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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONDITIONS OF AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL LEADING TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS: A CASE STUDY OF ONE SCHOOL THAT ATTENDED TO THE CONSTRUCTS OF SELF DETERMINATION THEORY

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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONDITIONS OF AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL LEADING TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS: A CASE STUDY OF ONE SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL THAT ATTENDED TO THE CONSTRUCTS OF SELF DETERMINATION THEORY

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my late mother Betty Sue Birkes. She was and is my inspiration in all higher pursuits. She stimulated me intellectually from the time I learned to speak into my 40s when I lost her. Thanks Mom, this one is for you.

Acknowledgements

Without the support of my wife Lynda I could not have accomplished this work. I appreciate the fact that there were sacrifices involved but you helped me throughout. Thanks for your love and support.

I enjoyed the kindred spirit of my cohort members and the intellectual stimulation you all brought into the classroom. Thank you for your partnerships and inspiration. I must say it was a challenge being the only male in the group.

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Finally, to Krista Pettersen who said, "The dedicated never stop working." Indeed, she doesn't as I would often get responses from her on her weekends.

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Abstract

There is a dearth of literature regarding alternative school practices based on theoretical premises leading to successful outcomes for students. The literature reveals outcomes that alternative school practitioners have long associated with successful practices and these were discovered to be very similar to the constructs of Self Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT posits that when three human needs are supported people show increased self-motivation. These needs are competence, autonomy, and relatedness. The purpose of this case study of one successful alternative high school was to explain if its successes could be linked to the support of the component needs of SDT. Methods consisted of interviews, forum discussions, observations, and document reviews to reach findings after a series of coding reductions produced a framework of theme categories that were matched back to the constructs of SDT. The findings showed the school was highly and consistently supportive of the necessary human needs for building students' motivation to succeed and were associated with a higher success rate leading to graduation. Future implications include that alternative school practitioners can raise successful outcomes of their students by building and sustaining practices around the support for student needs found in Self Determination Theory.

Chapter I: Introduction

Alternative schools were formed in the 1960's in order for a small number of students to escape perceived deficiencies in public education (Graubard, 1974; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1983; Reimer & Cash, 2003). Through the decades alternative schools have become as diverse as their clientele, and their definition has become obscured as well. (Kellmayer, 1995; Lange & Sletten, 1995; Neumann, 1994; Reimer & Cash, 2003). Two historical consistencies in alternative education include the predominant mission to increase high school graduation and a failure to use theoretical foundations (Raywid, 1983) for studying features that may or may not contribute to mission fulfillment.

Effective design and management are elusive because of the lack of empirical evidence identifying effective strategies leading to student success (Raywid, 1983). Early studies were influenced by various definitions and typologies of alternative schools, which reduced inquiry to anecdotal descriptions of the small samples used, often individual schools, without broader implications of the benefits of their findings.

This study was based on data collected from students, parents, faculty, and leaders associated with a long-standing alternative school having a population from the surrounding geographical area served by one large urban district. Evidence from focus groups, interviews, and document reviews of policies and student records, guided by the constructs of Self Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000), were analyzed. The purpose of the study was to discover common themes or categories of success and to study the alignment of these themes to the "social—contextual conditions" of SDT.

Problem Statement

Raywid (1983) summed up an academic dilemma with her assertion that theory has not driven the research or the practice in the field of alternative education. To a large extent, according to Raywid, no theoretical foundation exists for many of the alternative programs. Instead, their practice is based on assumptions supported by anecdotal, not empirical evidence. "Methodological shortcomings continue to plague the alternative school literature" (Cox et al., 1995, p. 230). The dearth of empirical research has slowed the discernment of intervention strategies that work (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2001). There is a need for scientific research on benefits to students as well as theoretical causes for those benefits in the alternative school setting.

Purpose and Significance

SDT is a broad theory of human motivation and useful in multiple settings with decades of research including the area of education (Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). Using SDT to explain student success factors in an alternative school, introduces a unique and clear conceptual framework previously unexplored. The utility of SDT as a framework for alternative school student success factors may act as a catalyst for larger empirical studies. If the findings in larger studies confirm the link between successes and approaches, then alternative school designers and practitioners can stop guessing and supposing and proceed more confidently to bring about more certainty in the accomplishment of the mission of alternative education.

> Effective high school dropout intervention strategies ultimately serve the needs of society. Determining what those needs are however requires a thorough understanding of the problem from a number of perspectives. By combining strategies that address the needs of both the dropout and the school, greater

> opportunity for success is obtained. An understanding of this process is essential to overcome inherent resistance to effective intervention strategies (Kaczynski, 1989, p. 5).

Theoretical Framework

Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) is the basis for the framework of this study. The theory is based on three human needs that, when supported, reliably increase the outcome of self-motivation to perform tasks or larger sets of tasks. These needs include *competence*, *autonomy*, and *relatedness*. The research questions were designed to remain intimately tied to these needs.

Research Questions

Three research questions guided this study:

1) How does the school support student competence?

2) How does the school support student autonomy?

3) How does the school support student relatedness?

Definition of Terms

<u>School structure</u> was generally defined as the conditions, elements, and features of the school, as perceived by the students, staff, parents, and researcher.

<u>Student success</u> was generally defined as behaviors that lead to graduation from high school.

Overview of Methodology

This study followed the case study tradition as described by Yin (2009) and Creswell (2007). I made observations, conducted interviews, convened forums, and gathered student progress records and school policies from September 2nd through October 25th, 2013. Notes were arranged and reviewed and interviews were transcribed

before beginning a process of coding all data. Four steps were involved in the data coding process of this case study. The first involved using preliminary codes based on the three constructs of Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and five subcategories derived from the alternative school literature (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Statements from participants' responses to questions derived from the guiding research questions were fit into the preliminary code framework. The second step involved "direct interpretation" (Creswell, p.163) of participants' comments and the resultant coding of emerged themes (see Appendix A). Themes were grouped and regrouped into patterns or categories, which constituted the third step (see Appendix B). Lastly, the fourth step involved an examination of the relationship of the categories to the constructs of Self Determination Theory which guided this study (see Appendix B).

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations involved in this study included the participants representing grades 9-12 with a total population of just under 100. As a single case study, it involved one alternative school of the voluntary student type. While these limitations may affect the transferability of this study they are considered as characteristics of qualitative case studies which, by nature, are limited in scope only. The possibilities which arise from the findings within these limitations are somewhat countered by the strength that comes with the match to well defined theoretical bases (Yin, 2009). Within the case study process other limitations can arise due to the issues of researcher bias and influence (Yin, 2009). Having been interested in and studying alternative schools since 1989 and also having been an administrator over alternative programs at two stages in my career, I had to consider my philosophical predispositions while recording data and undertaking

analyses. Attempts at deluding the possibility of influencing the surroundings of my presence included such approaches as introducing myself using my first name, as was the practice of the adults in the school, and being forthright about my background as a teacher and administrator in similar programs.

Organization of the Dissertation

After having introduced the particulars of the study I move to a review of the literature involving the history and background of alternative schooling in the United States. Therefore, Chapter II will draw a linkage of the alternative school literature to the foundations of motivational psychology ending with Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) which forms the basis of this study. Following this I identify the methodological approaches to the study and its logic in Chapter III. Chapter IV will reveal the findings followed by Chapter V which includes discussion and interpretation of the findings. In the final chapter I show the relevance of the findings to the past and future approaches that can further the effectiveness of alternative school practices.

Chapter II. Literature Review

Backdrop to Modern Alternative Schooling

What constitutes an alternative school? The term "alternative education" can be difficult to define (Kellmayer, 1995; Lange & Sletten, 1995; Neumann, 1994; Reimer & Cash, 2003). A review of available literature on the subject reveals that the modern alternative school concept grew from two distinct philosophical approaches to the education of students deemed too difficult to educate in a traditional setting. One approach assumes the problem lies within the educational setting (Fischer & George, 1994; Gerics & Westheimer, 1988); this approach seeks to improve student performance by altering the school structure. The other approach assumes the problem lies within the student and thus seeks to solve the problem by altering the student.

Historically, educational reform movements including compulsory education (Hazlett, 2011; Tyack, 1976; Zhang, 2004), juvenile corrections (Bohland, 2011; Hemmens & Lawrence, 2008; Platt, 1969), and alternative schooling (Foley & Pang, 2006; Menendez, 2007; Raywid, 1983; Reimer & Cash, 2003) have shifted between the two philosophies, either nurturing non-conforming children with care and optimism or punishing them with harsh consequences aimed at penitence. With the goal of understanding the alternative school setting, this section includes discussions of the intertwined histories of compulsory education, efforts to educate delinquent youth, and the alternative school movement arising from the social climate of the 1960s.

Compulsory Education

Tyack (1976) attributed lax enforcement of early U.S. compulsory attendance laws to a teacher desire to avoid dealing with students who did not want to be in school.

More effective strategies for dealing with youth who are academically unmotivated have not been fully defined but are necessary for a society that requires universal education. Policies such as compulsory education laws (Hazlett, 2011; Tyack, 1976; Zhang, 2004) and school accountability on one hand, and the call to purge the schools of bullies, violence, and drugs on the other hand reveal the need to balance universal education with security (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2001). Although a call to educate all children prevails (Tyack, 1976), a question remains: What should be done with those who can't seem to involve themselves in school successfully? "Alternative schools have evolved from a promise made within the American educational system -- the promise to educate all students, no matter their circumstances or educational issues" (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p. 24). This sub-section will explore the history of compulsory education in the United States and its implications for modern alternative schools.

Compulsory education, as a social need, was first noted during the European Reformation (Zhang, 2004). In the early 16th century, both Martin Luther and John Calvin called for a mandate to educate all children, the impetus being to give reformed congregations access to knowledge previously reserved for Catholic priests. This movement, according to Zhang, led to education requirements throughout many German states beginning in the 16th century, but it was the Prussian monarchies that instituted the first compulsory education laws at the dawn of the 19th century, leading to the more modern sense of the concept. Zhang (2004) assumed the Prussian motivation was to prepare a class of obedient warriors and workers for the good of the state. Most European countries and the U.S. followed with compulsory education laws enacted

before the end of the 19th century (Hazlett, 2011; Tyack, 1976). In the U.S., the motivation was to indoctrinate American children with regional religious values.

Hazlett (2011) noted that the U.S. legacy of compulsory education began in 1642 with a series of laws in the Massachusetts Colony, the most famous being the "Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647," (p. 1) which required towns to provide levels of schooling based upon their size. The laws, Hazlett noted, sought to indoctrinate students with Puritan Calvinistic beliefs. Though these laws did not compel parents to send their children to the town schools, they signal a trend toward compulsory education.

Tyack (1976) wrote of a two-phased implementation of compulsory education laws in the U.S. The first phase, beginning in the early 19th century he called the “symbolic stage” (p. 359); elementary education took hold and enrollments steadily increased. The compulsion was mainly symbolic, since enforcement was difficult and public backing was scant. The second phase, which Tyack called the “bureaucratic stage,” (p. 359) began at the turn of the 20th century after reformers such as Horace Mann began advocating for enforcement in the latter 19th century (Hazlett, 2011). During this time objections disappeared and society came to regard compulsory laws as logical extensions of states’ powers and duties (Tyack, 1976).

Tyack (1976) stated that by the 1930s, as secondary schools became more prominent, the expectation of attendance grew, while the availability of jobs for children diminished. He added that many children had been expected to work until the progressive reforms of the early 20th century and the Great Depression made traditional child jobs scarce. Coincidental to this shift away from child labor was a growing concern that immigrants would not teach their children American values at home. By

the Eisenhower years, the expectation of a high school education rose to the point that students who failed to finish became known as "dropouts" (p. 359). Tyack added that although education had been considered a role of the family, it became the norm to equate education with school attendance. Young people were expected to go to school as though it were their vocation.

Compulsory education laws and expectations did not take into account, nor were they motivated by the existence of children who might not fit into conventional schools. The stage was set to indoctrinate youth with a set of societal norms (Hazlett, 2011; Tyack, 1976; Zhang, 2004), whether religious in origin or designed to pass citizenship expectations on to a class of workers and consumers. It is unclear what was intended for the children who fell into categories that made them unfit or undesirable in the local schoolhouse. The courts and various juvenile authorities were overseeing many of the children who fell into these categories.

Efforts to Educate Delinquents

As compulsory education took hold it was inevitable that issues of universality would be raised. "In the current educational climate, educators are challenged to balance safety issues with compulsory attendance" (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2001, p. 75). Shocking images of public schools in the 1950s and '60s, especially in urban centers, were depicted in movies such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (Ray, 1955), *Blackboard Jungle* (Brooks, 1955), and *Westside Story* (Wise & Robbins, 1961). These works may inform an understanding of the movement in the 1960s to offer alternatives (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1983; Reimer & Cash, 2003) to the perception that schools were of out-of-control and unsafe. While alternative schools began as outlets to

escape traditional schooling gone awry, the movement was overtaken in the 1970s and '80s by public policies addressing a growing perception of a swell in delinquency (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1983; Reimer & Cash, 2003).

Alternative schools were increasingly seen as centers for housing deviants, (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1983; Reimer & Cash, 2003) and the public's negative perception of wild schools was then transferred or deflected to alternative schools. This shifting perception that the alternative school child was the problem alleviated any concerns that traditional schools could be impeding academic progress for some students (Fischer & George, 1994; Gerics & Westheimer, 1988) (Hazlett, 2011; Tyack, 1976; Zhang, 2004).

An approach emphasizing treatment as opposed to penitence and punishment of delinquent and criminal children (Bohland, 2011; Hemmens & Lawrence, 2008; Platt, 1969) occurred alongside the advent and growth of compulsory education in the United States (Hazlett, 2011; Tyack, 1976; Zhang, 2004). Education became a main component in reformer efforts to treat troubled children differently from the criminal prosecution model that prevailed until the mid-19th century. These education programs for children in correctional institutions grew at the same time compulsory education moved into Tyack's (1976) "bureaucratic stage" (p. 359), which marked the growth of districts. By providing schooling within correctional institutions, the movement also partially answered the question about how to educate delinquent children who were undesirable to the local public school.

A review of how delinquent, criminal and otherwise undesirable children have been schooled is relevant for two reasons. First, it provides a vantage point for

exploring the education of children outside of the traditional classroom, fitting one definition (Aron, 2006) of alternative schooling. Second, it is relevant because current approaches to alternative schooling are skewed toward educating deviant children apart from others.

For several hundred years, Western society has been convinced that each generation of juveniles is more deviant than generations before (Hemmens & Lawrence, 2008). This idea appears cyclical as American society moves between favoring treatment approaches and cracking down on lawlessness through strict enforcement and punishment. Hemmens and Lawrence wrote that when the latter is in vogue, fear is pronounced because of the false perception that there exists a ballooning juvenile crime wave. Moreover, this perception leads society to conclude the supposed crime wave exists because punishments are weak, and juveniles see, and exploit, the holes in the system. The outcome is generally that laws are made tougher and children treated more harshly.

The history of juvenile law in America has its foundation in English common law, dating back almost a thousand years (Bohland, 2011; Hemmens & Lawrence, 2008; Platt, 1969). Two legal doctrines emerged from this foundation; *parens patriae* (translated as parent of the country) and *in loco parentis* (translated as in place of the parent). These doctrines gave the state the precedence of taking children into custody and handed over parental responsibilities such as providing a secure environment, mentoring and modeling, and providing other domestic services that biological parents failed to provide. Prior to the existence of a juvenile justice system in the United States, it was the duty of the parents to direct children to behave in socially acceptable ways; in

the absence of acceptable behavior, children were subject to adult criminal procedures and punishments (Bohland, 2011; Hemmens & Lawrence, 2008). “The juvenile justice system was basically a sociolegal institution for holding juveniles accountable and for strengthening both the family and the school as they adapted to the changing social order” (2008, p. 56).

Houses of refuge were opened in some larger urban cities of the northeast U.S. in the early 1800s (Bohland, 2011; Hemmens & Lawrence, 2008; Platt, 1969). Reformers, including those under the banner of the *child-saving movement*, sought to involve the state in interventions believed to prevent criminal behavior and provide education to wayward youth. This movement produced experiments in education and prevention in settings away from adult institutions and prisons and evolved into states' attempts to reform children who had gone astray.

The term “reformatory” (Hemmens & Lawrence, 2008, p. 23) was adopted to reflect the goals of the progressive thought in the later 19th century. “In theory, reformatories were ‘schools’ that provided parental discipline, education, religious instruction, and meaningful work for incarcerated youth” (p. 23). “The early juvenile reform schools were intended for education and treatment, not for punishment, but hard work, strict regimentation, and whippings were common.” Hemmens and Lawrence argued that reform schools were unfair, particularly to racial and economic minorities who were over represented. They also note that the public became critical of these institutions after problems with peer and caretaker violence were publicized. As critics began to question the benefits of *parens patriae*, evidence confirmed that the state was not the ideal parent.

The first juvenile court in the U.S. was founded in 1899 in Chicago, Illinois (Bohland, 2011; Hemmens & Lawrence, 2008; Platt, 1969), and most states organized juvenile court systems within the first quarter of the new century. These courts followed the same approach used by reform schools to treat juveniles; specifically, they adopted the purpose of changing life directions rather than taking a solely punitive approach. Juvenile courts were intended initially to take youth out of the criminal proceedings context and provide a more flexible and treatment-oriented approach, reforming juveniles before they became deeply subscribed to a life of crime.

Because juvenile courts were not intended to be punishment-oriented and were more likened to civil rather than criminal proceedings, *due process* was not initially afforded to youth in the juvenile courtroom (Bohland, 2011; Hemmens & Lawrence, 2008; Platt, 1969). This practice continued until the 1960's and '70's when the Supreme Court ruled that minors should be afforded rights if the juvenile courts maintained their practice of indeterminate sentencing and other impositions on civil liberties (Bohland, 2011; Hemmens & Lawrence, 2008). Since the 1980s and '90s there has been a steady push in favor of stiffening sentences, returning procedural rules to a traditional criminal approach, and excluding many minors from the juvenile system in favor of using adult institutions. In 2005, the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Roper v. Simmons* (125 S.Ct. 1183 [2005]) ruled that capital punishment for minors was unconstitutional. This decision was one of the indicators that may have signaled a return to the idea that minors are to be treated differently from adults, according to Hemmens and Lawrence. The trend of getting tough on juvenile crime (Bohland, 2011; Hemmens & Lawrence, 2008; Platt, 1969) coincided with a trend to redefine alternative schools as places to

handle school deviants and adjudicated youth (Foley & Pang, 2006; Menendez, 2007; Raywid, 1983; Reimer & Cash, 2003).

Recently, many juveniles have not been allowed to return to their traditional public schools after involvement with law enforcement or the courts and are funneled into low quality alternative schools designed to segregate them (Weissman et al., 2008). According to a report from the National Center for Education Statistics, “38% of [school] districts reported arrest or involvement with the juvenile justice system as a sufficient reason for transfer to an alternative school” (p. 13).

Weissman et al. (2008) provided evidence that detainees in juvenile institutions are among the neediest students. Generally, behind in school, up to half have been held back at least one grade, and two-thirds of them are estimated to have histories of failing at least one course. Thirty-five percent of minors in adult prisons do not hold a diploma or equivalency, and sixteen percent have less than an eighth-grade education. Fifty-two percent of inmates under the age of 24 in adult facilities have no high school credentials. Attesting to the importance of education in reducing crime and delinquency, the U.S. Department of Education found that inmate education program participation results in a 33 percent lower likelihood of recidivism (Weissman et al. 2008).

