it's flip-flopped. They have directives from the district, however the timeline to meet it and the expectations for the kids to meet those directives is very different. So it's a flip flop of priorities.

Commonalities in Participant Stories

The presentation of the stories gathered from the informal group conversation give some evidence that alternative high schools are successful with students who do not find success at a

traditional high school. These former students and current teachers attributed a lot of their success at the alternative high school to the flexibility permitted in instruction, which allowed for greater differentiation. Each participant reported the ability to work at their own pace and complete work as quickly as possible or as slowly as necessary at Metro, whereas at the comprehensive high school completion of work was tied to time, such as a complete semester. The knowledge that they, as students, could work at their own pace and finish school early offered a degree of empowerment for them. Participants felt being held accountable and taking personal responsibility in this aspect of their high school work helped them to be successful.

Participants felt teachers at alternative high schools are able to build strong relationships with students because of smaller class sizes and flexibility in pacing of instruction. Conversely, comprehensive high schools, because of traditions as well as federal and state mandates, do not provide enough time for teachers to build strong relationships with students. Many rules and regulations create a classroom culture focused more on the content to be taught than the students the teacher is teaching. Participants acknowledge that teachers at the comprehensive high school were constrained by the bureaucracy. That setting did not allow the opportunity for caring relationships or the time to meet the needs of students who were at-risk.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusions, Implications, and Researcher Reflections

This chapter includes the conclusions, implications of the research and personal reflections gathered from this study of six teachers who were graduates of an alternative high school. This research lends support to previous studies about the significance of the organization and culture of a high school and the importance of positive relationships between students and teachers (Cushman, 2003; Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; Terzian, 2004). A supportive school culture has a positive effect on teacher influence with students. Teachers have a greater impact on students when the culture as a whole is one of respect and fairness. Students in the previous research indicated that teachers do make a difference (Daniels & Arapostathis).

This study is consistent with previous studies on students who were unsuccessful in a comprehensive high school and then were successful in an alternative school. Students from the alternative schools felt more cared for and fairly treated. It was a more nurturing environment. The alternative schools were smaller and had a more community like atmosphere (Lever, et al., 2004; May & Copeland, 1998). Teachers at these schools were more involved with students as mentors and role models. They had positive attitudes and provided more individual attention (Leiding, 2008; Spear, 2002).

Previous research found that empowered students were able to succeed academically. Empowerment is achieved when the school climate is one in which all feel safe to speak and their voice is heard. Marginalized students struggle with empowerment in the comprehensive high school (Delpit, 1995; Weis & Fine, 2005). Alternative schools offer more choice and students are given more responsibility for decisions involving their own education. Students were allowed to take ownership in their learning. The intensity and pace of instruction was

94

individualized (Christle, et al., 2007; Gallagher, 2002). Previous research on resilience was also supported by the current study. Resilient students had positive relationships with adults (Hauser, et al., 2006).

The decision to become a teacher often comes from experiences in a students' own life. This decision may be based on either positive or negative experiences (Olson, 2009; Watt & Richardson, 2007). Most teachers enter the profession for altruistic reasons, not materialistic concerns. This study of teachers who were graduates of alternative high schools corroborates the research on motivations to teach. Joan is the only participant who chose to teach for other reasons.

<div align="center">Conclusions</div>

Framing this research were organizational culture, bureaucracy, and empowerment. The organization of the comprehensive high schools has failed many students because of the rigid standardized program and the lack of differentiation (Deschenes, et al., 2001). The bureaucracy of comprehensive high schools also fails students because of a lack of autonomy in decision making for students and teachers. Regulations and rules do not always take into account individual differences (Bohte, 2001; Rocha & Hawes, 2009). Empowerment of students is not typical in a comprehensive high school. Trusting relationships with adults assist students to become empowered to take control over their own learning (Rees, 2003; Tomlinson, 2008).