Suspensions and expulsions from school are linked to students being involved in juvenile adjudications, failure to finish high school, and the likelihood of imprisonment as an adult (Weissman et al., 2008). “Data at the state and local level reveal that the majority of suspensions and expulsions are not for drug use, weapons or violent behavior but for ‘disruptive behavior’ or ‘insubordination’” (p. 3). Besides putting students out of school and referring them to juvenile agencies, schools are directing

students to academically poor alternative schools with a disciplinary focus; this is especially true for minorities and the disabled, according to Weissman et al.

Fewer than half of juveniles in custody receive at least 6 hours per day of instruction (Sedlak, 2011). Fewer than half of those with a diagnosed learning disability are given special education accommodations, and a third of juveniles in custody have special education designations, according to Sedlak, who also noted that at the time of incarceration, 21% were not enrolled in a school, and 61% had been suspended within the past year. While 28% percent of youth in the nation's schools are functioning below grade level, incarcerated youth are at 48%.

Weissman et al. (2008) sum up the issues and conditions for incarcerated juveniles pertaining to education needs: Education programs are described as limited and inadequate; they don't serve with consistency; and instruction is not based on grade or age level appropriateness, but rather convenience. The minimum time for instruction is not met, and teachers have little or no access to previous education records of students. Facilities and public schools do not work together to solve problems with alignment of credits and the timing of coursework delivery; therefore, most students are at a disadvantage when released because they have little chance of continuing where they left off. Weissman et al. noted that many schools do not allow these students to return to regular classes and instead force them to enroll in special schools or leave the district. No evidence supports the notion that alternative schools change the course of delinquent behavior, even when they seem to benefit the student in academic realms (Cox, Davidson, & Bynum, 1995).

A survey by Hemmens and Lawrence (2008) examined attitudes about the juvenile justice system. Their findings indicate that the public looks very favorably at general and vocational education in the correctional setting. Public opinion was less supportive of boot camps using military style surroundings, but still favored with 79% supporting the idea. Also positively regarded was the practice of taking offending youth into prison settings for intentionally intimidating tours and frank speeches from inmates. These data reveal that the public perceives the benefit and need of educating troubled youth; however, they also suggest a preference for stern control of the learners and the learning environment, indicating a rift between public definitions of alternative schooling and those that have come from scholars and practitioners of a more child centered approach, including Foley & Pang (2006), Menendez (2007), Raywid (1983), and Reimer and Cash (2003).

The Alternative School Movement

Keeping in mind the historical development of mandatory attendance and the role alternative education has come to play in addressing youthful delinquency, this subsection will explore more recent developments in alternative education. Defined loosely, alternative education might describe any deviation from the standard delivery of education (Aron, 2006). Raywid (1983) would include "choice" in her basic definition implying that student participation is voluntary. In a stricter definition, alternative education implies that the environment, approach, and delivery of education are set up to address learning needs that are absent from the traditional secondary school (Foley & Pang, 2006; Menendez, 2007; Raywid, 1983; Reimer & Cash, 2003).

The pairing of the words *alternative* and *school* has had many and sometimes conflicting meanings (Kellmayer, 1995; Lange & Sletten, 1995; Neumann, 1994; Reimer & Cash, 2003); For the most part these schools have addressed the graduation decline of a variety of student groups. Kellmayer (1995) and Neumann (1994) linked the early alternative school movement to the progressive movement of the 1920s and '30s, but emphasized a more direct association with the humanistic social climate of the 1960s. Alternative schools began in the second half of the 20th century out of a sense of frustration with perceived ineffective education opportunities for disenfranchised minorities. (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1983; Reimer & Cash, 2003).

These early alternative schools, called *Freedom Schools*, were created to address the needs of students whose schools were academically inadequate; their advent was connected to the civil rights movement (Graubard, 1974; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1983; Reimer & Cash, 2003). Simultaneously, other programs under the banner of the *Free School Movement* came into being, characterized by heightened student control of the curriculum and the theme of student self-fulfillment. Free Schools were anti-establishment in their orientation (Raywid, 1983). They placed the onus on the learner and revolved around student interests. Freedom Schools and the Free School Movement took place outside of public education, but by the late 1960s the alternative school movement was influencing public schools as well (Graubard, 1974; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1983; Reimer & Cash, 2003).

Before the 1980s saw a narrowing of the scope of alternatives (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1983), the scope grew during the 1970s. Among the spinoff programs of the 1970s were *continuation schools, learning centers, fundamental schools,* and

magnet schools. Then alternative schools became increasingly remedial, conservative, and disciplinary in design, with diminished democratic decision-making processes characteristic of 1960s configurations. Through the 1970s and '80s, many alternative schools became a vehicle for those wanting to cure the "nation's ills" (Raywid, 1983, p. 192; Reimer & Cash, 2003). These ills included: "juvenile crime and delinquency; school violence and vandalism; the demands of inner-city minorities; anti-institutionalism; resentments against public bureaucracies; racial segregation; youth unemployment; declining school enrollments; and demographic changes in school populations." (p. 192).

Alternative programs proliferated during the 1990s (Menendez, 2007). These schools mainly followed one of two camps representing the approaches of treating the student as the problem or the school as the problem (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1999; Reimer & Cash, 2003).

Two Divergent Approaches to Alternative Schooling

The literature reveals a dichotomy of approaches to alternative school programs that runs from student problem behavior oriented to school reform oriented rationales (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1999; Reimer & Cash, 2003). Public sentiment and traditional school managers appeared to favor corrective treatments for students considered to be difficult. Meanwhile, the practitioners and scholars of alternative education favored school reforms to enact better outcomes for most students, not just those that are viewed as difficult. This section will discuss the implications of both approaches for finding common ground to define and measure alternative school success. Approaches that view student behaviors as the target for alternative education

can be thought of as the deficit approach; they rely on assumptions that the student lacks attributes necessary for success in school and seek to imbue them. Approaches that view the conditions and environment of education as problematic can be thought of as taking an additive approach; they are focused on adding educational treatments needed for improved student success. It is important to remember that increasing graduation possibilities appears to be a common mission among most of the divergent schools identifying themselves as *alternative*.

Deficit Approach

The type of student behavior an alternative program is intended to address sometimes dictates the focus of that program (Raywid, 1983). Programs labeled as *alternative education* include schools specifically created for, low achievers (Ciccone, 1991; Gundersen, 1986; Rosenblum, Brigham, & Millsap, 1990), drug abusers (A. D. A. M. H. A., 1991; Gundersen, 1986), pregnant students (Gundersen, 1986), special education (Carr, 1995; LaCoste, 1991; Lawton, 1993), violent students (Harrington-Lueker, 1994), and those lumped together as "at-risk" (Elliot, 1991; General Accounting Office, 1995; Heger, 1992; Lister, 1994; Meixner, 1995).

Although there are many published reasons for alternative schools being perceived as desirable by districts and private boards, a few categories stand out in the literature. Those motivations include, according to Lange and Sletten (2002), attributing the need to attend to a group known as at risk of dropping out, attending to a group perceived as having disciplinary and risky problem behaviors, and providing interventions for special needs students.

While not all programs approach students as deviates based on their exhibited behaviors or characteristics, some are focused specifically on changing those behaviors (Raywid, 1983). Kaczynski (1989) wrote that research has focused primarily on the deviance instead of systemic inadequacies of schools. Some schools simply isolate difficult students from the traditional school (Raywid, 1999) with little intent to change the student, in which case the school does not reflect the common understanding of what it means to be an alternative school as described in this review and should be considered alternative in name only.

Programs that address issues including discipline, drug abuse, and violence are prone to focus on student deviance with punitive intentions (Foley & Pang, 2006). A meta-analysis of delinquency related outcomes, however, revealed that schools serving students with specific characteristics, such as deviant behavior, or high drop-out risk, had slightly better academic outcomes than schools with a generalized approach to client selection (Cox et al., 1995). This suggests some merit to specializing for certain populations; however, the study does not specify whether the schools focused on changing behavior or attending to student needs. The authors note that methodological problems and a dearth of research on alternative school outcomes prohibit this conclusion. According to Cox et al., alternative programs have not been very successful in changing delinquent behavior, even when students showed better academic success.

Students at-risk of dropping out. The term “at risk” could include students in most alternative categories, but a great deal of research and application has focused on it as a category unto itself. At risk is generally applied to that group of students who possess attributes or come from situations believed to reduce the likelihood of

graduation (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1983; Reimer & Cash, 2003). “Alternative programs often face unique challenges as they attempt to educate those students most at risk of failure in the traditional educational setting” (Lange & Sletten, 1995, p. 17).

A long list of social, economic, and psychological factors contributes to students leaving school before graduating. It includes: single parent homes, dropout siblings, three or more hours of time at home alone per day (Fischer & George, 1994), low income, poor self-esteem, low parental and student future orientation, disruptive behaviors, and low test scores (Kellmayer, 1995). In his study of a North Carolina school system, Carruthers (1997) observed, “the benefit of the Alternative Learning Center program to students who participated compared to those who did not, appears to be … that the program … influenced a greater proportion of students to stay in school than in either of the comparison groups.”

Using statistical indicators to identify and place students in at-risk programs deemed to save them is controversial. Many students who would be caught in such a dragnet may not be susceptible to graduation problems, while some who do not exhibit statistical markers nonetheless have great impediments to finishing school.

Discipline problems. Kellmayer (1995) wrote that too many districts misuse alternative schools to warehouse “chronically disruptive and chronically disaffected students” (p. 5). Short, Short, and Blanton (1994), claimed that current views and models of discipline in traditional schools do not produce experiences that translate into student self-discipline. They argued that a school’s disciplinary approach should have the long-term objective of teaching students and facilitating moral and intellectual capacity.

Alternative education is an increasingly sought after answer for a perceived decline in school discipline (Saunders & Saunders, 2001) and has been for at least three decades. In a 1991 survey of teachers, the U. S. Department of Education reported that almost 50 percent of teachers felt the lack of alternative placement programs for disruptive students accounted for a general lack in discipline (Mansfield, Alexander, Farris, & Westat, 1991). According to teachers and administrators surveyed in West Virginia, the most frequently mentioned need of the school system to curb suspensions was the further implementation of alternative learning centers (Henderson & Friedland, 1996). The Oklahoma State Department of Education (1994) called for the expansion of alternative education to broaden the possible responses teachers have in classroom management. Socoski (1989) addressed alternative schools as an option for bored and unreceptive students. Lawrence and Olvey (1994) suggested the need for alternative solutions to suspending students as an essential element in a school's discipline policy. The North Carolina Legislative Research Commission (1988) reporting on unruly students to the 1989 State Legislature General Assembly recommended alternative school programs to fend off the perceived crisis in school discipline. Erikson (1931) pointed out that when deviates are removed from a population, society tends to fill in the gaps with a new set of deviates. If every student deemed difficult by a teacher were placed in an alternative school, traditional schools would almost cease to exist, but the problem would continue.

Disabilities. A study conducted by the West Virginia Department of Education found that students with disabilities were suspended at alarmingly high rates without much regard for the government required documentation of a student's specific needs

(Henderson & Friedland, 1996). In the study, school administrators most frequently mentioned alternative schools as a way to ensure legal requirements were being met without suspension from school. Students with emotional and behavioral disorders are heavily represented in alternative programs (Gorney & Ysseldyke, 1992). It has been found that special education students were accessing alternative programs in numbers comparable to non-special education students, even though they represented a small percentage of the population.

The American Federation of Teachers took the position in 1997 of favoring alternative programs over other discipline options for dealing with severe behavior disorders and other disabilities (Bader, 1997). The authors suggested that an argument exists that these students do better when the labels are erased in such an alternative setting, but other programs surpassed traditional school practices within alternative programs by placing special education teachers in every classroom, assisted by other professionals and paraprofessionals (Williams, 1989). Not all special education alternative school placements are the result of administrator hands being tied by policies preventing suspension of special needs students. A few advocates call for the placements as truly better environments for special learners. While the literature reveals many examples of the deficit approach being used by school districts, few scholars advocate it as good practice.

Additive Approach

Alternative school researchers and writers are consistent in advocating for what is labeled here the "additive approach." The idea, that what works in one school may not work in another is a consistent theme in the literature. The practices noted as being

excellent alternative school characteristics are not exclusive to alternative programs, but include innovative practices reformers currently advocate for all schools. This section argues that promoted practices generally can be grouped into three categories taken from Lange and Sletten (2002). They are flexibility of scheduling and curriculum, student relational involvement with significant others, and attainment of academic proficiency.

Kellmayer (1995) stressed the importance of examining several curriculum models, but emphasized the need for flexibility by tailoring the curriculum of each alternative school to its own culture and needs. He hesitated to offer his school's curriculum to those looking for a blueprint. "The curriculum should be as integral to the school culture as food, water, and oxygen are to the human body" (1995, p. 92). "Curriculum development is an ongoing process, continually evolving in response to the needs of the students and community."

Tyler (1949) defined curriculum as more than just content; he also included learning objectives, evaluation, and methods of learning. Kellmayer (1995) suggested establishing two curricula or a complement of the two. One should be a time-based curriculum and the other proficiency-based. A time-based curriculum is akin to that of traditional schools, in which set times are established and an expectation of attendance is present. Flexibility is still possible by offering several different time arrangements throughout the day and evening. A proficiency-based curriculum replaces time expectations with mastery expectations. Mastery of content would follow different timelines for different students. Kellmayer noted that at-risk students may need flexible schedules to accommodate potential personal issues that might preclude traditional

school attendance, such as court dates and public service; childcare; necessary wage making situations; or externships. He concluded that if a student showed failure in a proficiency based program, which might require only minimal in-school time and more independent study, that student could attend the time-based program to hone more independent skills. Programs in Minnesota have been successful in allowing flexibility for students by using varied hours and days as options (Lange & Sletten, 1995). California's state model exemplified a willingness to flex beyond the standard schedule by encompassing a mix of proficiency-based and time-based instruction and relying heavily on externships (California State Department of Education, 1995). This model illustrates how attendance can be positive even when students are not in an actual school building.

Alternative schools that promote mastery of basic skills, measuring of success by standardized tests, and old-fashioned instruction are bound to merely replay the situations which led the students to them in the first place (Kershaw & Blank, 1993). Knapp, Shields, and Turnbull wrote:

> The available evidence suggests that effective curriculum should: (1) focus on meaning and understanding from the beginning—for example, by orienting instruction toward comprehending reading passages, communicating important ideas in written text, or understanding the concepts underlying number facts; (2) balance routine skill learning with novel and complex tasks from the earliest stages of learning; (3) provide a context for skill learning that establishes clear reasons for needing to learn the skills, affords opportunities to apply the skills, and helps students relate one skill to another; (4) influence attitudes and beliefs

about the academic content areas, as well as skills and knowledge; (5) eliminate unnecessary redundancy in the curriculum (e.g., repeated instruction in the same mathematics computations year after year) (1990, p. 5).

Kellmayer (1995) says that students and teachers should choose methods, materials, and textbooks, although basic fundamentals such as reading and writing obviously must be included throughout all disciplines. He recommended developing individualized program plans (IPP) to accommodate even more student choice. He stressed this as much for later proof to critics that academic work is being done as for the emphasis it places on the learner. This emphasis allows students to have individual needs, goals and interests embedded in their education instead of competing with the pack at a traditional school where the rewards are limited.

Neumann (1994) referred to the Eight Year Study of 1942: "As its name implies, the study was an ambitious effort to provide empirical evidence that thematic, learner-directed approaches to education were as effective as, if not more effective than, conventional teacher-directed, discipline-centered instruction" (p. 548). Neumann (1994), London (1992), and Hanson (1992) centered their approaches to alternative curriculum on student projects. "In some courses, some points were awarded for attendance, participation, and mastery of content as demonstrated by formal exams, but more often student learning was assessed in terms of the products they created: theses, reports, journals, performances, artwork, and so on" (Neumann, 1994, p. 549). London (1992), wrote that alternative school missions "provide a curriculum emphasizing developing problem solving and coping skills versus emphasizing the acquisition of knowledge" (p. 1). "Projects would be the primary vehicle to provide the student with a

comprehensive education" (p. 2). Hanson (1992) also promoted using student projects including portfolios, debates, learning logs, interviews, mock trials, and research reports in lieu of traditional testing methods.

Alternative school "curriculum content is often supplemented by courses in self-esteem and self-development" (California State Department of Education, 1995, p. 11). Kellmayer (1995) promoted several areas as beneficial because they address real problems alternative school students face that often precipitate their need for different or more effective educational programs. These areas include crisis intervention and suicide prevention, drug and alcohol abuse and prevention programs, intern and externships, and peer mediation.

Kellmayer (1995) and Neumann (1994) agree that student involvement should be integral to the design of the individualized student plans. Neumann recalled that in the 1970s at Shanti High School in Hartford, Connecticut, students were active in a curriculum task force.

> The task force surveyed classmates' interests and reported the results to faculty members, who, depending on the extent of interest and faculty expertise, might include student-requested topics in an existing course, develop a separate course or seminar, or enlist a member of the community with special knowledge to conduct a mini-course under the supervision of a faculty member (p. 549).

Neumann also noted that the teachers were given great latitude in designing curricula, relating it to the freedom college professors enjoy. When the faculty is able to work in schools having enabling structures, enabling structures for the student body tend to emerge (Hoy, 2001).

The reasons dropouts and at-risk students sometimes become successful in alternative schools can be credited to the informal control some students report in the

alternative setting (Kaczynski, 1989). These informal controls included the concepts: freedom, choice, group control of individual behavior, and feelings of academic success. Students' perceptions of problems in traditional schools and their suggestions for more effective schools led to the following summary from Saunders & Saunders (2001): "1) Move toward a connected and focused curriculum; 2) Use a more flexible instructional system; and 3) Develop a strong sense of community" (p. 13). The last suggestion was the one carrying most weight with the students, according to Kaczynski, and included details of relationships with teachers, staff, and other students.

Neumann (1994) believes that humanistic psychology is the driving force behind alternative schools, and as a result, alternative education often incorporates the idea that "education should be tailored to students' needs and interests as much as possible" (p. 548). "Consequently, alternative programs often attempted to blend academic subjects with practical areas of knowledge and personal interest, and many schools created individualized learning plans for each student."

Kershaw and Blank (1993) listed several attributes of successful programs: "choice, extended roles, relative autonomy, continuing evaluation, . . . teacher participation in management, well defined student populations, strong academic leadership, academic innovation, clear standards for conduct, and small school size" (Kershaw & Blank, 1993, p. 3). Darling-Hammond, Ancess, and Ort (2002) advocated for small school size as well, and London (1992) viewed the most effective size to be from 30 to 50 students. Neumann (1994) claimed that site based management of alternative programs is as important as other characteristics mentioned.

Raywid's Work in Typing Alternative Schools

Raywid (1983, 1994) is well known for her typology of alternative schools. Probably the most cited writer in the area of alternative education, she has been instrumental in providing the basis for the study of alternative schools. She argued the need to expand the research of the alternative school environment and cited shortcomings of her works that may have precluded better expansion.

According to Raywid, (1983) the formal definition of an alternative school "is any school (or administrative unit) within a system of differentiated schools or units that are available on a choice basis" (p. 191). Her "substantive definition" expands on the formal, adding five specific characteristics that distinguish alternative from traditional schools: 1) strong relationships between stakeholders, making for a sense of membership; 2) unique content; 3) participatory learning, including internships and social service; 4) systems of evaluation outside traditional grades; and 5) less emphasis on strict control and more on democratic and shared leadership. She distinguished the substantive definition from characteristics of many magnet schools and most "back-to-basics schools."

Raywid's (1994) "Type I alternatives are schools of choice and are usually popular" (p. 27). "They sometimes resemble magnet schools and in some locales constitute some or all of the options in choice systems. They are likely to reflect programmatic themes or emphases pertaining to content or instructional strategy, or both." Type I schools are largely student-centered and more democratic by definition, resembling additive approaches as described earlier. Type II alternatives are not optional for students and are usually the last stop before expulsion or long-term

suspension. They include punishment rooms, boot camps, and in-school suspension programs. They have behavior modification at their center and typically do not feature innovative education practices. They do not really fit Raywid's (1983) formal or substantive definition of a proper alternative school. Type II schools would fit into the deficit approach described earlier. Type III schools focus on academic remediation, psychological and emotional problems, or a combination. They are generally designed to reintegrate students into a traditional setting after temporary treatment. Type III schools likely would share components of both additive and deficit approaches to varying degrees. Some Type III schools incorporate additives such as treatment programs or other student-focused interventions, while others take the deficit approach through more moralistic methods that imply the student is the problem. In many cases, Raywid's substantive definition does not fit types II or III, but reveals her inclusion of labeled alternative schools in her typology so that they can be considered for comparison.

"Alternative education differs considerably from most other reform proposals, including open education and progressive education. While the latter seem to have originated from theories, or on drawing boards, alternative education originated and is evolving largely in practice" (Raywid, 1983, p. 190). Raywid sums up an academic dilemma with her assertion that theory has not driven the research or the practice in the field of alternative education. Friedlander (1965) suggested educators have a responsibility to verify that new ideas work before taking for granted that they are effective. To a large extent, according to Raywid (1983), there is no theoretical foundation for many of the alternative programs.

Early alternative schools attracted researchers with their innovative techniques such as learner-directed curricula and democratic leadership styles, but the ensuing studies lacked the rigor necessary to make them useful to scholars or practitioners (Cox et al., 1995; Lange & Sletten, 2002). Studies have mainly looked at individual programs because of the many varieties and disparate definitions, and generalizability is therefore suspect. The available studies also lack long-term outcomes and often are performed by those who are too closely involved to be objective. There have been increasing calls for scientific research on benefits to the students and what accounts for those benefits. “Methodological shortcomings continue to plague the alternative school literature” (Cox et al., 1995, p. 230). “These center on the lack of true experimental research designs and the lack of extended follow-ups.” The dearth of empirical research has slowed the discovery of intervention strategies (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2001).

Raywid (1983) blamed the lack of legitimate research into alternative schools on the roots of the movement. “Free schools, which were among the first contemporary alternatives, were openly ahistorical” (1983 p. 190). She stated, “the anti-scientism and anti-abstraction biases which began in the same period have also left their stamp on succeeding alternative schools.” Although there appears to be a connection of “open education” to alternative education, they do not share the same reliance on theoretical bases. Raywid views alternative education, as she defines it, as owing some allegiance to the progressive education movement.

Raywid’s (1983) typology, although useful in categorizing schools for discussion and comparison, does not meet the strict definition as a typology (Doty & Glick, 1994). Raywid’s types are not mutually exclusive, thereby not meeting the

definition. Raywid (1994) pointed out in her later works that the types she noted can and do overlap at times to form hybrid varieties; therefore, the types cannot be mutually exclusive. This failure to distinguish among types compromises her work's usefulness for study but has not kept it from providing a basis for examining and comparing alternative programs. Raywid's work "is essentially only guesswork until a definitive survey is conducted of alternatives as they currently exist and operate across the nation" (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p. 20).

The typing of schools has been used successfully as a lens to differentiate the approaches, philosophies, and management of alternative schools and has stimulated thought about which features might be leading to success; however, its limitations include its inability to help define the features that might be causing success. Most boot camps are not successful in turning around the academic or psycho-social outcomes of the students or inmates who attend them (Bottcher & Ezell, 2005; Gregg, 1999; Riphagen, 2010; J. Tyler, Darville, & Stalnaker, 2001). Type II boot camps, however, are not necessarily precluded from success. For example, Raywid's understanding is that a Type II boot camp may have a faculty that embodies characteristics of a Type III school, thereby leading to more possibilities of Type III outcomes for students. If Raywid's types didn't overlap there would be clarity about which characteristics of those alternative schools were successful.

Perhaps Raywid's observation that the alternative school movement has followed practice more than theory can help explain why there is not a body of longitudinal or systematic studies of alternative schools. Instead, the literature contains mainly anecdotal descriptions and observations. The reluctance to scale up individual

programs appears problematic to generalizability as well. A more stable theoretical basis is needed in order to study factors contributing to variation in alternative school success.

Lange and Sletten on Outcomes

This section advances a framework for empirical investigation of alternative schooling that addresses weaknesses of earlier work. Lange and Sletten (2002) noted that many researchers have framed alternative school *best practices*, but there is no evidence that these practices are being used in alternative schools. The researchers concurred with the practices defined earlier as the additive approach and argue they are the defining features of alternative schools. Lange and Sletten also argue that the rise of more punitive programs beginning in the 1980s have resulted in a drift from sound practice.

Lange and Sletten (2002) contended that research completed before the turn of this century was centered on three distinct aspects of alternative school design, lenses through which to understand intended outcomes: "1) student response to choice and flexibility, 2) students' sense of belonging, satisfaction and changes in self-esteem, and 3) academic achievement." (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p. 16)

This section uses Lange and Sletten's three *outcomes* (2002) to analyze practices suggested in the literature. A discussion about using the Lange and Sletten framework for examining the effectiveness of current alternative programs follows.

Choice and Flexibility Examples of Practices

Lange and Sletten (2002) wrote that choice and flexibility make up one of three outcomes found in the literature related to alternative school student success.

For example, Kellmayer (1995) suggested that curriculum be unique to the needs and culture of each individual school as well as students within the school and that it should not be considered static but should evolve. This is exemplary of flexibility of both the school organization and its approach to individual students. Further suggestions by Kellmayer included both a time-based and a proficiency-based curriculum to fit the needs of learners with impediments to traditional schedules.

Lange and Sletten (1995) reported that Minnesota had success using varied days and hours of operation to suit individual needs, and the California State Department of Education (1995) documented that the mixture of time-based and proficiency-based scheduling was being used effectively. Kellmayer (1995) claimed that alternative schools should make decisions on most school issues with the participation of students and teachers. Neumann (1994)) concurred with the idea that student and faculty participation is important to maintain a relevant and interesting curriculum because it reflects their choices. He advocated for site-based management as an essential first step in sharing decisions with students and staff. Kershaw and Blank (1993) used the terms *choice* and *relative autonomy* in their recommendations for alternative education, and Kaczynski (1989) used the terms *choice* and *freedom*. Small school size advocated by Darling-Hammond et al. (2002) and London (1992) is viewed as a component that makes flexibility a possibility. Saunders and Saunders (2001) concurred on the issue of small size allowing for flexibility in serving students individually.

Sense of Belonging, Satisfaction and Student Self-Esteem Examples of Practices

Lange and Sletten's (2002) second outcome is sense of belonging, satisfaction, and student self-esteem. Examples of this outcome or theme in the literature include the

following. The California State Department of Education (1995) noted that it is common to find courses that are designed specifically to explore and enhance student feelings of personal value. Kellmayer (1995) recommended courses in crisis intervention, suicide prevention, drug abuse and prevention programs, and peer mediation. These are courses that address issues known to affect student sense of self-esteem and the ability to interact within a social group. Saunders and Saunders (2001) found that the most resounding suggestions from students for effective alternative school programs emphasized developing strong feelings of a group identity.

Academic Emphasis Examples of Practices

Lange and Sletten's (2002) third outcome is academic emphasis. Examples from the literature include these studies. Prevailing practices advocate academic rigor as a means to increased success for alternative education students. Kershaw and Blank (1993) recommended against teaching low-level cognitive skills, rote memorization, and emphasis on testing standards at the expense of quality. In order to avoid these pitfalls, Knapp et al. (1990) advocated connecting the academic content to real life issues, understanding the deeper implications of content, thus allowing for new and complicated empirical exercises. They further promoted the application of skills in authentic ways, teaching concepts and disciplines as interrelated, valuing attitudes and personal thoughts, and avoiding redundant teaching of lower level skills. To accomplish the goals of Knapp et al., Nuemann (1994), London (1992), and Hanson (1992) suggested using student projects which could include theses, reports, journals, performances, portfolios, debates, learning logs, interviews, mock trials, and artwork instead of worksheets and low-level exercises. London observed that problem-solving

and coping mechanisms were more valuable than attempts to memorize basic facts. Kaczynski (1989) observed that feelings of academic success were important to the sense of self-efficacy.

Summary of Lange and Sletten's *Outcomes*

The literature seems to confirm Lange and Sletten's (2002) claim that research tends to fall under one or more of the *outcomes* noted. Raywid (1983) contended that there is little attention to a theoretical basis for the advancement of alternative schooling, and this appears to be the case with the *outcomes* framework. Lange and Sletten do not link their assumptions or findings to a theoretical base; however, their three *outcomes* interestingly do correspond to a set of concepts and explanations found in the psychological needs literature. An exploration of psychological needs theory seems logical as a next step in the search for a theoretical base explaining variation in alternative school effectiveness.

Needs and Motivation Theory

Alternative education programs, though varied, were historically designed or organized to address one or more of the three outcomes, suggested above by Lange and Sletten (2002). The literature includes curricular and programmatic features of: *choice/flexibility*, *belongingness/self-esteem*, and *academic abilities*. "Educators need to recognize that many of their 'problem' students are trying to satisfy what Maslow (1943) identified as lower order survival and belonging needs" (Kershaw & Blank, 1993, p. 16). "These students are unable to move toward self-actualization until those needs are fulfilled to some extent." The evidence suggests that unmet needs — both

physiological and social-emotional — impel many students toward alternative education (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2001).

Background

Abraham Maslow is among the most noted psychology theorists (Alderfer, 1969) in the area of needs. His 1943 “Hierarchy of Needs” was built on the central idea that unsatisfied needs guide motivation. This is represented in a five-level pyramid that includes *physiological needs* at its base, followed by *safety*, *love/belongingness*, *esteem*, then *self-actualization* at the top. He asserted that lower level needs must be satisfied before higher needs are activated. Significant unfulfilled needs at any lower level may cause a person to retreat to the lower level. Once needs are satisfied, energy can be turned to the higher-level needs. Maslow’s theory was criticized as untestable in scientific terms, yet it remains important conceptually.

Frederick Herzberg (1968) introduced a theory in 1964 claiming that there are two factors present in motivation formation; motivators and hygienes. Motivators provide positive satisfaction, but hygiene factors are only important if absent, at which point they become demotivators. Herzberg argued that what motivates does not necessarily demotivate when the stimulus is absent; it merely represents an absence of motivation. Hygiene factors can only cause dissatisfaction when absent.

Taking into account some of the criticisms of Maslow’s theory, Alderfer (1969) introduced a theory called E.R.G. The acronym stands for existence, relatedness, and growth. These stages combined Maslow’s five levels into three. Alderfer did not presume lower-level needs had to be satisfied before higher order needs were relevant to the individual, although he did claim that frustration in higher level needs affected

satisfaction and continuing pursuit of lower levels. E.R.G. theory assumes the three needs are the focus of constant pursuit.

Beginning in the 1970s, Edward Deci and Richard Ryan used the concept of intrinsic motivations to explain individual behavior. Their theory stresses three important environmental factors that produce intrinsic motivation: *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness*; these form a sub-theory, part of Self Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This theory appears robust with a good many replicated studies confirming its viability (Deci et al., 1999); it has remained a dominant line of thinking in social psychology, economics, and organizational sciences.

Assumptions Refuted

There has been a longstanding belief by economists and the public, in general, that strong incentives assures motivation (Bénabou & Tirole, 2003). While the behaviorist paradigm reduces process within the human subject to a simple stimulus-response, human needs theorists claim that, while temporary motivation may be exhibited when a reward is presented, the same reward is not likely to motivate behavior in future attempts to replicate it (Bénabou & Tirole, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This may be due to an inner process whereby rewards lower feelings of task desirability or of competence to accomplish the task. Bénabou and Tirole found three beliefs about rewards and punishments that constrain motivation: 1) people perceive them as demeaning; 2) they lead to less impetus to act out the desired behavior; and 3) they are interpreted as externally motivated.

Applications to Organizations

"A focus on the interpersonal context within which events occur seems particularly important when applying these concepts to organizational settings" (Deci et al., 1989, p. 581). It should not be assumed that motivation will come just through management's awareness that people respond negatively to rewards and punishments. According to Deci, et al., the whole of the climate is important to consider as it conditions motivation. They state while the mechanisms used by organizations to prime worker behavior are fairly consistent, the dynamics involved in interpersonal communication and interaction show more variability. This observation provides an avenue to understanding the differences in human reactions between-persons and to effect change of those behaviors that are not productive according to Deci, et al. This was noted in a study that found variables at play that influenced worker inability to move beyond perceived minimal basic needs being met. "It could be that these results support the concept of a hierarchy of needs (Alderfer, 1972; Maslow, 1943), in which the higher order need for self-determination was salient only when lower order needs for pay and job security were well satisfied and thus not salient" (p. 589).

School Setting

Among the first studies challenging conventional assumptions about rewards and motivation were those in the school setting (Deci et al., 1989). "These studies showed… that teachers who were oriented toward supporting student self-determination had a positive effect on the intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, and perceived competence of their students, relative to teachers who were oriented toward controlling their students' behavior" (p. 581). Effective control in the classroom is less about a

controlling management style and more about attending to the psychological needs of students.

Attention to student needs does not mean eliminating the need for classroom control. Nie and Lau (2009), however pointed out that, consistent with a behaviorist view, most classroom management focuses on controlling misbehavior. They assert that *control* and *care* are both relevant for effective classrooms. Wooten and McCroskey's (1996) findings confirmed that teacher responsiveness produces trust between students and teachers, but a level of teacher assertiveness is an important ingredient as well for student participation. "Accumulating research has revealed that classroom management is a critical component of effective teaching" (Nie & Lau, 2009, p. 185). Teacher actions that convey concern for student needs along with balanced control of student actions promote student performance. Balanced "behavioral control was a significant negative predictor of classroom misbehavior and care was a significant positive predictor of satisfaction with school" (p. 185), even after controlling for student socio-economic status and demographics.

Self Determination Theory

The utility of Self Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000) has been shown in the settings of business, sports, education, economics, and others. As pointed out in the previous section, the psychological needs identified in SDT parallel the three needs, established as outcomes and framed by the literature as those that alternative programs have traditionally sought to fulfill (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Those domains include *choice/flexibility*, *belongingness/self-esteem*, and *academics.* Further, SDT offers an explanation about how alternative education programs can develop student

intrinsic motivation to promote achievement. “SDT is an approach to human motivation and personality that uses traditional empirical methods while employing an organismic metatheory that highlights the importance of humans' evolved inner resources for personality development and behavioral self-regulation (Ryan, Kuhl, & Deci, 1997)” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68).

“Self-determination theory emphasizes the significance of three basic psychological needs in people’s self-motivation and healthy psychological growth—the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy” (Nie & Lau, 2009, p. 185). Note the coincidence of these psychological needs and the needs outcomes framework of Lange and Sletten (2002). Clearly, *choice/flexibility* conceptually overlaps *autonomy*; *belongingness*/*esteem* overlaps *relatedness*; and *academic achievement* overlaps *competence*. “Strong links between intrinsic motivation and satisfaction of the needs for autonomy and competence have been clearly demonstrated, and some work suggests that satisfaction of the need for relatedness, at least in a distal sense, may also be important for intrinsic motivation” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71).

SDT and Classroom Management

Nie and Lau (2009) argued the relevance of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) for classroom management. SDT differentiates between balanced behavioral control, or management, and external control; preventing student loss of the sense of autonomy while maintaining order. It explains through needs satisfaction why teachers can be more effective in showing concern for students. Order, according to Nie and Lau, is not only the removal of misconduct; instead it requires that students act with purpose and show signs of psychological wellness.

External Control and Behavioral Control

Differentiating between external and behavioral control is key to understanding why some studies point to teacher control as positive and motivating, while other studies find that control lowers student involvement and motivation (Nie and Lau, 2009). External control uses coercive methods such as setting guidelines and offering rewards for compliance, or punishment for non-compliance (Deci et al., 1989; Nie & Lau, 2009). When external controls are minimized, students are surrounded by autonomy support that encourages self-initiative and self-control. Ryan and Deci (2000) "found that conditions supportive of autonomy and competence reliably facilitated this vital expression of the human growth tendency, whereas conditions that controlled behavior and hindered perceived effectance undermined its expression" (p. 76). Teachers who have adequate control of their classrooms should therefore see the benefits of less misbehavior and deeper involvement of students in their own education. (Nie & Lau, 2009)

Behavioral control can be related to *structure* as found in the literature (Nie & Lau, 2009). Structure implies that there is good communication of expectations, procedures, and norms and that the setting is well defined for students. Although *structure* is more often used in describing instruction, behavioral control is used when describing classroom management; both communicate expectations, according to Nie and Lau. This is how SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) explains that structure or classroom control can provide welcome and useful information, thereby not thwarting the development of autonomy.

Care is complimentary to behavioral control (Nie & Lau, 2009). Care is the avenue through which relatedness is conveyed to students and is thus a necessary component of overall classroom management. But care alone cannot elicit appropriate behavior—it doesn't address the need for order. Control is a necessary component for managing behavior, but it does not produce feelings of liking school, as care has been shown to do. Nie and Lau found, that together, care and informational control can lead to effective classroom management.

Information or Control

Students are naturally motivated towards activities that they find interesting, stimulating, or novel (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For activities that do not naturally appeal to children's interests, adults have the ability to influence the incorporation of activities, rationales, behaviors, and norms that evolve into interests. SDT helps teachers understand how to motivate students.

Self-determination is advanced by useful *information*, while information viewed as *controlling* thwarts student self-initiated behavior (Deci et al., 1989). "More recent studies have shown, however, that although a specific event (e.g., positive feedback) tends, on average, to have a particular functional significance, the interpersonal context within which the event is administered has an important influence on the functional significance of the event" (p. 580). This explains why positive feedback can be taken as either *informational* or *controlling*, and this is true for rewards based on performance, as well as punishments. As examples, positive feedback can be interpreted as trite and therefore as controlling; performance rewards can sidetrack students from more personally meaningful work and therefore as controlling; and restrictive rules can be

viewed as helpful in maintaining a perception of needed order and therefore as informational.

Rewards and other forms of external control measures have two parts (Deci et al., 1989). The *informational* form increases perceived competence and self-direction in the student, while the controlling aspect causes the student to perceive that he is not in control and therefore become less intrinsically motivated. “Events that decrease perceived self-determination (i.e., that lead to a more external perceived locus of causality) will undermine intrinsic motivation, whereas those that increase perceived self-determination (i.e., that lead to a more internal perceived locus of causality) will enhance intrinsic motivation” (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001, p. 3).