The descriptions of the participants' experiences in the comprehensive high school correspond with the research on organizational culture, bureaucracy, and empowerment. Participants had very different experiences in the alternative high school than they did in the comprehensive high school. The organization of the alternative school was conducive to individualization and differentiation of the educational program for each student. The

<div align="center">95</div>

participants reported the ability to work at a pace advantageous to their own needs. The alternative high school students had to earn the same credits to graduate as the students in the comprehensive high school there was less bureaucratic control in the alternative high school as to how and when those credits had to be earned. The climate was less rigid and controlled because of the more relaxed atmosphere. Strong relationships with adults in the alternative high school, was noted as an important factor in empowering the participants to make good choices in order to succeed in school.

Encountering Bureaucracy in the Comprehensive High School

Each of the six teachers encountered the bureaucracy inherent in comprehensive high schools. Standardized schedules and curriculum that was not flexible in meeting their needs was an innate characteristic of their time in the comprehensive high school. Melissa felt she was wasting her time, because Hope High School required her to sit in a study hall for an hour and a half. She wanted to work at her own pace so that she could leave school early to work. Melissa also had usually completed her assignments and had nothing to do for long periods of time. Jessica was bored. The comprehensive high schools' curriculum did not take into account her interests. Leah faced a racist, very conservative system that did not attempt to reach students with different cultural or ethnic backgrounds. Joan was a bright student who was not challenged by the mandated curriculum of the comprehensive high school. Suzanne, as well, was not challenged. The importance of sports in the bureaucracy of the comprehensive high school was apparent in her story. The school system did all they could to keep her in compliance with attendance laws so that she could play softball, while diminishing the importance of her education. Angelina shared that the large size of Hope City High School allowed more freedom to find trouble. Teachers followed procedure, taught the lesson, and did not have enough

opportunities to get to know the students because of the large class sizes and educational mandates.

Like most public bureaucracies, a comprehensive high school has carefully formulated rules and procedures. It can be impersonal and authoritative (Burns, 1978). Impersonal relationships with teachers and staff contributed to the participants' lack of success in the comprehensive high school. The participants all shared that the teachers in the comprehensive high school did not get to know them on a personal level. Melissa shared that there were so many kids that teachers would not even know their names. In Suzanne's story, Riverside staff did not realize she was a freshman and thought she spoke Spanish, assumptions made because staff had not taken time to get to know her. In Leah's experience at a conservative Summit High School, black students were treated differently than white students. She charged, "They were unaccepting and didn't have to accept."

The comprehensive high school had more rules and stricter schedules than the alternative high school. Melissa and Jessica both talked about the strict rules at the comprehensive high school. Jessica described the discipline policies as "zero tolerance." She felt that once she had done something wrong she was continually blamed. Even today when Jessica sees a former teacher from Chance High School they seem uncomfortable talking to her. Former teachers and administrators who are now Jessica's colleagues still hold grudges against her, still seeing her as the rebellious, trouble making teenager. Though the rules were reported to be stricter at the comprehensive high school, they also seemed to be flexible depending on the person breaking the rule. Suzanne and Leah both conveyed inequities in discipline. Suzanne was treated differently in receiving consequences for her behavior because she was an athlete. Leah was treated differently because she was white.

Schedules were rigidly set in the comprehensive high school. Everything was time based. They had so much time to finish an assignment otherwise they failed: or they had too much time and became bored with not enough to do. A prescribed amount of time was established to fit in all the requirements. Students could not work ahead and should not fall behind. Those who finished early still had to attend study hall. Melissa shared that study hall was such a waste of time that she would end up leaving school and would not return for the remainder of the day.

The participants, in their current role as teachers, pointed out how the education policies of today have contributed to an already rigid bureaucratic school system. Joan and Melissa spoke about content area scope and sequence and how these guides dictate how many days, how many lessons, can be spent on a particular unit or skill. Melissa stated, "because of the scope and sequence, the pacing guides, the number of students in the classroom – factors that teachers have no control over. I think those things make the biggest difference." Consequently, teachers have been disempowered to make professional decisions about curriculum and students.