“Contexts supportive of autonomy, competence, and relatedness were found to foster greater internalization and integration than contexts that thwart satisfaction of these needs” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 76). Overt micromanagement, tedious work, and perceptions of meaningless duties can do more than harm to the student work ethic; they can cause dysfunction in the emotional and psychological aspects of student school experiences. On the other hand, giving students the ability to choose to participate for themselves and feel that they have the inner resources within an environment of caring can stimulate feelings of satisfaction and success in school.

Relatedness

Behaviors originated by forces outside the students generally are not of interest to them; as a consequence, students primarily act only to impress or emulate another person whom they respect or who acts as a model (Ryan & Deci, 2000). “This suggests that relatedness, the need to feel belongingness and connectedness with others, is

centrally important for internalization" (p. 73). Internalization is connected to a structure of support that amplifies the likelihood that students will perceive belongingness. "For example, Ryan, Stiller, and Lynch (1994) showed that the children who had more fully internalized the regulation for positive school related behaviors were those who felt securely connected to, and cared for by, their parents and teachers (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 73)."

Infants exhibit intrinsic motivation to explore when they venture away from the safety of the parent (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In fact, theorists who study attachment find that the propensity to explore is greatly heightened when the infant has a sense of security and an environment shaped by the parent that supports autonomous behaviors. SDT assumes that this is true throughout the developmental stages of humans, especially flourishing when the environment is equipped to foster security and significant relationships.

> For example, Anderson, Manoogian, and Reznick (1976) found that when children worked on an interesting task in the presence of an adult stranger who ignored them and failed to respond to their initiations, a very low level of intrinsic motivation resulted, and Ryan and Grolnick (1986) observed lower intrinsic motivation in students who experienced their teachers as cold and uncaring (p. 71).

Obviously, there are many examples of independent activities being carried out without any outside prodding. Thus, it is not always necessary to have others around in order to develop intrinsic motivation; however, "a secure relational base does seem to be important for the expression of intrinsic motivation to be in evidence (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71)."

SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) researchers have used the term "involvement" when describing an environment that conveys relatedness (Nie & Lau, 2009). Involvement in

this sense describes the relationship between teacher and student as caring, interested, and affectionate. This climate exudes relational harmony for the purpose of developing the components necessary to promote self-directed and motivated behaviors in students.

Competence

Competence is another necessary component for student internalization of motivation that starts externally (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students are more likely to take on activities if they feel they are capable of performing them. “As is the case with all intentional action, OIT [organismic integration theory, a sub-theory of SDT] suggests that supports for competence should facilitate intermediation” (p. 73). When students are asked to internalize behaviors before they are matured enough to understand the reasons for performing the activity, or before they can successfully perform a task, they cannot be expected to internalize it fully as their own. A sense of efficacy is essential in the process of becoming internally motivated.

Autonomy

The possession of perceived autonomy is the third element for internalizing a norm, behavior, or thought pattern. It has a special place in the equation for students to become self-regulated.

> Contexts can yield external regulation if there are salient rewards or threats and the person feels competent enough to comply; contexts can yield introjected regulation if a relevant reference group endorses the activity and the person feels competent and related; but contexts can yield autonomous regulation only if they are autonomy supportive, thus allowing the person to feel competent, related, and autonomous. (Ryan & Deci, 2000, pp. 73-74)

A school can provide an environment supportive of autonomy. On one side a school will miss this supportive environment by instead providing too much control and on the other side may fail to motivate students by lacking mechanisms to encourage

meaningful and challenging tasks (Ryan & Niemiec, 2009) “Support for basic psychological needs fosters more autonomous self-regulation, persistence, quality of learning, and greater wellness and feelings of connection.” (p. 269)

For integration to take place, students must understand the rule or norm in question, and they must be able to fit it in with their other internalized ambitions and values (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Environments rich in autonomy support provide students with choices and the freedom to act on their own. The need to comply is not expected or pushed on them. Only then can students perceive that they got to that point on their own and want to be there.

Summary of Self Determination Theory

SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) aligns with the three domains of *needs outcomes* described by Lange and Sletten (2002) which have historically been the foci and bases of alternative education programs. SDT explains self-directed behavior, which is furthered by a mixture of legitimate control of behavior in the classroom and a show of care and concern for students as individuals. The environment set by the teacher, whether informational or controlling, affects self-determination. Informational input is perceived as helpful and encouraging of the perception that behavior is chosen; controlling input diminishes self-determination because it is external to the individual’s locus of control. Feeling relatedness to school and class is likely because of ample support suggesting students are safely in the fold. This sense of safety tends to allow for better exploration of the environment. Competence, or the perception of possessing it, is necessary for a student to see reason for engaging. Autonomy is the building block of SDT that promotes student engagement in competence and relatedness. Only when

there exists an environment supportive of the idea that students are making choices in their own education is there an opportunity to build on the concepts of relatedness and competence.

> The growing body of evidence from SDT demonstrating that when classroom conditions support the intrinsic motivation of learners by attending to their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, students are more likely to flourish and develop capabilities. In contrast, when education consists of controls, demands, pressures, and performance-contingent rewards, both its quality and its reach is diminished (Ryan & Niemiec, 2009, p. 270).

Chapter III. Research Design

The purpose of this case study of an established alternative school program was to explain the conditions of school structure that may contribute to increased likelihood of student success. School structure was generally defined as the conditions, elements, and features of the school, as perceived by the students, staff, parents, and researcher. Student success was generally defined as behaviors that lead to graduation from high school. The "social—contextual conditions" of Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68) guided the investigation. Researcher observation, interviews, and document collection were used to explore the questions.

The organization of this chapter begins with a restatement of the research questions followed by a discussion of the rationale for the research design strategy. I then describe in fuller detail the study site, participants involved, and the data collection methods. An account of all measures used to insure the protection of human subjects is included next with support and evidence of my accountabilities. I follow with a detailed account of the data reduction and analysis including four steps of coding used and a summary of those processes. There is a short review of the validity issues followed by my role as the researcher leading to a summary of the entire chapter.

Research Questions

Three research questions guided this study:

1) How does the school support student competence?
2) How does the school support student autonomy?
3) How does the school support student relatedness?

Research Design Strategy

This study followed the case study tradition as described by Creswell (2007). He indicated that this approach is best suited for "developing an in-depth description and analysis of a case or multiple cases" (p.78). Because of the limited body of knowledge regarding alternative schools (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2001; Cox et al., 1995; Raywid, 1983), the case method provides an especially effective approach for gaining an understanding of alternative school environments. Though alternative schools differ greatly on many dimensions (Kellmayer, 1995; Lange & Sletten, 1995; Neumann, 1994; Reimer & Cash, 2003), the literature reveals that alternative school origins attempted to address the neglected needs of students (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2001; Lange & Sletten, 2002). Lange and Sletten categorized the limited research into three outcomes on which alternative schools were designed to concentrate; these categories revealed striking likeness to the concepts underlying Self-Determination Theory. The case study approach allows for the discovery and exploration of concepts, yet undefined in context and since the questions stem from a need to discover the *how* of the concepts the case method is appropriate (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009).

The rationale for choosing the case method included a well-defined case with clearly marked parameters, and a plan to provide a deep vision of the setting based on a broad variety of data (Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, "The case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events—such as… school performance…" (Yin, 2009, p. 4). This study examined a distinct setting. I conducted the exploration through the use of observations of the students and staff; interviews conducted with students, parents, staff, and administrators; document

reviews including student progress records and school policies; and engagement of focus groups.

Site

Yin (2009) stated that the single case design is extremely appropriate when the case represents “a critical test of existing theory” (p. 52). The selected case included attributes of graduation rate successes, longstanding community partnering being founded in 1973, and having an autonomous board of directors with the stated focus of attacking the graduation rate decline. I have relied on Yin’s belief that the best technique is to use pattern matching to show a link between the predicted pattern and the pattern derived from the data. By starting with a subject, Alt School, that has shown long-standing success, the site is appropriate for pattern matching to the theoretical bases for its possible mechanisms of this success. Yin advises that an embedded design of subunits within the study can prevent over-abstraction and provide more depth in data; however, he also cautions against the study losing touch with the focus on the subject (the school in this case) by overemphasizing the subunit (the members of the school).

Participants

Creswell (2007) suggested the importance of “purposeful sampling,” not only in selecting a site, but also in selecting participants. Because success was a defining parameter in the research questions, it was proposed to involve only students who had successfully completed at least two semesters and their parents. Nine students were involved in the student focus group with two being interviewed individually as well. Parent volunteers proved to be minimal resulting in looking outside of the group of

parents of the students who participated in a focus group and individual interviews. Only two parents of interviewed students were themselves interviewed along with five parents of students who were not interviewed.

Ten teachers and counselors took part in two focus groups of five participants each. One teacher and one counselor, who both took part in the focus groups, were individually interviewed. Originally it was planned to seek only input from staff members who had at least two semesters of experience in the school but two new teachers were used in the focus groups when I rationalized that they had valuable insight as fresh observers of the school's processes. The original protocol mirrored the reasoning I used to interview only students with at least two semesters within the school and I noted this did not hold the same value with staff members since it was student success that was being studied. Two administrators were interviewed individually.

To recruit participants the administrators agreed to distribute a letter I had drafted to students, staff, and parents (see Appendix C). In addition, further recruitment efforts involved my attendance at a staff meeting, a student lunch period, and a parent night event.

Data Collection

Data collection for this qualitative study consisted of "multiple sources of information, such as observation, interviews, documents, . . ." (Creswell, 2007, p. 75). Sources included: Focus groups with students and staff; individual follow-up interviews with students and staff who seemed to offer the most information in the focus groups; individual interviews with parents and administrators; observations made of the school setting; student progress documents, and a review of school policies and procedures.

The data gathered from interviews and group forums were the result of set questions designed before the meetings with participants (see Appendix D). These questions were designed to elicit responses that could attend to the significance of the three research questions and were later transcripted (see Appendix E). It was assumed that additional questions would be included as they were warranted by the participant feedback to more fully investigate the research questions. Follow up interviews that resulted from choosing four forum participants who were particularly vocal and informative were asked questions designed after their input in the forums to further the possible significance of their previous statements.

Protection of Human Subjects

IRB and Ethics. I completed The University of Oklahoma Tulsa Graduate College two-day course in Responsible Conduct of Research. The certificate of completion described the course as being "Focused on development of ethical decision-making skills and understanding the complexities and ambiguities of conducting research in the 21st century".

I successfully completed the Human Research Curriculum Course– the CITI Course in the Protection of Human Research Subjects through the University of Oklahoma. Upon proposal acceptance, I completed the process for Institutional Research Board approval (see Appendix F).

Informed consent. Federal guidelines for research were followed in providing and conveying such provisions to participants in this study. Subjects were fully informed of the intentions, process, and intended methods of documentation of their responses so that they could consent or decline with the full knowledge and clarity of

expectations (see Appendix G). In regard to minor students, the full disclosure and subsequent approval of their parents was obtained before allowing them to engage in any aspects of the investigation. These parameters reflect the ethical guidelines for research that have been broadly accepted by the education community.

Confidentiality. The specific location of the school was not used in the manuscript and only generalized references to the geographic placement was involved. In regard to the participation and inclusion in this study, the confidentiality of all respondents was protected. Data was assigned labels to differentiate according to status as student, parent, teacher, or administrator, and pseudonyms were assigned such that identities are secure. No real names, initials, or other designation was used that could distinguish one participant from the others. Concise phrases were used in reporting of results that cannot be attributed to any specific individual participant in the study.

Data Reductions and Analyses

Data management started with the creation and organization of files for collected data. Data analysis consisted of dissecting the transcripts from the focus groups, interviews, and classroom observation notes. The text was read, notes were made in the margins, and initial codes formed. Descriptions of the case, within its contexts, were written. The analysis involved "reducing the data into themes through the process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, . . ." (Creswell, 2007, p. 148). Creswell notes that several authors describe various strategies, all of which involve "(reducing the data into meaningful segments and assigning names for the segments), combining the codes into broader categories or themes, and displaying and making comparisons" (p.148). Therefore, the

classification employed categorical aggregation and patterns of categories were established. Interpretation was pursued through "direct interpretation" (p.163) and "naturalistic generalizations" (p.152) were developed. Narratives have been augmented using tables and figures for aid in visualizing analyses.

Once all data was analyzed in the coding process, themes were considered to identify similarities to determine "Within-Case Themes" (Creswell, 2007, p. 172) to examine for consistency. Finally, "Assertions and Generalizations" were derived from the patterns established in the results.

Coding. I organized the data by grouping responses, phrase by phrase, according to similar themes. Initially, several preliminary code categories were identified in conjunction with Creswell's (2007) concept of "Tentative Coding" (p.152). The digestion of data led me to "naturalistic generalizations" that may be considered when studying other similar cases in the future, either by myself or for other researchers.

Step 1: Preliminary/Tentative Coding. The preliminary codes were selected to reflect alignment to the three constructs of Self Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000) with enhancement based in the work of Lange and Sletten (2002) (see Table 3.1). Coding was determined according to three broad categories derived from the constructs of SDT a) Competence, b) Autonomy, and c) Relatedness. Lange and Sletten found in their research that alternative schools had largely been focused on five concepts within three outcomes for students and I have shown parallels of these to the three constructs of SDT. Therefore, the Competence category included one subcategory of Academic Achievement. The Autonomy category included two subcategories of

Choice and Flexibility. The Relatedness category included two subcategories of Belongingness and Self-Esteem. Note that the use of the term category here should not be confused with subsequent steps that resulted in reducing themes into patterns or "categories" adopted from Saldano (2009).

Preliminary Codes
Competence   Academic Achievement

Autonomy
    Choice &
    Flexibility

Relatedness
    Belongingness &
    Self-esteem

Table 3.1 Preliminary Codes

Before applying the coding methods, participant statements and answers to the interview questions were obviously grouped with the questions in the transcripts. The questions were drawn directly from the constructs of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), however it became apparent, even during the interviews, that in some instances the answers and statements actually pertained more closely to one of the other preliminary codes. More precisely, some statements aligned more closely to other constructs of SDT or the *outcomes* that alternative schools had traditionally sought to achieve, uncovered in the literature by Lange and Sletten (2002).

To cite an example, the first question in the student forum was "How do they support you to know that you're capable — that you can do this stuff?" Carrie: "Yeah. And if you're not comfortable with talking to your counselor at the time, you can go,

like hey, can I talk to another counselor? And then they're like, yeah! go ahead!" Although this datum was a part of a discussion that pertained to the question designed to explore the concept of Competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000), it spoke to the preliminary sub-code of Flexibility (Lange & Sletten, 2002) and was therefore placed under that code in Step 1. In this first step, I looked at the responses as large chunks of data and re-sorted the data to align it with its best-fit under the preliminary code headings (see Table 3.1).

Step 2: In vivo coding.

Data phrases were extrapolated from the data under the preliminary code headings and based upon the words of the participants were assigned codes as themes emerged (see list of in vivo codes in Appendix A). This initial organization was based upon "direct interpretation" (Creswell, p.163) as the meaning was drawn from each individual comment. The framework was modified as needed to accommodate the basic emerging themes heard in the participants' voices.

For examples, here I will use the emerged code of CA or Caring Attitude which revealed itself to be the second most common theme. One student had a simple response: "they care more here." Referring to his previous schools Eddie stated: "You're only gonna find probably one teacher who's really gonna care at school." I followed up Eddie's statement with: "And why do you say that? What--what do you think they do to—that shows you that?" Eddie: "Their attitude." Ann stated: "They want to see every child here succeed. They want to see every child here graduate, you know, and move on to bigger and better things." The last statement included neither the word caring nor attitude but when broken down revealed exactly that.

It should be noted that I originally planned to use values coding as a fourth step in my methods, however I found it to be redundant after the processes I used in this second step. Saldana (2009) notes the importance of considering the influence of participants' individual situations on their responses. Their attitudes and beliefs toward school, teachers, and the establishment may have influenced their perceptions of the setting. I found that in listening to the participants' voices in the context of drawing meaning from each individual comment I was aligning the themes with consideration of the participants' assignment of values to the question being asked.

For instance, when Doug, a teacher, was responding to a question about the school providing flexibility to student needs and preferences he stated that the school was not very flexible because it could not offer a variety of elective courses due to its small size and staff. What he revealed, however, were a number of ways that the school was flexible in handling student needs within the courses that were offered. "You know, out of my understanding with the kids, um, in the subject matters that I teach I'm—I'm well aware that there is, um, different kids that have different learning styles, different learning interests in the material and I approach each one of them and work with them on the level that they need in terms of how they attack the material that is presented." Although Doug denied that the school had flexibility, his words affirmed that it did.

Step 3: Pattern coding. During this step, it became clear that the many emerged themes were noticeably similar and had overarching themes and patterns. I studied each grouping under the initial themes and rearranged the framework to put the emerged themes with like emerged themes. I used memoing each time I considered the regrouping and found some outliers that required evaluation to consider their likeness to

the broader groupings. Particularly, those emerged themes that were found only one to three times were considered for merit as stand-alone themes or for possible inclusion in an existing theme (See Appendix B, with notes in parentheses when single themes were moved to another theme code). Saldano (2009) used the term of *categories* when grouping themes to like themes, therefore I adopted this term.

An example comes from the step 3 category labeled Pastoral Care (see Appendix B). The Collins English Dictionary (Harper Collins Publishers, 2016) defines pastoral care as "help with personal needs and problems given by a teacher." Problems, needs, and personal were words in three of the four step 2 codes and the definition of pastoral care included these, therefore the grouping was condensed to use that terminology as a category. Another example is the largest regrouping of emerged theme codes into a single category. All of them spoke to building a culture at the school that bound the students, staff, and parents together in such a way that they were very tightly knit and protective of the culture they felt a part of, so the category was labeled as Culture of Sacred Community.

Step 4: Theoretical coding. Finally, the categories were reviewed to extrapolate their relationship to the original constructs of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). I examined the perspectives of the students, parents, teachers, and administrators to gain a comprehensive understanding of the constructs of the study to the overall student success reflected in the case. I examined the patterns (Yin, 2009) or categories, informed by the emerged themes they contained, for relevance to the constructs of SDT. Scrutiny was applied to the six categories to look for the degree of relatedness to the three-underlying human psychological needs that make up SDT. The

result was that three categories related to Competence, two to Autonomy, and one to Relatedness.

Data analysis summary. Four steps were involved in the data coding process of this case study. The first involved using preliminary codes based on the three constructs of Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and five subcategories derived from the alternative school literature (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Statements from participants' responses to questions derived from the guiding research questions were fit into the preliminary code framework (see Table 3.1, p. 55). The second step involved "direct interpretation" (Creswell, p.163) of participants' comments and the resultant coding of emerged themes (see appendix A). Themes were grouped and regrouped into patterns (Yin, 2009) or categories, which constituted the third step (see Appendix B). Lastly, the fourth step involved an examination of the relationship of the categories to the constructs (Yin, 2009) of Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) which guided this study (see Appendix B).

Validity and Credibility

The limitations involved in this study included the participants representing grades 9-12. As a single case study, it involved one alternative school of the voluntary student type. These limitations affect a conventional understanding of scientifically valid research design based on quantitative research methods.