The bureaucratic make up of public education includes national and state departments of education, state and local boards of education, superintendents, and building principals. These are the leaders who mandate rules, procedures, and policies. These leaders are not usually involved in the everyday act of educating a classroom of students (Bohte, 2001; Ferguson, 1984). Participants in the group informal conversation agreed that national, state, and district mandates these leaders have established, have contributed to an educational system that does not individualize or accommodate for academic differences. Teachers are accountable for student performance on state tests. They are responsible for following state standards and district pacing guides. A certain amount of days are set aside for teaching each concept. Participants felt that after so many days working on a skill they had to move on even if a student has not successfully

learned that skill. Joan described these students as "running to catch the bus." They have not mastered a skill but the teacher must move on and the students spend the remainder of their schooling trying to catch up.

The clients in a bureaucracy are expected to conform to the structure of the system (Marion, 2002; Pinchot & Pinchot, 1993). Students, the clients in a school, are to conform to the structure of the school's schedule, rules, and environment in general rather than the school responding to their individual needs. Group conversation participants all believed that teachers are working hard and doing the best they can. Jessica shared that teachers did not have much of a chance to reach "children like us" because of all the requirements. Large comprehensive high schools are not able to respond to the individual needs of students. Rather, schools are taking away the courses that keep students in school such as art, shop, and P.E. and requiring them to take an extra load of the courses in which they are not successful. Joan asks, "So why are these kids coming to school?"

These teachers experienced firsthand the impersonal bureaucracy that is characteristic of large comprehensive high schools. The factor referred to most often by the participants for their lack of success in the comprehensive high school was the size of the school. Participants felt the teachers did not know them because the class size was too big. Teachers did not know their name or anything about them. There was not enough time or attention given to each student. Participants reported feeling like a number or feeling alienated, as if they did not belong. Joan reported that teachers did not know her abilities because of the school's size. She would have never been able to find her niche in the comprehensive high school and get involved in extracurricular clubs such as editing the school newspaper. It always seemed to be the same group that was involved in everything, somewhat pre-determined.

Experiencing the Alternative High School as Anti-Bureaucracy or Empowering

Important components of an organization with a healthy culture are consensus on goals, agreement on how to reach those goals, and consensus on remediation if goals are not met (Schein, 2004). This was apparent in the pacing of the curriculum at the alternative school. Participants in the study reported they had more flexibility in how and when they completed their courses at the alternative high school. Assignments needed to finish a certain curriculum were set up individually. Students were allowed more creativity, more choices on how they might complete an assignment. All six participants were able to work at their own pace, many finishing courses quicker than they would have at the comprehensive high school. Work was set up individually for each student in a folder. Leah shared, "work was made up specifically for you. This was what your work was. If you were bright and independent enough you could go as high as you wanted." If remediation was needed a teacher would step in and work with the student. This was critical for student success.

In the less rigid alternative high school the individualized schedules allowed students to work to earn money as they finished high school, which was particularly significant for Angelina, a young, single mother. They also had the opportunity to be involved in work-study programs, which allowed them to have experiences in different career fields. It was more open because of the issues students had going on in their lives, from pregnancy to working, because they lived on their own. The pace also afforded five of the participants the chance to graduate from high school early and begin attending college.

The culture of the alternative high school was one of personal connections rather than the impersonality of a bureaucracy. It was a more informal environment. Students and teachers were on a first name basis. Students believed the teachers cared about them and they felt close to their

teachers. In each narrative, the school was described as having a family type atmosphere. This type of atmosphere created a culture of acceptance. Angelina felt the teachers at the alternative high school were more accepting of students and their challenges. Teachers did not just know their own students' they knew every student in the school. Leah described the teachers as having a different gift than teachers in a comprehensive high school. They had a more compassionate nature and were dedicated to working with troubled students. Teachers at the alternative school were more like mentors. For Jessica the true difference in her experiences in the two high schools is in the response she receives when encountering a former teacher. The teachers from the alternative high school are thrilled to see her and visit with her, which is not true of the teachers from the comprehensive high school. The teachers at the alternative high school are happy for Jessica's pursuit of a teaching career, whereas the comprehensive high school personnel seem almost resentful.