In order to help insure that the participant's voices were being evaluated according to their intent when giving input I used member checking to boost credibility after transcribing the interviews. I also strived to ask clarifying follow-up questions and repeated my interpretation of the statements as the interviews were being conducted.

In this study, the independent variable would be the school's conditions of support for SDT, namely competence, autonomy, and relatedness. The dependent variable would be increased student success behaviors leading to graduation. "If the case study is an explanatory one, the patterns may be related to the dependent or the independent variables of the study (or both)" (Yin, 2009, p. 136). In the pattern coding phase, I adopted Saldano's (2009) term of *categories.* I believe that the categories related to both increased student success behaviors and the constructs of SDT (see Appendix B).

"For case study analysis, one of the most desirable techniques is to use a pattern-matching logic" (Yin, 2009, p. 136). "If the patterns coincide, the results can help a case study to strengthen its internal validity." In the next two chapters I will address the issues of the categories coinciding with student success and the constructs of SDT.

Researcher's Role

I was previously employed by the school district to which the site is connected by agreement and although it has an independent board there are revenues and other contracted dependencies. My role with the district included coordinating the management of the school but due to its independent nature contact was limited. In addition, my background in alternative education administration influenced the philosophical orientation to the concept of alternative education.

Summary

Alternative school effectiveness is little understood and empirical links to student success factors are lacking. A qualitative study using the case-study approach to

explain how the constructs of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) at an alternative school site were supported in order to bring to light conditions within an alternative school program that can then be used to promote successful practices leading to student success. The use of focus group interactions, personal interviews, document reviews, and researcher observations allowed for a comparison to theoretical concepts believed to affect student motivation and leading to enhanced student success in the educational setting.

Chapter IV: Report of Research Findings

The purpose of this case study of an established alternative school program was to explain the conditions of school structure that may contribute to increased likelihood of student success. School structure was generally defined as the conditions, elements, and features of the school, as perceived by the students, staff, parents, and researcher. Student success was generally defined as behaviors that lead to graduation from high school. The "social—contextual conditions" of Self-determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68) guided the investigation. Researcher observation, forum discussion, interviews, and document collection were used to explain the questions. In this chapter I will describe the setting of the study in greater detail to add richness to the context. I will then summarize the coding process from the methods chapter to add light to the ensuing findings from that process followed by a discussion of a proper presentation of findings from the literature. The chapter will proceed with a comparison of student definitions of academic success and the definition offered by this study to find if the two coalesce into a viable study of the findings. The remainder of the chapter will focus on the presentation of data findings. The organization of the presentation will include three sections headed by each of the guiding research questions which were derived from SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68) constructs of competency, autonomy, and relatedness. Under each I will present findings grouped under the categories that related to the constructs and under each category I will present the findings from the themes that were derived from the data.

Study Context

This case study centered on one longstanding alternative school serving around 100 students in grades 9-12 within the bigger context of a mid-western state's largest urban school district. The pseudonym used for the school and district in this study is the Alt School in Urban City School District. The administration of the school had been consistent for many years and the vision and the mission of the school had remained constant as well. The Executive Director had been in that position for 10 years at the time of the study and the Assistant Director had volunteered for the school in the summer of 1974 and began working as a counselor there in 1984. The school had an independent board of directors but had an agreement with Urban City School District which included funding the school for some of its teachers. It employed 10 teachers and six counselors including an intake counselor. With two administrators, a development coordinator, and auxiliary staff the total number of adults in the building was just over 20.

The success of its students has been documented as it relates to higher than average retention and graduation rates as well as improved academic outcomes measured by grades, state testing outcomes, and college entrance among others. Executive Director Lana, reported that, "The school's dropout rate is always around 3 or 4 percent; the other state alternative programs that we would compare ourselves to is usually 12 to 13 percent." Students attend by choice and usually are referred by friends who also attend or by the sending school's recommendations. There is an extensive evaluation of each prospective student aimed at determining the right fit for the

student's perceived needs but also to protect the school's ability to reserve its limited space for those students in the catchment area who could benefit the most.

All members of the school community go by their first names as a matter of practice. Executive Director Lana gave me a history of the school. The Alt School began in 1973 after some members of the Church of the Advent struck up a conversation with some teenagers who should have been in school. Upon finding that the teens expressed the desire to attend school but were not allowed for various reasons by the district. The congregation members decided to start a school program for students like the ones they were talking to.

They sought and gained approval from Urban City Schools for accreditation and became an approved agency to obtain funding through the United Way Program. According to Lana "The founders wanted it to be a place where students wanted to go — kind of modern-day, now *school of choice*." They also wanted the school to include a therapeutic and counseling component. "No matter what bureaucracies, what funding sources, what board of directors, staff, executive directors that have come and gone over the 40 years, the mission has really been able to stay true, and I find that pretty remarkable," said Lana.

Lana revealed that in the early to mid 1990s the state had 25 million dollars available that was sought after by various state agencies but ended up funding the new push for alternative education. She went on to say that Alt School was viewed as being a model for the state's vision and the 16 criteria put into law for the establishment of alternative school programs was "based on the best practices of Alt School."

> Alt School had a long history in this state. [The state's] longest-running and most successful and most replicated program. Um, and that's one reason why I

> feel really proud to be a part of Alt School is that history that's here and the work that's been done over these years. And the respect that we've gotten, um, from at one point from the State Department of Education and certainly legislatively based on what the, the good works and the success that we've seen in this program. So that's part of the background about Alt School.

Coding for Themes

Four steps were involved in the data coding process of this case study. The first involved using preliminary codes based on the three constructs of Self-determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and five subcategories derived from the alternative school literature (Lange & Sletten, 2002) (see table 3.1, p.55). Statements from participants' responses to questions, derived from the guiding research questions, were fit into the preliminary code framework (see table 3.1, p.55). The second step involved "direct interpretation" (Creswell, p.163) of participants' comments and the resultant coding of emerged themes (in vivo codes) (see appendix A). Themes were grouped and regrouped into patterns or categories, which constituted the third step (see Appendix B). Lastly, the fourth step involved an examination of the relationship of the categories, again, to the constructs of Self-determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) (see Appendix B).

Findings

Case study analysis, according to Yin (2009), is not well defined and very difficult to get right. He added that it depends on the researcher's ability to define his own style and ability to think critically combined with a full reliance on the evidence at hand. With this in mind, and before the study began, I selected what Yin called the "first and most preferred strategy" (p.130) of "relying on theoretical propositions." Yin believes that relying on the initial propositions guided by the theory and that shaped the

proposition, there is less likelihood of straying from the data that matters most to the study. My basic proposition was that if the alternative school under study was attending to student competence, autonomy, and relatedness then student self-motivation would lead to increased chances of academic success. Further Yin proposed that questions that start with “how” can aid in directing the analysis of a case study and mine qualified in this regard. He also espoused the strategy of looking at rival explanations as being appropriate combined with the approach of “relying on theoretical propositions.” To bolster internal validity, I have relied on Yin’s belief that the best technique is to use pattern matching to show a link between the predicted pattern and the pattern derived from the data.

Yin guided my analysis in four areas that he believed will result in the best outcomes for purposes of quality. First, I strove to be inclusive of all the evidence gathered in the study. One dilemma of qualitative studies is sensing how much of all the evidence available in the setting can possibly be gathered in the scope of one study. Secondly, I attempted to address all possible rival explanations or express them as possible areas for further research. Thirdly I showed that I am concentrating on the essential element of my study, namely student success and increased chance of graduation. And finally, I have applied my own personal experiences having been an empirical student of and professional administrator over alternative education since 1996.

What is Student Success According to the Study Participants

For this study student success was generally defined as behaviors that lead to graduation from high school. Though not in the original protocol I noted the need,

during my initial meetings with participants in the student and staff forums, to ask how they defined student success to compare the participants' ideas of success with the study's definition. A positive correlation of the students' definition and the study's definition would give credence to being on the right track when considering the data gathered from the protocol questions that were inspired by the research questions.

Student definitions of student success. During the student forum, which included 9 participants, Bobby's succinct answer was, "Uh, good grades and well, just good grades mostly." Gina stated, "success in school is understanding, and now, being here, I understand more." Hannah was even more succinct answering "participating" and Gina chimed in directly stating "I was gonna say that word." Eddie agreed with some previous definitions while adding a few by saying "basically just understanding your work and knowing how to do it, applying it, and getting good grades." Irene then added "do what you're supposed to do and make sure your grades is all pass." She added that she used to skip school but not now, thereby adding that her presence was a marker of success as well as "do[ing] what you're supposed to do." When Carrie's turn presented itself, she said, "I think success is being here and, uh, graduating." Next was Hanna with a longer thought on her initial one word answer: "Um, waking up every day and coming to school and learning responsibility, because that's what you're gonna need in the future is responsibility, and starting with school, I think there's, like, a-the foundation for learning how to do that." Frankie, a girl, remarked "cause I used to get F's," implying that passing grades were the key to student success. Danny was the last to add "I am much more successful here than, um, I would have been if I would have stayed at [Public School] … because I mean I just got an apartment and this school- my

counselor really taught me how to grow up and be more independent and have confidence in myself that I can be successful."

Comparing the students' definition of student success to the study's definition has merit for validating that the study's definition is aligned with the participants. Did I compare apples to apples? For this study student success was generally defined as behaviors that lead to graduation from high school. Only one student, Carrie, mentioned graduating as a marker of student success directly. Bobby started with good grades being a defining aspect of student success and Eddie, Irene, and Frankie echoed this in their statements. The behaviors that lead to passing grades are a path that lead to successful graduation. Gina and Eddie stated that "understanding" was a definition of success. Understanding is a component leading to passing grades and thereby more likelihood of graduation. Hannah brought up "participating" and Irene along with Carrie agreed that presence and "being here" led to success. Absences and nonparticipation are common issues that increase being at risk of unsuccessfulness and therefore attendance and participation are behaviors essential to graduation. Besides the agreements with previous statements Irene added "do what you're supposed to do" and later Hannah spoke again to add "responsibility" as ingredients to student success. An inner sense of responsibility or acting on what you need to do to move forward are, again, components of the behaviors needed for students to increase their chances of achieving graduation.

The students' comments to the question "what is student success" easily complied with the study's definition that success includes the behaviors that lead to graduation. Therefore, I ascertained that the students agreed with the study's definition. This is important because each research question sought to answer how the school

supported the conditions that satisfy students' needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness with the premise that this satisfaction would lead to student success. Knowing that the study's definition and the students' definition coalesce makes it possible to move forward to the exploration of the findings from the interview, forum, and observation data.

Presentation of Data Findings

Three research questions guided this study: 1) How does the school support student competence? 2) How does the school support student autonomy? 3) How does the school support student relatedness? Each question is gleaned from the three constructs of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The last step of methods used in this study was to examine categories of themes for their relationship back to the three constructs of SDT (see Appendix B). I intend to move through the discussion of each of the three research questions by addressing the categories that brought certain themes together under them. Each theme will be presented with the data from the findings that supported them.

Research Question 1: How Does the School Support Student Competence?

Following are the findings under the theoretical code of *Competence* which included the categories of *Pastoral Care, Individuation,* and *Self-activation* (see Table 4.1). These categories surfaced as the means for the school to make students feel efficacious in their attempts to do school work, gain credits, and finally show success through graduation with a high school diploma. The first category, *Pastoral Care*, allowed students to free up their energies to pursue higher order needs by taking care of basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. In addition, other basic needs including

addressing personal issues, psychological issues, and making students feel efficacious in being able to extend themselves in ways that were previously personally threatening to them. The second category, *Individuation*, grew students' feelings of efficacy by giving

Step 4: Theoretical Coding "Relation to SDT"	Step 3: Pattern Coding "Themes Condensed into Categories"	Step 2: In Vivo Coding "Emerging Themes"
	PASTORAL CARE	Basic Needs Personal Problems Personal Happiness Safety
COMPETENCE	INDIVIDUATION	Individualization Small School
	SELF-ACTIVATION	Empowerment Self-esteem Personal Accountability

Table 4.1 Categories and Themes with a Relationship to the Competence Theoretical Code from SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

them personalized and individualized attention, predominately to their academic needs. The third category, *Self-activation*, enabled them to gain a sense of efficacy through addressing their personal attributes of self-worth and ability to be in control of their own destinies.

Pastoral care. "Help with personal needs and problems given by a teacher" (Collins English Dictionary, 2017) is one definition of pastoral care. This is the first of three categories that tied into the theoretical code of *competence*. This category presented itself after the analysis of the emerged themes in Step 3 of the methods

section. I noted that the associated themes were related to the school's efforts to provide students with a basis from which to feel they had the ability to accomplish their work successfully at school by clearing a path in their personal lives for such work to be free from personal impediments. It was a departure from my presumption that only academic efforts of the school would lead to students feeling competent. Instead the data led to competence being attained by attending to social psychological issues as well as academics. Following is a report of findings under each theme that makes up the *Pastoral Care* category including: *basic needs, personal problems, personal happiness, and safety*.

Basic needs. The first of four themes under *Pastoral Care* emerged as participants related the school's efforts to ensure students had food, clothing, shelter, and the services of medical and general counseling. It surfaced within the first few minutes of the student forum but wasn't repeated until the staff forum. Student Ann introduced the theme with "A lot of the things that students don't have going to schools—like clothes, might not have food at their house or something, and Alt School helps provide you with that so that you can have clean clothing and whatnot." Assistant Director Mary remarked "So we're taking in the kids that are needing a lot of those basic needs." She stated at intake they ask "Are you going to need a place to live, do you need food, do you need medical care, have you had uh, uh vision screening ever, you know just those things that, that we'll know ahead of time so the counselor starts working with them, um, on that right away."

Mary gave an example about one student who she didn't name but from his earlier input in the student forum I recognized him to be Elijah:

> If they're going couch to couch you know how focused could they be here and so we work on that, so we have one young man that's doing that, we were able to get a place for him and it finally came through last week and so everybody is helping him. One of the teachers took him shopping for curtains you know, I have a sister-in-law who makes quilts so he's able to have bedding you know, somebody else is like, everybody comes together and they bring the things that he needs you know for that and we have the student store here where we have the food that's donated so the kids get food for free.

The very first comment in the staff forum fit the theme of *pastoral care* when I asked, "In what ways if any does this school support students in knowing what they need in order to be capable of handling school work and for the future?" Special Education Teacher Betty replied, "I think it's just like Maslow's--like it-- we have food, clothing, counseling, so all that is met first and, obviously, they can't learn algebra if they haven't eaten in 3 days." "So, it's just like all of those needs are met in one place." The second time in the staff forum that the theme revealed itself was from Counselor Jan:

> We know if a kid comes in and they're really tired I may let them nap in my office for ten minutes 'cause they can't learn if they're sleeping in class but they give them ten minutes to have a little cat-nap and they're ready to go you know, and so um, you know, we kind of do some of those things that maybe they don't do at other schools

Chronologically the last instance of the theme of *basic needs* came up in a parent interview. Denise revealed, "they've already taken care of things, you know, that some parents may not be able to afford, you know, certain things, and they've done that for them."

Although my prior assumption was that competence would be enhanced for graduation success through such means as enhancing basic student academic skills, the data revealed what Maslow (Alderfer, 1969) presented, namely that humans cannot be expected to move forward until basic needs are met. The number of times the theme

was presented was few but it spoke profoundly to the students' ability to feel capable by way of lessening their lower order needs.

Personal problems. The second theme that fit under the *Pastoral Care* category centered around the issues of trauma and perceived personal stressors. All the school's counselors hold licenses for counseling above and beyond the school counselor certification.

Student Ann stated, "yeah, if you're stressed out I don't even know math equations." She prefaced this with "they… ask you about problems that's going on in your home life so that you're not stressed out about it in class so that you can focus and pay more attention in the classroom." According to Carrie:

> A lot of the support I've gotten is from teachers and stuff like they're always worried about, like, if we're doing OK and what you're going through. If you're not, like if you don't seem focused in class they pull you aside and try to figure out what's going on.

Hannah, "They have grief counseling for you." "It helps me cope."

Administrator Mary related that the school had many more applicants than they had openings. She stated:

> We look at those kiddos that have had the most trauma… that just don't have any support, if they're kids that would just be out there some place cause nobody's going to be there to help them get the services they need, um then those are the ones that we bring in here.

Teacher Ed noted, "They have a dedicated counselor that is not just an academic counselor but they're a therapeutic counselor, which is a big deal." Hanna, the school's development director, said "it has a lot to do with the counselors and that they actually take into account the mental wellbeing, um, of the students." Counselor Angie, who was

a former student, reacted to the question about how the school provides for the need for *competency* with the following deep observation:

> Hmm, I think this, I'll just, students truly want to do well in life, with themselves they, that's where they want to be and they have developed these maladaptive behaviors for whatever reasons and so once we're able to focus on those reasons and focus on those behaviors, once they become self-aware of those they really can focus a lot more on the classroom and it feels good to get things and it feels good to see As and Bs and so I think a lot of that is just them, um, kind of mastering things they haven't been able before.
>
> Elly, a parent, revealed a specific case in point when she responded:
>
> I know me and my daughter, she was having some problems last year I didn't, I was not aware of until her counselor called me, and she talked to me about it, and then she's like, 'This is what we need to do, or we could do to help your daughter.' I was like, Okay, so I went, I went with whatever they suggested we do to help her.

Elly was the only parent whose input qualified for a fit in the theme of *personal problems* but she had another point:

> Well I think that when a person is strong, like, got high confidence and you don't have all these worries and burdens on your shoulder, and you don't sit there dwelling on your home life, and you come to a place where you feel comfortable, and you got people who care about you, and they want you to do well, then that makes you a stronger person.

Student Danny related:

> You can go to your counselor at any time during the day and ask a teacher, talking about, like, 'Well, hey, I'm having such and such problem at home, or I'm dealing with this person at school,' and it's another real great thing.

Student Ann responded:

> Here at this school they understand that most of us are coming from broken homes, where, you know, a parent or sibling or somebody could have a drug or an alcohol issue and it could be really hectic at your house, and there's just no way you're gonna concentrate, and in [Public School] you can try and explain that to a teacher that that's why you didn't do your homework. No, not really, how about you try living in somebody's shoes, you know like why don't you go into their house and see if you can focus, cause my mom was an alcoholic for

> six years and I didn't get a lick of homework done, not once, 'cause I was either, either taking care of her or, like Hanna said, I was going to work.

Counselor Angie and Teacher Doug brought two more instances that fell into the *personal problems* theme. Angie gave an instance that showed that in supporting students' *personal problems*, the staff was aware that timing was important. Angie related that she had been worried about a young man's state of mind and noted she should speak to him.

> I said I need to see you and he's like why, and I'm like you don't look like you're in a good place, he's like 'I don't really want to talk about everything right now,' Okay, I'll call you tomorrow, you know so we're very flexible it's not like you have an appointment you have to see us if you're not in a good place, we respect that.

Doug pointed out that students are free to see their counselor any time the student thinks it necessary even at the risk of missing something that can't be redone in class. He added "we're as much a counseling center that has a high school as we are a high school that has a heavy dose of therapeutic counseling and I think that balance is important for who we are."