Rules were a little more relaxed at the alternative high school. It was smaller, thus closer relationships were formed between teachers and students. Melissa believed it was less strict there because it was "more like a family and not a boot camp." The individualized program created a higher level of student engagement, which according to Jessica reduced power struggles between students and teachers and left no time for misbehavior. Leah's experience with rules and discipline at the alternative school could be described as equity in action. Every student was treated with respect, received appropriate consequences for behavior, and then helped to change their behavior. She said, "it was equitable for you." This was not the same experience she had at Summit High School.

The mandates concerning requirements for graduation from federal and state education agencies are still present in the alternative high schools. The difference lies in the flexibility in

how and when those requirements can be met. Metro had much more flexibility than the comprehensive high school. Students worked at their own pace and received assistance from teachers as needed. Rather than the content of the curriculum and time-frame of when it is to be mastered being the most important to a teacher, the students feel they are the most important. Joan described this as a flip-flop in priorities from the comprehensive high school to the alternative high school. "They (comprehensive high school teachers) have directives from the district, however the timeline to meet it and the expectations for the kids to meet those directives is very different. So it's a flip-flop of priorities."

Relationships Build Empowerment

Empowerment is a process where people gain control over issues that have meaning to them. When an individual succeeds in reaching a goal he or she is often inspired to achieve more (Alsop, et al., 2006). Empowerment is difficult for a person to realize if she or he feel they have suffered injustice. The participants in this study gained empowerment through their attendance at an alternative high school. Trusting relationships allowed them to take control of their own learning and choices for their future.

Empowerment for these six teachers was achieved because of the difference in the cultures of the alternative high school as compared to the comprehensive high school. Participants were able to develop trusting relationships with adults at the alternative school, where teachers were reported to be more caring, more family like. Joan believed it was not so hard to fit in there. Everyone was really an "odd duck" in some way. There was not a dominant group of students that stood out as privileged or a group that was more alienated. Everyone found a way to belong. Suzanne stated that you could be friends with a skater person, a gangster, or a pregnant girl all at the same time. The culture was one of acceptance. They felt the teachers

loved their job, and as students, they felt loved. They sensed morale was different at Metro, these former students experienced a sense of happiness they did not feel at the comprehensive high school.

When asked about what kinds of support systems were in place at both schools participants recalled the counselors at the comprehensive high schools. Several of the participants mentioned a teacher they had liked or respected. However, the counselor just was not enough. At the alternative school, the support system was wider in that it involved the entire staff. The teachers were there for issues beyond academics. They were there to offer guidance on life issues and to help students succeed. Suzanne said she could see the support, - could see that they really wanted her in school. It was not just teachers who offered support. Other staff such as those in the office, were there as well to help students. The principals were more involved with the students than the comprehensive high school principals. Students had to interview with the principal before being accepted to the alternative high school. Participants believed the principal took an active role in keeping them on track to graduate.

Organization and Empowerment Affect Decision to Teach

Experiences in high school affected these women's decision to teach in two different respects; the teachers they had at the two different high schools and the experiences and support available at the alternative high school. The teachers at the alternative high school were mentors and role models. Participants witnessed their caring nature with challenging students, including themselves, and felt the desire to help others in the same situation. Their teachers gave them the confidence to know they could go to college and be successful. The close relationships established through their experiences in the alternative high school allowed them to achieve the power of control over their future. Participants named teachers at the alternative high schools,

rather than those at the comprehensive high schools, when asked if they keep in touch with their former teachers. There was a relationship between them that ignited a desire in most participants to dedicate their own lives to working with challenging students. There was also a negative aspect to the choice to become a teacher. The thought that they could not do any worse than the teachers they encountered at the comprehensive high school. One participant shared that she could do a better job at her worst.

The organization of the alternative high school, because of the self-pacing curriculum and intensive support, was conducive to experiences that led participants to teaching. Just having the success of graduating from high school led one participant to college. Jessica believes that if she had remained at the comprehensive high school, she would not have attended college. By senior year, because of the teachers at Metro, she realized college was possible. The teachers at the alternative high school were instrumental in helping students work towards graduation and make plans for college. Work-study programs allowed Suzanne to work at daycares and latchkey programs. That experience shaped her decision to become a teacher. Leah was asked to speak many times in education courses at local state and private universities. She was able to connect with a woman from a large state university who encouraged her to go into teaching. The woman conveyed to Leah that her horrible experiences in the comprehensive high school would help her affect change.

Joan's motivation was different. She initially was interested in joining the Navy but decided on teaching as it fit the lifestyle of raising a family. As she looked back though, she realized that the great teachers she had in her life did play some role in her decision to teach. Angelina has struggled some with her decision to teach. She described her first few years of teaching as rough and struggles to stay in teaching. She continually asks herself, "What am I

doing? Am I really getting through to these kids?" Yet, she still enjoys the experience of discovering new learning each year.

Learning from the Experiences of Former At-Risk Students

A clear message given by all participants is the importance of seeing each student as a person, even overriding the content of every lesson. Building relationships with students is the most significant endeavor a teacher assumes. Participants recommended that teachers get to know something about their students. Teachers need to see students as people, not just a body sitting in the classroom that needs taught the content. It is essential that students know their teacher cares about them, not just told they are cared about, also shown.

The significance of students having a voice was also an important message for teachers. Students need to know that their opinion matters and that they should have some choice in how they learn. The participants in this study reported having choice in the pace they worked, projects, presentations, and work-study. They were on an individual plan, work was put together especially for each particular student. Not only did they have choices of the nature of their work, they were also treated as adults in charge of their own education. If a student missed school she was called, not her parent. Students were told it was their decision. They had ownership of their education.

Implications

Comprehensive high schools were designed with a noble purpose in mind, to educate all students according to their need in one place. Students from all backgrounds would come together at school to learn to live in a democratic society. Though the plan was to educate all, students who struggled did not always get the help they needed (Austin, 1953; Wenrich, 1990). Alternative high schools have become an option for students who struggle behaviorally and/or

105

academically in the comprehensive high school. These schools are often thought of as an opportunity for a student to have a second chance (Leiding, 2008).

Reflecting on the theoretical framework of organizational culture, bureaucracy, and empowerment this study focused on what graduates of an alternative high school had to say about their experiences in the comprehensive and alternative settings and how those experiences influenced them to become teachers. Their stories presented a powerful message to teachers and administrators in the public schools. Several implications for practice portrayed in their stories can be identified: (a) not all students are successful in comprehensive high schools. That is not to say these schools are deficient. According to one report 76% of students do graduate from them (Casey, 2000). Practitioners must learn strategies to connect with the remaining 24% of students; (b) the small size of the alternative schools made a difference in the lives of the participants in the study. Large schools need to find ways to create a feeling of closeness and a family like atmosphere regardless of the size of the school; and (c) whatever the form a high school may take, students need to have a voice in their own education.

Build Relationships and Connect with Students

It was evident among the six teachers' narratives how difficult it is for a teacher to teach students with whom they have not developed a relationship. The difficulty is highlighted even more when working with at-risk students (Chubb & Moe, 1988; Cushman, 2003). Students will be less disruptive and more engaged academically if teachers know them well enough to know their unique needs and learning styles. They are less likely to drop out of high school when relationships with adults in the school are positive. Melissa did not want to miss school when she attended Metro because she knew that she would be missed. Jessica said, "They [Metro

teachers] were always excited when you walked through the door." Schools are less effective when teachers do not know students well (Cotton, 2001; Lee & Burkham, 2003).

Students offered advice on how teachers can get to know them better and develop positive relationships (Cushman, 2003, 2005; Olson, 2009). Teachers need to pay attention to the challenges in their students' lives and, know the commitments students have outside of school. Students often have jobs to support themselves and their families. Knowing this would give teachers a better idea of the obstacles students face each day. Angelina stated, "They [Metro teachers] were more accepting of you with your challenges or your situation." Students ask that a teacher accept them as who they are; that they are patient when students struggle with a task. Teachers have the power to either transform or damage lives. Teachers who reach out to students, engage them in learning, and let them know they are worthwhile are the ones who make a difference (Gross & Mitra, 2009). According to Leah, Metro teachers would make an effort to understand what students were experiencing each day. Teachers asked, "So what is going on today, Leah? What is happening to you"?