Personal happiness. The third theme that fit into the category of *Pastoral Care* was very straight forward, namely that being happy led to productivity. Being personally happy only saw six entries but nonetheless seemed to play a powerful role when it was noted as being connected to intrinsic motivation by some participants. Interestingly it did not reveal itself in the staff interviews and forums. It ultimately landed in the theoretical code of *competence* due to its primary role as giving students strength to pursue academic success.

Student Ann summed up the concept of *personal happiness* succinctly by saying, “Whenever you’ve got happy people the productivity is exponential, you know what I mean.” Bobby stated:

> I guess not really talking to people, thinking you have no friends, so I wasn’t happy, motivated to do anything at all, like anything whatsoever, so I guess I have more friends now and I’m more motivated to just get on with my life and get out of school.

Ann reported, “by making sure they’re happy at school at all times, they really make it like a second home, for a lot of kids it’s really like a first home, so for a while it was my first home but my mom’s been sober from alcohol for a year and now it’s kinda my second home.”

The head of the school, Lana, with a doctorate in education, but choosing to answer to her first name, stated:

> There’s that whole other piece that is kids truly embracing the program and being happy to be here and wanting to participate and seeing those leaders emerge and giving them opportunities to develop intrinsic satisfaction that they hadn’t been able to before.

Parent Denise’s statement, “he seems more happy, he’s happier too.” I followed her statement with a question, “Is he getting more credits and other kinds of markers of success?” Denise replied, “Well he, um, he’s doing real good, he’s in the one class, he’s making an A in there you know, and in the other class he’s doing pretty good, but he just-he applies himself more.” Denise connected personal happiness with her son’s better application of himself which helped place this theme as one that built competence. Parent Bryan added, “They have a lot of friends, they’re friends with their teachers, which you know how often can you say that in your life?” “I’ve had maybe

three friends in my – of teachers in my whole life, here they have what a dozen at least, and they have a lot of peers that are friends, and they're happy."

Personal happiness originated in one preliminary code and one sub-category; *Competence* and *belongingness* (see appendix A). It ended up being related to *Competence* in the theoretical coding, step four (see appendix C), due to its adherence to the category of *Pastoral Care* by giving students the nurturing fundamentals needed to be able to tackle the complexities of school academic demands.

Safety. The last theme under the category of *Pastoral Care* was *safety*. Surprisingly it did not involve safety from physical danger as one might expect since the students came from schools that presented certain dangers as well as from families and neighborhoods that certainly offered sketchy surroundings and conditions. Instead the *safety* theme revealed itself to be centered around the idea of being able and free to explore new ideas and skills, voice opinions, and participate without fear of judgement or fear of failure. Also, it included a type of familial safety such that students didn't fear rejection. It was discovered 6 times in the interviews and forums.

Student Hanna, "I've been to a lot of schools, more than I can count on my hands and toes, and I've never been to a school where I felt safe, welcomed, and appreciated." Teacher Doug offered:

> I may or may not be – my job is not to be their next best friend but to make them feel safe, create a safe setting here, or to enjoy the safe setting that is created by the culture and the, and the, and the procedures or everything that we do here and tying everything back, it might seem like an irritation and um we are trying to keep this place safe, but also in our relationships with individual students that every relationship is built on a, on a basis that says we want you to feel safe here about taking the kinds of risks that you need to take to begin to identify what is it that you want. What do you want to accomplish academically, what do you want to accomplish with your lives you know, counseling and teaching components work together to try and accomplish that and it comes out of that

> relationship. Students trust somebody in this building, it may not – every student may not trust me, and I don't need them to, but there are people that they can go to and they can feel safe and they can talk about the kinds of questions that you're asking.

Following a question about how the school provided for student relatedness, the head of school, Lana, gave some input that fell into the theme of *safety*.

> I think we do what we can to make it seem, um, like family and home for them and a safe place, so they do feel like this is a place where they belong, and to that, there are students that have graduated years ago that still come back. They may still come back to talk to their counselor or to touch base, um, and I think that they – it's the obvious, that it's – they kind of think of this as their safety net.

Lana also contributed to the theme of *safety*, this time after being asked what academic success meant to her.

> Students that come to us that really have that light dimed, who aren't speaking, who want to keep the hood up, you know, keep to themselves and then to really see them embrace the program and find out that it's a safe place that they can – they don't need to fear failure or success and that they become accepted for who they are and then you start to see eyes (laughing) you know and coats come off and it's – there's more interaction.

The one parent contribution to the theme of *safety* came from Adam who had also been a student of the school in the 1980s. His experience was one of being more motivated to learn because he wanted to please his teacher whom he felt cared for him and that led him to believe he was more interested in the subject. The teacher was not at the Alt School, but rather the example came after he was returned to his sending school at a time when the Alt School's purpose was to return students to the sending school.

> I knew that when I got to her class everything was alright because of that relationship with her. I knew that when I got to her class I was safe, I was- she understood me, she loved me truly as a student, she truly cared for me and that motivated me to do better in her class, that motivated me to want to learn because I wanted to please her, I truly wanted to learn and learn from her.

Though not from the experiences at Alt School Adam spoke to the value that was added at Alt School considering the other participants' contributions.

Individuation. The second of three categories that tied back to *Competence* in the theoretical coding step is named after the term used in sociology that describes the process of people becoming differentiated from others to become unique. This category presented itself after the analysis of the emerged themes in Step 3 of the methods section. I noted that the associated themes were related to the school's efforts to provide students with a basis from which to feel they had the ability to accomplish their work successfully at school by providing individualized specific needs to move forward. The category has only two themes associated with it, but nearly twice as many occurrences in the interviews as the previous category of *pastoral care*. In fact, it is the second most commonly occurring category in the study which brought it forward as being an important feature of the school, according to the participants. The two themes under this category were *individualization* and *small school*. The entries under *small school* all pointed to size being a contributor to students accessing a more tailored and personal education plan, therefore it tied directly to the school's conditions that provided *individualization* for students. Both themes in this category are responsible for increasing students' feeling of efficacy since they address students being capable in their academic pursuits. Unlike the previous category, it fit my preconception of how a school could attend to student competence. Following is a report of findings under each theme that makes up the *Individuation* category including: *individualization, and small school*.

Individualization. As a theme *individualization* came from the students being given an opportunity to learn according to the mechanisms that worked best for them. The school supported the actions by teachers to teach to different learning styles and preferences as well as blending modes such as online learning when students couldn't master their classes in the timeframe of a class. The students were also able to make suggestions about how they could learn best and the teachers empowered them to individualize for themselves. The theme was presented 48 times, which meant it was the most common theme of the study.

The students' voices revealed the most offerings of the theme of *individualization*. Danny explained that back at his original high school he was about to be placed in remedial classes but then upon arriving at the alternative school he succeeded in his classes. "They teach you not just from what everybody else needs, they help you progress slowly so you're gonna – that you're gonna get it." In this way, he felt the competence to succeed whereas he expressed that the notion of being placed in remediation was demoralizing. Ann was frustrated by a lack of individualized help at her high school as well.

> One of my problems with Public School whenever I was going, is they put a paper in front of me and I had no idea what was on it. I'm like looking at some crazy freakin mess, but I'm like, I don't know this so I put question marks by it. Obviously, I had a question if I put a question mark by it. Turned it in. Teacher called parent teacher conference and said she's not doing her work. Well because I don't know the work. You didn't teach me how to do the work, you just gave me the paper, said do this.

In another instance, Ann stated:

> Here the teachers come to school thinking these kids came here for a reason. They wanna, like, change the way they were learning for a reason so we need to step up our game and teach 'em. So, whenever teachers here are explaining something they'll explain it and they'll ask if everybody understands, and if

> somebody doesn't understand they're gonna manipulate what they just said to where it's the same thing – you understand it the same – it's just they explain it differently to you because they understand that you didn't grasp it the way other kids did and they're not gonna move on until everybody gots it. Like that's one of Alt School's things is, no kid left behind. Unlike in a traditional school they're gonna lay it out, uh, that they say that's how it is and this is how you're gonna learn. If you can't learn that way that's your fault. You're gonna fail.

Hannah echoed sentiments about the teachers' dedication to bringing all students forward when she told of her previous experiences:

> Well, all my public schools that I been to and all the teachers, I feel like they didn't care at all and they just gave up on their students. If you didn't get it that's your bad, but I'm moving on with the rest of the class 'cause they get it.

Danny expressed similar feelings:

> So, it's like they're taking the kids and, and seeing where they're good at, and then working with you from there, figuring out how you learn instead of saying well this is how everybody else learns, we're gonna do it this way. So, it's more of a one-on-one, so how, it's like me and you, if you were my teacher, "how do you learn this and how are you gonna get it?" And they teach you the way that you're gonna understand it not just the way everybody else wants to be taught or how they get it.

Speaking of a particular teacher, Danny explained that she knew he struggled in science:

> So, she went a step further and searched up some more information, that say, and she gave me a website I could go to and say, I want you to read it, look at this video, and follow it along with like a little lesson that was at the end, and I think I passed it with 100 percent and I never really got science until I really necessarily got here. So, she just made it more flexible. She done some research and seeing what other ways to – for me to understand. So, everybody fits different. It's like a pair of jeans. I'm not gonna fit the same pair of jeans my brother's gonna fit, or my older brother.

Irene told me, "here it's on your own pace" and Danny added, "And they do online school too, cause see if you run over your time limit you finish your work online, so it's a lot easier instead of just not going to school at all." Eddy contributed, "I mean, that's just the advantage of having the smaller class, getting the one-on-one with the

teacher and more hands on." Ann noted that as part of the school's use of a social program they use called *Tribes*, the opportunity is taken to discover students' learning styles, "we write down how we learn best so that teachers know, you know what I mean?" "They know how we learn so they can be flexible to, uh, our learning styles."

Ann was one of two students that I selected to interview individually after the student forum because of her outspoken desire to give me information about the school and her colorful way of expressing herself. Ann revealed she had a notorious affinity for marijuana and told of a time in math class that she was struggling until the teacher used illustrations about weighing grams of pot that helped her master the point. "Hey, you know, five grams blah, blah, blah, and all this stuff – everything just clicked." "he taught me about exponential growth and linear expansion and stuff like that by teaching me using cannabis as, like uh, a variable, you know what I mean?" She went on about the same teacher:

> He took us to a car dealership and you know, like, everybody's like, what am I gonna use math for? Well he showed us what we're gonna use math for, you know, and we ended up formulating an equation to see how much it would be to pay monthly payments for how long, uh, on a car, how much it would be for car insurance. We made equations about all kinds of stuff to find the price of living, you know what I mean?

It was Ann again who spoke to the teachers' willingness to let students guide their learning when she gave an example of asking a teacher if she could approach a lesson in a different way:

> A lot of times, you know and if there are guidelines that they really do want you to follow, uh, you can walk up there and be like, you know, I'm not really getting it like that. Is it OK if I do it this way? And, uh, they will consider your idea and 99 percent of the time you can do it, you know, your own way, because they understand that children will grasp the concept a lot easier by doing it in our own way, you know what I mean?

The two staff forums and the two follow up interviews with staff members paralleled well with the students' instincts about the theme of *individualization*. Development Director Hanna: "I think, so, they actually know what a, a kid is, his ability, what he can do and can't do or she can't do and so I think that actually enables them to be successful." Counselor Angie: "Our teachers really look at different learning styles you know and they, they mix it up quite a bit so hopefully our kids are met where they are."

Alt School structures its schedule so that only two classes are taken at a time for 6 weeks. The rationale is that if a student experiences a rash of absences due to trauma or other conflicts with school attendance they only miss out on two credits instead of four or eight. And they can rejoin in a matter of weeks instead of months or a year. Also, included in the rationale is that students who have had a difficult time handling a traditional class load can more fully concentrate on two subjects at one time. Ed spoke to the benefit of this feature being conducive to teachers' ability to individualize. Ed:

> We have 13 max in a class, so having small class size enables teachers one on one time. I've been able to identify because of that, you, students in my room that, you know one girl wanted to raise her EOI [State mandated End of Instruction] scores so I can get her on an independent track on that. One, a couple of kids haven't passed their algebra I EOI, they need to refocus on that. So, I can know that because I have a small class and I've only got 26 students I have to concentrate on at any one time. So, with any one, any one session, structurally we are setting ourselves up to be able to answer those questions for them.

Ed brought out some connections to student interest and choice being connected to the theme of *individualization*. In his statement, he also revealed himself to be the math teacher that Ann spoke about in the student forum. Ed:

> In math class, we try to give them, um, they are doing some research around their areas of interest. So, we try to get something that they are interested in and

> I try to give them projects where they have a lot of choice. Like if we are picking, we are doing cars right now. We are looking at automobile purchases and value of cars and so they are getting to go out and select the car that they want and debate as to how their car is better for them and why they picked it and that kind of thing. So, they get to express themselves individually in that way and be independent.
>
> One thing that might also address your question about how do we address individual students is we do have an internship program, that, we don't have our internship teacher here with us but that I think, I believe is highly interest driven, individualized for the student. And, at work that can also be credited if they have a job, they get some sort of credit. So, we address their individual needs. If they need to go work, um they can go to work and get a credit doing that too.

Iris gave an account of having multiple approaches to the same outcomes. She described a student who had an interest in poetry so she allowed that student to do more creative writing but then expanded on it to have the student learn five paragraph essay outcomes. Other students were using computer based curriculum to enhance their scores on state testing and other students who were at different levels and interests, but all working towards the same curriculum outcomes.

> I've got these two other kids, they're doing 20/20 [a computer based curriculum] and they've got their headphones and they're doing their testing stuff and then I've got this other kid that started out writing a poem and now I'm going to start having him develop this poem into a descriptive paragraph and then I'm going to show them how to link that paragraph to other paragraphs and they're all working basically toward the same goal and getting to it in different ways, because I'm tailoring it to the things that they're sort of interested in and the, the strengths that they have.

Fran added to Iris' point by pointing to the fact that the teachers may have four grade levels in one class, which she stated was amazing to some people who wondered how it could be effectively worked out.

> I equate Alt School almost to being individual, uh, uh, one room classrooms. You know of the old days when you had all those different levels of kids in the classroom and one teacher was doing it and that's a prime example of what Iris just spoke about, a prime example of how you have all these individual needs and yet they're being met all in the same, all in the same area of, of study.

Betty is the special education specialist at the school. She had this to say about individualization efforts in the school and how it made her job easier.

> And we were talking how the individual themes in the classroom, like how things are adapted to, I'm in charge of the IEPs and at a bigger school I am constantly telling teachers, like you have to give them options. You have to give them longer time on a test. And here I rarely ever have to say anything because the teachers all just do that.

Two staff members' statements can summarize the staff input better than I. Valery: "They have more choices and there's more freedom in how they accomplish a task and so their grades and scores go up because of that. Hanna: "I was going to the last part of that question when you talk about the individualized, I think that's a big part of Alt School is that everything is individualized."

Of the two administrators interviewed only Assistant Director Mary registered with two *individualization* themed assertions. She was referring to the teachers knowing that they would have to approach their teaching and relationship to the students in a much different way than it might be expected in a regular school.

> They know they have to be really creative, they've got to come up with things that are going to be of interest to these kids and they're going to accommodate those individual interests in the classroom with whatever they decide to do as a group.

Her second statement relating to individualization does not translate well out of its entire context but I was clear that she was speaking to the idea that exceptions to standard rules and policies could be made on a student to student basis. This is due to consideration of individual circumstances. In other words, people have different reasons or circumstances for violating policies and rules but to individualize for students and not rules was the paramount meaning of individualizing at Alt School. It should be

noted that there are a few policies that the school makes known are beyond compromise including fighting or violence which end with instant expulsion.

The parent interviews added six more entries into the *individualization* theme. Bryan followed Mary well by adding that large schools have inherent issues. “The teacher can’t control them. It gets literally out of control. There’s fights, there’s a lot of stress that way… It just provides for ‘em a little bit better when they can learn at their own pace and feel a little safer.”

Adam, who attended Alt School in the 1980s:

> Alt School sort of breaks everything down, finds out where that particular child is, and let them take it at their own pace, and that’s what, that helps them to get the program, to get whatever it is, maybe math, English, reading, you know, it, they get to learn on their own pace.

Corinth:

> Um, I think it’s more the one-on-one attention that they are able to give the students, because when Keith was in, just at a regular school, if he had trouble they weren’t always there to help. I’ve noticed that they’re always there to say, “do you need help?” “Are you understanding?” “Do you need?” Kinda show you more. “Do you need more attention?” What do you need help with?” Things like that.

Adam noted: “And they are always, their staff is always, the staff here is always trying new things to keep things going the right direction for these kids, and it really, really works.” Francine framed the individualization theme well, if not humorously by adding her own take on the theme and the parts of it that may be lacking in regular public schools.

> Look, if you’re trying to teach a kid and the kid’s not learning, maybe you should teach them, change your teaching, you know, so that they can learn it. The way they’re teaching it is wrong. I, here, just based on my own observation, I would dread going to parent teacher meetings because I didn’t have fucking bail money. I’m just being honest with you sir.

Small school. The last of two themes under the *Individuation* category; *small school* reflected data that were presented by the participants who saw Alt School as being more manageable, contributing to better communication and socialization, and allowing for individual student expression and attention from the teachers and counselors. I found a dilemma in associating this theme with the theoretical code of *Competence* which caused several bouts of rethinking this theme's association with this particular construct of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It was considered as possibly more connected to *Relatedness*, because of the presence of sub themes dealing with interpersonal communication, socialization, and connectedness to other members of the school society. In the end, however, it is the feature of the school that is the most beneficial to allowing for the individualization of student needs, and therefore contributes to the individuation of students' uniqueness. There are overlapping uses of the data in this theme with those that will be discussed later under the second research question regarding *Autonomy* as well. The theme came from in vivo interpretation of statements and offerings that almost always included the word small. The theme presented itself 16 times in the interviews and forums.

Student input into the theme of *small school* was limited to two entries. Elijah: "It's a smaller school and you get to know people on a – it's a different level." Bianca:

> This is a small school. So, I think because of our [previous] schools and where we come from, not only the school but through life, I think that really makes us bond more, because we both have – we help each other… to get through whatever is needed to have to overcome.

The staff spoke to the theme of *small schools* nine times. Ed: "You know my daughter goes to a bigger school, she has a counselor she's never met." Clara: "And I

think we are such a small school, we have the ability to do that, we have the ability to see, we know all the kids, we know we're making that constant connection with them." "And I think that makes a huge difference and in large schools you're not able to do that." Doug pointed out a down side to the smaller size: "We offer what they need to graduate under [State] standards without a whole lot of elective opportunities." Doug's statement was one of the very few that indicated some aspects of the school may not be positive and it was a statement of opinion that seemed not to fault the school, but rather to point to one issue of the size. He was chosen as the only teacher to have a follow up interview because of his clear advocacy for the school and his ability to expand on his thoughts and comments.

Betty:

> And I think they [students] know that we all talk to each other, like, it is so small. I worked in a pretty big school before. And [here] they're, like well, "Angie said," and I'm like, oh really, we'll talk to Angie and they know that we all talk to each other, so it's cohesive, you know, like they can't do like they do at, in a big school because we can go check and make sure that that's what's really going on.

Ed:

> But it isn't just the size of the school because the school I came from was no bigger than this school. Not really, I mean, it is about similar size, similar everything, and we were acting like a big school, like, we didn't know what one side was doing to the other. So, I mean it plays into - it'd be harder to do obviously at a big school.