Building a respectful and trusting school culture is crucial to developing positive relationships. Students need to believe that teachers have their best interest in mind (Chubb & Moe, 1988; Olson, 2009). High school students have indicated if a teacher sets an example of respect and fairness they are willing to pay attention and follow the rules even if they do not personally like the teacher (Cushman, 2003). If students perceive a teacher as fair, they also feel respected. Students ask that teachers show they care about the content, treat students as capable, allow independence with clear expectations, model appropriate responses when the teacher themselves make a mistake, and show respect for individuality (Cushman). Jessica shared that the Metro teachers knew what strikes the students had against them yet treated them fairly and

did not assume they had broken a certain rule. She stated, "I started every day with a chance." Leah described the culture as equitable. Every student was treated equitably.

Create a Close, Familial Culture in Schools of all Sizes

Each of the six teachers spoke about the family-like atmosphere at the alternative school and the close relationships with teachers. These intangible aspects of the school made a huge difference in their educational experience going from negative to positive. "Anonymity is the curse of the overloaded, overspecialized, overcomplicated American comprehensive high school" (Cotton, 2001, p. 30). Teachers at large schools are less likely to personalize instruction to meet individual needs. Schedules are rigid and adults are too busy to really get to know the students. Many students do not feel welcomed at their high school (Blankstein, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 1997). Schools have to develop ways to make a large school feel small.

One way to implement a small school feeling in a large setting is through the establishment of small learning communities. Two or three teachers work in teams with about 100 students for whom they are responsible (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Finn & Rock, 1997). Even very large schools can be structured into several learning communities with their own teachers and administrators. Career academies are another way to structure a school into smaller communities. They work similar to the small learning communities but each academy is integrated with a career theme (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Themes may include automotive studies, law, health, and many others. Many students participate in internships based on their interest.

Give Students a Voice

Comprehensive education was established for the purpose of maintaining a democratic society (Wraga, 1999). If schools are to perform this function, they need to provide avenues for

creative thought and enable communication between the students and adults as well as encourage participation in dialogue and decisions. A democratic education requires equal access for all students concerning course work, technology, and all elements of schooling (Greene & Foster, 2003; Gross & Mitra, 2009). When students were given a voice in issues of communication, they reported that this was not the case. Often students who were well known by administration were given preferential treatment while others lacked support and recognition (Greene & Foster).

Other research has found that high school students sometimes feel that they have no voice in the decisions that affect them. Passive compliance by students is the design of the bureaucratic school system. Lacking in this design is a sense of independence and empowerment (Cushman, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 1997). Students frequently disengage from learning when they perceive a lack of power in the classroom. When their voice is heard and valued, they have ownership of their learning and seek greater responsibility (McQuillan, 2005; Wallace, 2008). Student empowerment could be the key to improving schools and creating successful learning environments for more students.

McQuillan (2005) studied three types of empowerment in high schools: academic, political, and social. In order to increase academic empowerment teachers must have high expectations for students and schools need to offer demanding curricula. Teachers need to have consistent expectations for all students. Vital to giving students a voice is letting them express what they already know and decide what they need to learn and how they will go about that learning (Cushman, 2005; Wallace, 2008). Participants in this study expressed that academic empowerment was related to their decisions on how to pace themselves to finish a course and ultimately finish high school. They had a great deal of freedom in the amount of time spent

completing assignments. Students want to be included in decisions about course offerings. They become more invested in their own education if courses are related to their interests.

To increase political empowerment students want teachers and administrators to seek advice from them both formally and informally. Leadership opportunities such as being involved in some faculty committees and student council are means for students to have a voice. Holding frequent class meetings help students feel connected and heard. Students can be the ones to work for change in their schools. They know what their peers are saying. By allowing this political voice, principals can set themselves up for having school decisions more readily supported (Chubb & Moe, 1988; Cushman, 2005; McQuillan, 2005). Participants in this study did not identify political empowerment as a characteristic of either the comprehensive high school or the alternative high school.