Iris:

> I think it's sort of the entirety of the culture of the school, um, that that sort of comes together, all of it works together to create, um, that overall sort of sense of belonging I think that size matters, size matters so one of the things that we really have the ability to do at Alt School that other, um, schools will have difficulty with in terms of feelings of inclusive has to do with the fact that there are fewer kids, you know, there's just not, you know, the classroom sizes are not that big, the size, the size of the school itself is not that big and so a lot of sort of

feelings of being overwhelmed or feelings of just being a student identification number or those, you know, lost in the shuffle things don't happen here… we know names, it's, it's possible for every adult in this building working here to know the names of every student that goes here because, you know, teaching in a traditional school, I mean where there are about a hundred kids here, I had a 160 kids on my class course list, you know, at another school before and you know, so I mean if I can know all of their names I, yeah, can know every kid here, you know, and, and, and so that I think is huge, I think that's a huge part, that we're able to provide just through having the smaller size and more intimate community environment.

Jan:

I don't think at a regular public school their needs are met like they're met here because we know what those needs are more, and I also think that, you know, one of the things, because we're small and we're able to do it. Jan again: I think, I think just the way we're structured probably lends itself to a feeling of closeness here because we're so small, um that the students really get to know the staff, the staff gets to know the students, and the students get know each other.

Fran:

I just want to say one thing, size I think is the number one reason why this works is the size. Size, number of counselors and teachers per child too, because as we talked about earlier, you know, you have six counselors and ten teachers, that's 16 not including administration, uh 21 people work here, that's including security guards and the person that works at, in the cafeteria and, um, you've got 21 adult people here that focus on a hundred students, that is amazing.

Executive Director Lana explained the capping of class sizes. "Well and certainly having those smaller sizes, you know, our class will never be more than 13. Do you know why? Did anybody tell you our secret to 13? Because we can't fit anybody else in a passenger van." State law prohibits over 15 passengers in a passenger van and with a teacher making 14 they decided that classes could not be larger than 13. The reason that the number allowed in a van is crucial is because the executive director's and the school's vision is to ensure that teaching and learning is relevant to the real world. *The world is our*

classroom is the school's theme and within that philosophy lies the school's determination to take the classroom to the world.

The parent interviews revealed the theme of *small schools* six times. Bryan: "And also one of the big things is there's roughly 90 kids here so you've got real small classes, where in the regular high, regular schools you've got 30 plus kids in there." In response to my added question about whether Denise thought that Alt School helps those kids that are prone to dropping out, she offered in part, "Yeah it would help them, like I said, because of the, the class sizes" Bryan added, "Cause this is way more like it was 100 years ago, or even 60 years ago when they had one classroom with all the students in one, one classroom, you know, and they all learned."

Elly: "And it's also easier for them to help target the kids and put 'em in different groups and help 'em with certain situations, 'cause this school is smaller, so they, you know, they know all these kids by, like, first name basis." She went on to offer an example of her distrust of her child's previous large school.

> When she was in middle school she was going to [Public School] and it's a bigger school. She was struggling and half the time I would come up there and pick her up for a doctor's appointment, they didn't know where my kid was and so, you know, it kind of made me nervous, like, you don't know where my kid is, and it's supposed to be high security, and it's supposed to be real tight knit.

Denise related to her own experiences in school when she spoke about a few teachers she remembered showing care but others, due to large class sizes, paid attention to the students who already showed ability to do well.

> I think that the, the um, teachers that have a better chance of helping them more when there are not so many students in the classroom that they have to attend to. So, I don't know; I just know the classroom size has a lot to do with it.

Self-activation. The third and last of three categories that tied back to *Competence* in the theoretical coding step is labeled *Self-activation* because I noted the three themes that fall under it come together to help students make forward momentum toward their educational goals. This category presented itself after the analysis of the emerged themes in Step 3 of the methods section. It allows the students to start themselves. Without the self-starting forward momentum, there is a lessened possibility of a feeling of competence to succeed. The three themes under the *Self-activation* category are *empowerment*, *self-esteem*, and *personal accountability*. All three spoke to students' learned capabilities to activate their abilities to make progress in their academic goals. Following is a presentation of findings under each theme that makes up the *Self-activation* category including: *empowerment*, *self-esteem*, and *personal accountability*.

Empowerment. The first theme under the *Self-activation* category originally included ten entries. After all themes were analyzed and grouped into categories (Step 3 pattern coding), I used a process to consider the merit of themes that had only one or two occurrences in the study. In each case, they were determined to fit into other existing themes better than standing alone. I noted the fact that they remained under the same category after finding the right fit in the newly combined theme and that this was

a sign of the strength of the decisions made when grouping themes into categories. During that process four themes were joined with *empowerment* bringing the total entries to 17. The themes that were combined under *empowerment* included *motivation*, *knowing self*, *risk taking*, and *shared leadership*. The *empowerment* theme embodies both staff and student evidence of increased personal capacity, because of being given authority or enhanced abilities, to accomplish their tasks.

In response to my question about how the staff thought that the school helps students attain academic success, Counselor Angie answered first with: “In lots of ways I think there is, and I think I’ve said it before, a systematic empowerment that takes place that kids transform as far as how they see themselves and their abilities.” Teacher Valery: “Unfortunately I guess that state tests are what people look at to see how they’re doing, that’s how you can compare them to other students at other schools, um, and I think they do better on those because they gain like a sense of empowerment here.” Student Danny replying to a question about whether the students at Alt School do well in response to rewards: “No. It’s just a, they, they, since they’ve come to school [here] they’ve matured, and they actually want to do it right because they know they, they have a future.” Counselor Jan thought that the school itself gave students an empowered feeling of success being available due to it having a good reputation with their friends that often recommend it and the initial feelings they get when touring at the time of application. “They get a good sense that this is going to be a good fit for them, and so I think they come in kind of with renewed hope that, uh, this is going to be a jumping off point of being successful in school.” I noted that “good fit” combined with “renewed hope” spoke to a beginning to empowerment.

I asked Executive Director Lana, after observing a staff meeting, about the fact that the newest teacher was leading the meeting and Lana wasn't in the meeting. She revealed that for many years she had been using the practice of alternating the duties for heading the staff meetings including building the agenda and leading the voting of certain propositions, as well as staffing of individual student issues. "This is where I want to make sure that everybody gets what they can." "It gave them some ownership, some leadership, and, uh, it's been a really good thing." Regarding staff members' empowerment SPED Teacher Betty said:

> And some of it I think is the lack of connection with the bigger school system. Like, it's not as dictated by the school system as other schools are. There's a lot more individuality and less micromanagement. You can make choices and be considered a professional instead of everything you do having to be approved by someone else.

What Angie called "systematic empowerment" appears to include the transfer of empowerment from teachers to students. Teacher Iris:

> The level of support that is given to the teachers via the counselors and the administration, um, just trickles down to the teachers' ability to support the students fully in the classroom. Um, the environment really enables teachers to get in classrooms and do their jobs really, really, I mean without being bombarded with paperwork and craziness and all kinds of things going on they're able to be with their students and do their thing.

The parents focused three times on the issue of empowerment with some specific examples of how their kids might have been empowered but without using the word. Adam:

> They're really involved in their own education and getting them to want to learn, you know, because if, if you feel like that you have a big say in your education and how you're gonna learn it, you're gonna be more apt and more capable of doing better.

Corinth:

> I know that Keith can tend to get aggravated from time to time, and if, then if he gets that, to that point, he's able to step away from the group and say, "hey I just need a minute to go cool or calm down." "I'll be back." And nobody's there to stop him like if he were in [Public School], when he would need a break he would have to sit there and just get more angry and get more angry, and I know that they [Alt School] allow them a little more space. They treat them more as an adult than just a teenager or child.

Bryan:

> He went from being a wallflower when he first came to this school too. One of the teachers just told me a few weeks ago that now he's a leader. He talks to all the new kids coming in and tells them all about it, what they can do, what they can't do, and I mean, that's not (Bryan laughs), that's not my son. That's not the way he has been all his life. He's always been a wallflower.

Self-esteem. The second theme under *Self-activation* involves feelings of worth. As a theme, *self-esteem* only saw six occurrences in the transcripts but was determined to be worthy of standing alone due to its important nature in helping humans to be motivated. The likelihood of feeling competent to perform the actions necessary to graduate is low for students who don't have the feeling that they are a somebody, who show low confidence in themselves, who feel that they can't offer something to the world, or that they are an individual who doesn't fit in.

Student Danny:

> Lotta kids come here with low self-esteem and it kinda helps you through the process of showing them, like, you are somebody, and you just have – you're given tools when you're born, but what you do with your tools is all up to you.

Angie, the counselor and former student said, "And once you start to build on the self-confidence then you see it, you see it in their grades, you see it, hopefully, in their test scores." I chose Angie for a follow up interview since she was a former student. During that interview at some point I followed up her point with a clarifying question, "Success breeds success?" and she answered, "it does, it does, and self-confidence."

Parent Elly commented, “once you start making As and Bs when you were a D and F student, once your grades start slipping, you’re like, oh I’m not doing well, I know I can do better than this, ‘cause I had been doing better than this.” Elly had another example from her daughter and the counseling she had been involved in.

> It worked out, you know, so now she’s kinda back on the right track again to where she’s, you know, confident and she’s coming to school every day and she wants to do better, so that’s, that’s one of the things I noticed that they do here that helps them, and I see when they do that it helps them become a better student, or she realized that there’s a lot far more that a student can offer in the world.

Bryan, the parent who was surprised that his son was no longer a wall flower in the previous section, followed that statement with something that spoke to his self-esteem having risen. “Leadership is a real good thing. Individualism is important to me, so I think it’s gonna help him grow and get – you get more social skills like that.” I noted that individualism in this context was speaking to a sense of self-esteem necessary to act as an individual.

Personal accountability. The third theme under *Self-activation* involves the students’ taking a stake in their own success. As a theme, *personal accountability* saw four repetitions in the transcripts but was determined to be an important factor in students’ activation of their learning plans, and therefore remained an independent theme. *Personal accountability* was noted as important for activating students towards the actions needed to succeed in school alongside *empowerment,* and *self-esteem,* because its absence would make the other two useless. In fact, students who are highly empowered with high levels of esteem might make for a student body of reckless narcissists without the ingredient of being accountable for their actions. Unknown to me

at the time of considering the theme's inclusion into the category, *Personal Accountability* is one of four guiding principles in Alt School's policy manual.

Teacher Ed, "In terms of academic success, indicator of academic success is when a student sort of makes that mental change from blaming me or other teachers for their lack of knowledge and start taking ownership over their own learning." "Students taking responsibility coming in and proactively saying what do I need to do? If they've missed, things like that. Be proactive and really just taking responsibility." After being asked about what academic success was, Counselor Angie commented that it wasn't really the occasion of graduating, but rather the student's role in the process of graduating. Angie: "Graduation is um, but also looking at their, their role in it too, you know. That they have – they're like a pilot in their future, you know."

Parent Francine stated, "Each student has an opportunity to be heard and by incorporating each kid into the conversation, um, I think that most makes them to be accountable." She later described her elation at her daughters newly found ambition.

> I was, I was completely just, I was, I coulda danced, you know (laughs), I was thrilled. She wanted to go to school. She got up on time on her own. It made her more accountable, because she saw that she had an opportunity here and I think she saw that opportunity because they showed her that opportunity. You know I could tell her about all, all, I could tell her about, "touch that, it's gonna burn you" and lo and behold, you kids are gonna do things regardless, and they're gonna damn well touch it and get burned, and, um, in my opinion the school by having it be other professionals, it being in another field who weren't Mom or Dad, um, show them that they have an opportunity and I think, you know, that that's what helped her want to be accountable. So, 'cause she wanted that.

Summary of Findings Under Research Question 1

The findings under the theoretical code of *Competence* included the categories of *Pastoral Care, Individuation,* and *Self-activation* (see Table 4.1, p. 71). These categories surfaced as the means for the school to make students feel efficacious in their

attempts to do school work, gain credits, and finally show success through graduation with a high school diploma. The first category, *Pastoral Care*, allowed students to free up their energies to pursue higher order needs by taking care of basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. In addition, other basic needs including addressing personal issues, psychological issues, and making students feel efficacious in being able to extend themselves in ways that were previously personally threatening to them. The second category, *Individuation*, grew students' feeling of efficacy by giving them personalized and individualized attention, mainly to their academic needs. The third category, *Self-activation*, enabled them to gain a sense of efficacy through addressing their personal attributes of self-worth and ability to be in control of their own destinies.

Research Question 2: How Does the School Support Student Autonomy

Step 4: Theoretical Coding "Relation to SDT"	Step 3: Pattern Coding "Themes Condensed into Categories"	Step 2: In Vivo Coding "Emerging Themes"
AUTONOMY	ENHANCED MOTIVATION TO LEARN	Love of Learning Personal Stimulation & Student Interests Real-Life Application Community Involvement
	LICENSE TO CHOOSE	Autonomous Decisions Depth of Choice Goal Setting

Table 4.2 Categories and Themes with a Relationship to the Autonomy Theoretical Code from SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

The data in this study revealed that students found that they chose to dig deeply when they were given opportunities to apply real-world skills within their own community and while surrounded with subject matter that was personally satisfying to their own interests and needs and to those of their fellow citizens. The findings under the theoretical code of *Autonomy* included the categories of *Enhanced Motivation to Learn* and *License to Choose,* (see Table 4.2). These categories surfaced as the means for the school to make students feel that they had chosen to accept and participate in the activities that lead to graduation.

The first category, *Enhanced Motivation to Learn*, showed that Alt School gave students a sense that they liked learning because they found stimulation in the subject matter and were interested in the content when they found meaning in it for themselves. This was enhanced when they discovered a place for themselves in the surrounding community in which they lived and found a connection to the real-world issues that they had experienced and discovered they could provide some positive contributions to the issues involved. All of this coalesced into their decision to move forward with their educational goals.

The second category, *License to Choose*, reveals that students were given the ability to choose, or not to choose, how they could go about achieving the necessary milestones that equate to success in the required outcomes of high school graduation. It revealed that the school provided richness in the choices the students could make and that it was not a shallow pool of choices, but rather a menu of multiple paths to success. Finally, the category revealed that goal setting was a student oriented but professionally

guided process of the school's aim to offer students the opportunity to autonomously decide to participate.

In the fourth step of the methods procedure, the categories were grouped by their relationship to the theoretical coding based on SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Following are the findings under the theoretical code of *Autonomy* which included the categories of *Enhanced Motivation to Learn,* and *License to Choose* (see Table 4.2, p. 98).

Enhanced motivation to learn. This category presented itself after the analysis of the emerged themes in Step 3 of the methods section. The first of two categories that tied back to *Autonomy* in the theoretical coding step is labeled *Enhanced Motivation to Learn* because I noted the four themes that fall under it come together to cause students to realize a personal desire to become educated. A decision that studies are important because they like the subject matter, there's a reason for the need to know, they can apply it in their lives, and it connects to the actual involvement in their own community that they could be part of. Following is a presentation of findings under each of four themes that make up the *Enhanced Motivation to Learn* category including *love of learning, personal stimulation and student interests, real life application,* and *community involvement.*

Love of learning. The first theme under *Enhanced Motivation to Learn* reveals the turnaround most students enjoy after coming to Alt School. The dread of learning along with all the students' previously conceived ideas about the processes and surroundings of schooling, becomes a desire to be involved in learning. This new attitude helps students to feel that they have chosen to learn because they now find that

the curriculum and the processes of schooling are pleasant. There were seven entries of the theme from the transcripts.

Student Ann exhibited her zeal for learning after beginning her academic career at Alt School both times I interviewed her and when I observed her in the classroom. She had a couple of things to say about its roots. “Whenever children are excited about learning, the good grades come, but whenever you’re just trying to make a good grade it’s a lot more stressful, and that’s all [Public School] really seems to care about is just kids making good grades.” “Um, being at Alt School, it takes away the stress of making good grades, because they don’t want you to strive to make good grades, they want you to strive to learn.”

Assistant Director Mary, “You’ve got to figure out how to get information presented to them in a way that they are just, they are just, they enjoy it, that it’s fun, that they’re excited about their learning.” Teachers gave two stances that I believed spoke to *love of learning*. Betty, “I think that it could be that they are learning something for the first time. Like, they don’t know if it’s a good experience or not because they have not learned anything anywhere else before.” Doug:

> So, it’s, it’s very different every time I provide some assignment I will reemphasize here that the goal isn’t, you know, your PowerPoint, the goal isn’t your essay, it’s what you’re learning and what you’re pouring into that that I care about. These are just ways of organizing, you know, your ideas and your thoughts and your, your exercise in learning.

I related Betty’s “good experience” with a love for learning coming from students experiencing that they are learning and it’s an enjoyable experience of success which can lead to more interest in success of the learning experience. A starting point for finding enjoyment in the process. Doug’s point about emphasizing that the mechanisms

and methods of learning, what may be called assignments in more traditional classrooms, was not the point of learning. I saw his intent to separate the dreaded "school work" from the process of communicating what has been learned. This was noted as a connection that may have not been communicated in the students' previous experiences in school where they were unaware that assignments were connected to an outcome of learning.

Parent Adam:

> They take it easy with them, they take it gradual with them, they make it fun for' em, you know, and the teachers find a way to make it fun for 'em to learn, and that's why they learn. That's why they get motivated. That's why they enjoy coming here. That's why they enjoy coming to school, because here they know that regardless of what goes on out there, here they have an opportunity to make a difference in their lives.

Parent Corinth, "Now, he's like, 'I'm ready to go to school, I want to go to school, I want to go to school, we're going to do this, we had a field trip today'."

The parent perspective supplemented the teacher perspective that communicating the reasons and the rational for doing things, assignments and activities, leads to an enjoyable consequence of understanding and learning things.

Personal stimulation and student interests. The second theme under the *Enhanced Motivation to Learn* category deals with students' increased motivation to believe they chose to be involved in the school work because they are not bored but are instead stimulated and interested. The school's staff, procedures, and other characteristics prevent students from feeling put upon to learn by raising their level of intrigue. Originally this was two separate themes. As the data were reduced it was noted that *personal stimulation* included only student input, save for one parent, and *student interests* had no student input. I noted that these two themes may be two sides of the

same coin. With one exception, the student input included statements that referred to boredom instead of interests, but this is clearly just a situation of antonyms leading to the same point. Students tending to be stimulated by what they find interesting and the school's attendance to the needs of students to have interesting subject matter are the same theme, therefore the two were merged. As one theme, it relates to *Autonomy* by way of its tendency to raise the students' likelihood of intrinsically buying into the decision to participate with an expectation of finding positive results for their own educational goals.

A follow up question about teachers' ability to maintain classroom control in a loosely structured atmosphere led Student Danny to reply:

> It's really, uh just—they make the work so interesting that kids don't want to get sidetracked. They, they're just so focused on their work that they make it to where something that, that's gonna catch their eye. So, it's not like, 'I'm, I don't wanna do this,' it's more of a thing of, 'that looks pretty cool, let's try this.' And may—it gives them something to look at and like, it's like, it's like watching a movie. You go, you see a movie, everything looks interesting to you, you're gonna pay a lot of attention to it. You're gonna try to go watch it. You're gonna learn about it. You're really gonna watch it close. It's like this, they give them something that catches their eye and they teach 'em how they're gonna learn it.