When a school is socially empowering all students feel safe in speaking out and they know their ideas are respected and students are welcomed to question. All students are honored for their diversity in learning and interests. Melissa felt valued at Metro stating, "I didn't feel judged." Both Leah and Angelina described feeling safe and listened to at Metro. Students desire power and will seek it in inappropriate ways if appropriate means are not offered. Schools can offer choice within an environment that provides some control. High school students need some freedom in discovering who they are (Cushman, 2005; McQuillan, 2005; Wallace, 2008). Students looking for social empowerment ask teachers to recognize their different perspectives, let them have a say in the dress code, acknowledge their right of self-expression, and respect their right to be heard (Cushman, 2005).

Personal Reflections

The best part of this research was meeting six teachers who deeply care about each and every one of their students. I have been in education for over 26 years and I've met many teachers like them and many teachers like the ones they described, the ones who made a positive difference in their lives and the ones that reacted to them in a negative manner. In this business of education, I've been a classroom teacher, an instructional coach, and a building principal. In these roles, I have seen stories similar to the ones told by the participants. This is why I am honored to tell their stories.

Before beginning this process, I had a suspicion that relationships would be an important component in the stories. I was not wrong. Too often educators, especially at the high school level but it occurs at the other levels as well, rely completely on the content and forget about the people. I believe this study shows the error of that thinking. These former at-risk students were never going to get the content if they were not treated respectfully as people who were capable of making decisions and taking control of their own lives.

I found myself looking back at the students I remember from my schooling who just did not fit in. Nathan must have had a learning disability and did not get the help he needed. He dropped out. I remember him, beginning in grade school in 1968 and through middle school. He was one of those kids who was just there, did not make much of an impact, I guess. I do remember this about him. He was the nicest boy in my class. I was not one of the privileged kids from a rich family so I was picked on some. Nathan was the only boy in the class who called me Kathleen instead of Patterson. Even then, I knew there was something special about him. The school just did not find it.

Another classmate from elementary school, Steve, had some behavioral issues. He was always in trouble, never did his homework. Steve was the first boy in the school that grew his hair long. When the class stood up to say the pledge of allegiance Steve would kick whoever he was standing behind in the back of the knee. I was a little afraid of him. This was before diagnosis of ADD or ADHD, but I wonder if he had gotten some help with that if he would have succeeded. Steve also dropped out and spent time in prison.

Joyce got pregnant as a high school freshman. There was no help for her at school, so she dropped out soon after. The same was true of other girls in my high school who got pregnant at a young age. There was not a place for them in a small town in the late 1970's. At least today, these girls have more of a chance to finish school, although many have to work as well and find it a struggle.

These students did not seem to have relationships with teachers, an emotional connection that might have kept them in school. In my small town, there were no alternative placements for them. The urban setting in this study had alternative high schools as early as 1970. The participants in this study had another educational option available to them but more significant they were resilient. They were able to find a school that met their needs and empowered them to finish, go to college, and become teachers.

I see these same students now, the ones our schools are not reaching. Two years ago at an urban middle school, I was walking down the hall with David, a seventh grader. He and I had built up a relationship and I was trying to keep him in class and help him with academics and behavior. A paraprofessional said to him as we were walking, "Why are you even here? It's a waste of time for you to be here." All I could do was tell David how glad I was for him to be there, how glad I was to know him. I found David again after two years through someone who

works at his high school where he is a freshman. How do you think he is doing? We all need to think about the harm that words, often said in frustration, do to children.

Why do I teach? Really many of the same answers I found in the research and in my own study, mainly, to make a difference in a person's life. The most memorable moments are meeting up with a former student somewhere around town. I have to confess, most of the time they recognize me immediately, but I usually have to take a second look or even ask for a clue. Adam was a first grader my fourth year of teaching. I saw him a couple of years ago. He was so excited to see me. I felt like a million dollars. Adam is a Hope City police officer. Eli was a student when I was a principal. He waited on me at a restaurant about a year ago. Eli was a little ornery and we had our moments. Even with that he was glad to see me and I was glad to see him. We had a great conversation. I could tell he had good memories. Eli is in college now. Jarrett struggled in school. His parents had him repeat a grade. Jarrett followed me from one school where I was principal to my next stop as principal. The teachers and I worked with the family to help him be successful. I saw Jarrett at the YMCA a few months ago. He is in firefighter school. I could tell a million stories like these. This is why I teach.

I was lucky. I had parents who valued education and expected my siblings and me to work hard in school and attend college. The participants in this study were lucky in that respect as well. Each one had family support in addition to the support they received from the staff at the alternative high school. I just started a new position as a principal in one of the poorest elementary schools in Hope City. Already I get a sense of which students will struggle and which students will not have family support. This is where the school personnel become so much more important in developing relationships with these students so that they feel safe and loved somewhere in their lives.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM

Department of Educational Leadership
Box 142, Wichita, KS 67260-0142
Consent Form

PURPOSE: You are invited to participate in my dissertation research, which is a study of alternative high school graduates who are now teachers. I hope to learn how your experiences in the alternative high school compared to your experiences in a comprehensive high school and what influenced you to choose teaching as a career.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION: You have been selected as a possible participant in this study because you attended a comprehensive high school, however, you graduated from an alternative high school and are now a teacher in the Wichita Public School system. I hope to have six to eight participants in this study.

EXPLANATION OF PROCEDURES: If you decide to participant you will be interviewed for a period of 90 minutes to 2 hours. You will also be asked to participate in an informal group conversation for a period of 90 minutes to 2 hours. The interview and informal group conversation will be digitally recorded. Your name will not be used in any way so as to maintain confidentiality. Interview questions will be concerned with your experiences attending a comprehensive high school and an alternative high school and what influenced you to become a teacher.

DISCOMFORT/RISKS: There are no discomforts or risks anticipated in this research though you may be sharing personal information with me and with other teachers in a group setting.

BENEFITS: It is expected that the results of this study will provide school administrators and other personnel with information that can be used to help students considered at-risk be successful in high school. Consequently, results of this study will be presented at conferences and published in journals.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All information collected in this study in which you may be identified will remain confidential and will only be disclosed with your permission. Any data gathered will remain in my possession and will only be shared with my advisor. Participants in the study will remain confidential and your name will not be used in the final dissertation, presentations, or publications. Your decision not to participate will not affect your future relations with Wichita Public Schools or Wichita State University.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this research, please contact me, Kathleen Patterson, at 2601 S. Linden, Wichita, KS 67210, email apatterson@usd259.net, or phone 316-655-0067. Or contact my advisor Dr. Jean Patterson at Wichita State University, 1845 Fairmount, Box 142, Wichita, KS 67260, email jean.patterson@wichita.edu or phone 316-978-6392. If you have any questions pertaining to your rights as a research participant, you can contact the Office of Research Administration at Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas, 67260-0007, and telephone (316)978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signing of this consent letter will be taken as evidence of your willingness to participate and your consent to have the information used for the purpose of the study. You may keep a copy of this cover letter and explanation about the nature of your participation in this study and the handling of the information you supply.

REFUSAL/WITHDRAWAL: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you are under no obligation to participate.

Sincerely,

_____

Kathleen Patterson, WSU Doctoral Student   Date

_____

Name of participant

_____

Signature of participant   Date

APPENDIX B

TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1.   Please introduce yourself and tell me some things about yourself.

2.   How do you describe your experiences in a comprehensive high school?

3.   What role did the structure of the comprehensive high school play in those

      experiences?   PROBES: Describe the daily schedule. What rules were in place?

      About how many students were at the high school? What was a typical class size?

      How would you describe the school rules that were in place?

4.   How do you describe your experiences in an alternative high school?

5.   What role did the structure of the alternative high school play in those

      experiences?

6.   What kinds of support systems were in place in both high school settings?

7.   What prevented you from being successful in the comprehensive high school?

8.   To what do you attribute your success in the alternative high school?

9.   At what point did you decide you wanted to be a teacher?

10.   How did you arrive at that decision?

APPENDIX C

GROUP CONVERSATION PROTOCOL

1. Please introduce yourselves to each other.

2. How would you describe your high school experience? Begin with your time in a comprehensive high school to your graduation from an alternative high school.

3. Explain how the differences in the two environments impacted your school and life experience.

4. What experiences are you realizing that you all may have in common?