While Danny's comments reflect an attention to interesting subjects and concepts, the following students revealed that the school structure provided the opportunities to produce stimulation. Ann thought that completing a semester's worth of curriculum in six weeks was more stimulating. She felt the sense of speed made it seem that there was always something new in the course being explored. Carrie, "We only have two classes for six weeks. It makes it, like, it's [unintelligible] with the same classes all year and it's easier, but it's something different every six weeks." She later stated, "I get bored doing the same, being in the same class, and like, we have classes

for longer [periods per day]. We have less classes per, like, six weeks, so you can focus on whatever you're doing and then it changes, so you're not bored." No students reported feeling that the longer classes caused them a sense of boredom.

Not being confined to the classroom all the time was a stimulating experience for some of the students. One of the girls, who couldn't be identified on playback of the recorded forum, said, "We do a lot of outside learning too, like outside of the class." Carrie said, "We go out a lot… like you get to go on field trips."

Parent Corinth:

> He [Corinth's son] likes that he's able to go out on field trips and experience going and stepping out and seeing what's behind, what's going on outside, not just eight hours in a classroom and you're getting just so bored because you're, you know, they don't have the, the freedom like they do.

Counselor Angie, "In the classrooms you see all the time, kids excel because they're, you know, trying to tap into things that interest them and areas that they are capable to do." Teacher Iris was quoted under the *indivualization* theme earlier regarding teaching to the same outcome through a variety of differentiated student needs. From that same response and at the end she stated, "they're all working, basically toward the same goal and getting to it in different ways because I'm tailoring it to the things that they're sort of interested in and the strengths that they have." Speaking about the Alt School's internship program Teacher Ed said, "I believe it's highly interest driven, individualized for the student." Teacher Ed again:

> In math class, we try to give them, um, they are doing some research around their areas of interest. So, we try to get something that they are interested in and I try to give them projects where they have a lot of choice.

While the staff input above reflects providing for content that is interesting, the following staff statements reflect a bigger picture of attending to future aspirations through addressing the larger concept of student interests. Teacher Iris:

> I think that the educators have um an understanding that there are a lot of different pathways and interests for these kids, and so that you know, we're talking about if you're interested in opening a business, if you want to go directly into the workforce to do such and such, if you, to try to do this trade you –these are the ways in which this learning that you're getting is going to apply to do that, if you want to do the traditional college thing this is what you need to know for that.

Counselor Jan, "They [students] have an opportunity to think, hmm maybe this is something I would like to do." She spoke earlier about a student who didn't know what he wanted to do in his future until a fieldtrip to a glassblowing shop spurred his interest. This experience led to him doing an internship with the artisans of the shop who encouraged him to seek a school in Washington state that was an avenue to pursue his love of the art. He was accepted and attending at the time of this study. Jan:

> So, I think that, that, it just, um, through exposure to lots of different, um, opportunities and finding out what they're interested in we can then sit down with them, one-on-one, and you know, kind of—OK how, what are things that you need to do to kind of get to the point where you can do what you want to do in the future?

Administrator Mary, "with the academic part, you know, the teachers are working with them on, um, what their interests are, what's important to them."

Parent Corinth, "They can get to know, and know what the kid is looking--the child is looking for, what the child is wanting to do." Corinth said she wished she would have gone to Alt School. She related that she skipped much of the time when she was in high school but that if the school had concentrated more on her interests she probably would have "stuck around and not been ripping and running and wanting to skip

school." To Corinth's credit she was a teenage mother, but returned to finish and graduate from high school.

Real life application. The third of four themes under the category of *Enhanced Motivation to Learn*, *real life application* was the fifth most common theme in the study. It presented itself as statements that applied to working outside of the classroom, relating to useable skills, hands on activities, and work or social skills. The theme speaks to enhancement of motivation by giving students an understanding of why the curriculum is important to them which causes them to make the decision to participate with the understanding that what is learned is not only linked to their school goals but those beyond school as well.

Executive Director Lana wondered if I had heard the school's theme, in fact she wanted to think that it was ingrained in the culture enough that it would have been brought to my attention in earlier forums and interviews. She was right because Teacher Ed and Student Ann both quoted it while several others alluded to it. Administrator Lana:

> *The World is our Classroom* is our theme. You've probably heard about, or I would hope so, and it is really looking at how we can get these students, kind of, off their seat, on their feet to learn and show them that it's, that what they need is meaningful. It has relevance and here's how you can have everyday application for that, and to help prepare them with the courses and the study skills. I think that's something that we've always got to be working on.

Counselor Angie, "I think one thing we have to be mindful of is that we prepare our students for a world that is not Alt School." Teacher Iris, "They [students] have a sense of capability in doing their school work because they know how the learning is going to apply to the future that they want for themselves." Iris again:

> To express the relevance of what they're learning to, uh like you know, real-world application of the things that they learn in the classroom, you, it's not, this is not a place of, you know, do this worksheet to get this grade or even pitching the whole concept of you go to high school so that you can finish high school so that you can go to college.

Student Gina, "I don't think, like, learning, to [Public School], is like [another unidentified girl injected 'passing a test'] yeah." "Learning is understanding the problem, and Public School… they don't give you time to understand the problem, they just let you do it to where you can take your test and get up out their school." "Here, they're gonna make sure you understand the problem and know how to do it and can be able to teach somebody else to do it." In an exchange during the student forum three students played off each other with short bursts that summed up the theme. Unidentified girl, "It's hands on." Unidentified girl 2 "You get up and do it." Eddie, "Get into it."

Danny, "More of a hands on at the same time, so it's like, not just learning the information." "It's learning and applying, cause at school, you're just writing it down and looking at it, you know the knowledge, but you're not applying it." Danny, speaking of an example of his enhanced understanding of a concept because he was made aware of the application of the concept, proved his understanding quite accurately.

> I was talking to my counselor about some, um, what was 20 percent of 3.8 million? And it'd be 760,000, 'cause .2 is 20 percent and you take .2 and times it by 3.8 million, and you get 760,000. So back in, at Public School I wouldn't have known none of that, to be honest, I would have been like, I don't even get what you talking about.

Ann, "In our cafeteria we have a slogan and it says, 'The World is our Classroom,' um, and for that reason the teachers here know that kids aren't just going to

learn out of a book." "We go out into the world. We've had students go meet with bank tellers, you know, ask them about their job. Get in with the real world."

Parent Corinth, "I think that's one interesting thing that Alt School is showing them how to work. How it's going to work out, so, not just about school, but how it's going to work in the real world." Corinth:

> They take you out in the real world and they show you, like, I think my daughter was telling me, like, probably a month ago, they took them out, not her personally, but her friends in this class, they took 'em out and showed 'em how to buy a car and how to use your money correctly and get a loan and what kind of situation you put yourself in when you're spending money after school, because, you know, you don't think about that stuff when you're a teenager. Your parents buy you a lot of your stuff, so when you go out in the real world you have to start doing it for yourself and you gotta be real smart with your money.

Parent Bryan, "Because it really is more hands on here." Bryan again focused on the social aspects of real world needs, "Put everybody together 'cause that's what they're gonna be when they work in the real world, and they've gotta get along, and here, they teach 'em to get along better because of that."

Internships tend to be closer to real life encounters, therefore Teacher Ed's introduction of the school's internship program was included in this theme. Parent Elly acknowledged Alt School's focus on internships. She was the only college graduate of the parent participants and she pointed out that an internship during her college experience is what made her realize she needed to change her major. She found she wasn't interested in the field of her first internship.

Community involvement. The last of four themes under the category of *Enhanced Motivation to Learn*, is one that reflects the school's commitment to be actively involved in the community. This includes student involvement in service

learning projects, fund raisers, and communicating to the contributors and school donors. It also involves the school's expectation that students will represent the school well in the larger community. The theme is tied to its category of *Enhanced Motivation to* Learn because the participants reflected that students apply themselves more when they feel they are doing something that is both real and of service to others. The category is tied to the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) construct of *Autonomy* and this theme adds to this tie by way of giving students a sense that their involvement in the community is a personal choice, having selected which causes to work for. When students see a cause, they are committed to and have chosen to be affiliated with, they see themselves as motivated toward that cause and the academic credit they receive for that commitment. Alt School Policy includes four guiding principles of which *Community* [involvement] is one.

Administrator Lana talked extensively about the school's efforts to involve students in several fund raisers each year. She believed that the students were aware that the school gets some funding through the United Way agency and they are given several opportunities to host and speak to groups who come to the school or by going out to community meetings and events. "They see how much that we get from this community, and in turn, it's important to us to be giving back." She described that through the school's leadership class, students become involved in raising money and awareness for a charity of their choosing. She noted an added benefit when students teach other students about their chosen cause. "It makes them feel important. It gives them a real sense of satisfaction that they've been able to do something for others."

Student Danny, "I'm doing a service learning project right now. I'm helping people do, um, domestic violence, uh DVIS [Domestic Violence Intervention Services]."

Parent Corinth came to know the Alt School because her brother had attended. She stated that the participation in the local community allowed students to understand "they can be a part of society, regardless of what their background was." Parent Francine related that the Alt School has an annual Thanksgiving dinner with city councilors, sometimes the mayor, and the school's board members attending. Francine is Ann's mother:

> Ann's volunteered several times to pass out blankets downtown. You know, she's donated blood, I mean to the point that I had to ask them to quit calling—she's not coming back, you know [laughs]… They wake them up to the fact that they are members of this community and they let them know, I think, through all of the different classes and projects and programs in Alt School that they matter and that they have a voice in this community, and um, that, to me, that's how I think it gives them a sense of belonging.

Francine also brought out that Alt School makes the students sign an agreement to represent themselves well in the community. She stressed that getting into altercations with non-students off school property could be grounds for expulsion from the school and she believed the pledge made a difference in students' behaviors. "Because I know it's been a couple of times that Ann's wanted to haul off and knock the shit out of a person here or a person there, and she's like, 'I am not blowing my Alt School' [laughs]!

License to choose. This category presented itself after the analysis of the emerged themes in Step 3 of the methods section. The second of two categories that tied back to *Autonomy* in the theoretical coding step is labeled *License to Choose* because the three themes that comprise the category all speak to not only allowing for student

choice, but also facilitating it. Personal goal setting is begun from the first day and followed up regularly allowing for a level of student choice in shaping their own education plan that few schools can match. Student choice is a factor leading to students believing they have the autonomy to shape their future. Following is a presentation of findings under each of three themes that make up the *License to Choose* category including *autonomous decisions, depth of choice,* and *goal setting*.

Autonomous decisions. The first of three themes under the category of *License to Choose* is a theme that incorporated the idea that students and staff are free to make most choices without feeling compelled by the school and administration. This included the fundamental choice of coming to the school in the first place. The larger district used to send certain teachers who had been deemed unwanted in the regular schools but the Alt School administration put their foot down on this practice and arranged that all teachers would be interviewed by the school before placement to ensure that they were coming to the school of their own will and with the premise that they had something to offer the school. Students also apply to the school completely of their own choice. Other choices include how to study and what to study to a large extent. It seems that any choice that can be left to the students and staff are left to them.

Student Gina, “It was leadership [class] and we were—instead of them telling us, you know, ‘go do this and go do that,’ we actually got to do it as a group. On what we wanted to do and how we were gonna do it.” Unidentified girl, “Yeah, you get your choice of how to study what you wanna do.” Ann, “It’s a kid’s choice to come here. We’re not sent here, so we’re, it’s definitely not, like a last chance kind of thing.” Ann:

> A lot of the times, you know, we make a lot of posters here at Alt School about stuff that we have learned, and um, teachers always give us kind of like

> guidelines that, kind of like what we should do, but they don't tell us, "This is how you have to do it," you know? They want us to think and they want us to use our imagination and our creativity to get in there and tackle an assignment.

Administrator Mary stated that independent decision making was afforded to the students whether it be selecting the books that they want to study in literature or selecting the subject of a project they may be involved in. Executive Director Lana spoke to the teachers' level of choice within the curriculum. She was responding to my telling her that in one of the staff forums a teacher had responded to, what he thought was a lack of flexibility in offering electives due to the small school size. Lana echoed exactly what the teacher had said in the forum after he seemed to realize and counter his statement about a lack of choice in classes for students. He and Lana both made the case that the level of choice and flexibility the teachers have at Alt School in manipulating and creating their curricula is very wide.

The only appearance of the theme of autonomous decision making in the parent interviews was with Gail. She didn't offer concrete examples of how the school allowed for more personal decision making but she noted that the local public schools were mandating school uniforms whereas Alt School provided more individualized choices to the students themselves. My observation notes confirmed that students were very free to express themselves through choosing what to wear. Hats are an example of the difference at Alt School. Hats are usually strictly controlled in public schools as though they were a threat to the fiber of education quality, but at Alt School students are free to wear them and staff energy isn't used up in the constant monitoring of student attire. Student Danny seemed to be the one student that thrived most of all with the freedom to choose his wardrobe expressions. He appeared to be talented in his fashion sense which

included a carefully tailored straw cowboy hat on the day of the student forum, although he was far from being a cowboy type.

Depth of choice. The second of three themes under the *License to Choose* category dealt with the level of choices students and staff are able to enjoy. This theme revealed that students feel they have empowerment from the ability to decide who to confide in, what activities to participate in, how to go about gaining credits towards graduation, and how to plan their paths in life to name a few.

Student Carrie, “If you’re not comfortable with talking to your counselor at the time you can go, like, ‘Hey, can I talk to another counselor?’ And their like, ‘Yeah go ahead’.” Gina, “They have, like, just the staff—people that’s not even counselors, like, you have Regina; she brings in the money. You have—you can talk to the art teacher.” Unidentified Girl, “The janitor.” Gina, “Yeah you talk to the janitor, the lunch lady, you can go into the library and talk to some books.” Gina seemed to be having fun when exaggerating her point but it showed the depth of choice in finding the right person on staff to relate to.

Counselor Angie brought out the depth of choice that students had when they choose to attend the school in the first place. She noted that the intake process was lengthy and required students to be present for intake and processing at least four separate times before being admitted. The students are not forced or compelled to choose the school so it is not a last ditch choice forced by the students’ home school. Speaking of the school’s new strict attendance policy which requires a minimum expectation of class attendance time, Doug noted some depth in the students being able to work through any attendance problems. He referred to students’ ability to opt for

computer based competency in a course as an option to being present in the classroom. It would seem that the school recognizes the need to enforce expectations of attendance while providing options that solve the issue without making the enforcement of the policy a matter of punishment. Doug:

> Particularly, as we look at kids doing any kind of work off campus, because of our attendance policy, you know, if they respond to that and they are capable of that, we'll say well, how about, you know, as an option as opposed to a consequence.

Teacher Doug later related freeing the students to take risks which he credited with depth of choice in making decisions about "what it is that you want." "What do you want to accomplish academically, what do you want to accomplish with your lives."

Teacher Betty responded to a question about what the definition of student success is which led to her mentioning that the students improve their capabilities to pass required state tests. Betty:

> I think they do better on those because they gain, like a sense of empowerment here. Like they have some control of choice over what they are doing here. It's not just people, you know, telling them what to do or we're making them do something. They have more choices and there's more freedom in how they accomplish a task.

Counselor Angie told of the students' increase in self-confidence by becoming involved in their learning plans and graduation checklists. "And they feel like they have some choice in that because they are *going* to graduate."

Assistant Director Mary revealed that on Fridays there is another opportunity for students to be involved in another group aside from their classes. This involved some choices for staff as well as students. Teachers and counselors get to design mini courses based on their own strengths and interests but then students make choices about which to become involved in. Mary:

> And then we have an assembly, we did that last Friday, where everybody [staff] gets up, describes what they would do and then the counselors, some of them would have more therapeutic groups, but everybody describes it and the kids pick first, second, or third, almost everybody got their first choice.

Parent Francine may have been speaking of the Friday groups when she gave some input into student choices:

> I'm sure they have choices in there, and they have options that they get to, you know, like decide, would you rather do art this time? Cause I know they get groups. And, um, they get to choose which group they're in, and each group is geared towards building them up. And, you know, I know they have choices as far as that goes.

Parent Gail reflected on her son's ability to use the computer guided curriculum mentioned in the staff forum. "and, uh, they told me he could do courses to get his credits, you know, but he could do two of them at home off the computer."

Goal setting. The third and last theme under the category of *License to Choose* involves the choices associated with setting goals. These include academic, personal, post-graduation, and social goals. Because students make these decisions they are more likely to find motivation from their autonomous choices.

Student Danny, "Well, whenever you first come here, they set up a," Unidentified Boy, "It's basically the goals that you want to meet before you leave." Danny, "Yes exactly that, but anyway, that basically is how we figure out the ways that this school supports us." Counselor Clara:

> One other thing that I think is important to talk about that is specific to Alt School is that every student that comes into our building has a treatment plan and they set treatment goals that they are going to work on while they are here. And so, those goals can be anywhere from postsecondary options; what—you know, what is their long-term plan for them once they graduate, that kind of thing. Um, it can be social skills goals, you know, maybe they want to work on their anger, they want to work on their job interviewing skills, or maybe they've had a chemical dependency issue and they want to work towards sobriety. Um, every student here has a treatment plan and they are—I think that is a big part of

> what we do, especially in the counseling department is working with them to set those goals and think about, you know, what does it look like for you six months from now? What are your future plans?

Counselor Jan in a separate staff forum:

> Another thing is they sit down with their counselor one-on-one and they develop for themselves their individualized treatment plan and, and, and that treatment plan reflects the goals that they have for themselves as far as their education, um, and then also some personal goals that they have for themselves as far as behavior and, um, maybe working through some past experiences and things like that.

Counselor Angie revealed that she helped students to set goals in the areas of academics, post-graduation plans, and social goals. She expressed surprise at the self-awareness many students revealed when setting social goals.

> I had one student this year say, 'I want to know why me being abused my whole life makes me open to being treated like I a,' --you know she's really very sexually overt and things like that and I'm just like wow that's really self-aware for being 16.

Administrator Mary reiterated the areas that students are guided in setting treatment and counseling goals and summarized the goal setting well with: "So, the students are setting their goals and the counselors are working with them, 'what do you want to get out of being here?'."

Summary of Findings Under Research Question 2

The findings under the theoretical code of *Autonomy* included the categories of *Enhanced Motivation to Learn* and *License to Choose,* (see Table 4.2, p. 98). These categories surfaced as the means for the school to make students feel that they had chosen to accept and participate in the activities that lead to graduation.

The first category, *Enhanced Motivation to Learn*, captured the students' sense that they liked learning because they found stimulation in the subject matter and were

interested in the content when they found meaning in it for themselves. This was enhanced when they discovered a place for themselves in the surrounding community in which they lived and found a connection to the real-world issues that they had experienced and discovered they could provide some positive contributions to the issues involved. All of this coalesced into a personal empowerment that they oversaw the decision to move forward with their educational goals.

The second category, *License to Choose*, revealed that students were given the ability to choose, or not to choose, how they could go about achieving the necessary milestones that equate to success in the required outcomes of high school graduation. It revealed that the school provided richness in the choices the students could make and that it was not a shallow pool of choices, but rather a menu of multiple paths to success. Finally, the category revealed that goal setting was a student oriented but professionally guided process of the school's aim to offer students the opportunity to autonomously decide to participate.

Research Question 3: How Does the School Support Student Relatedness

In the fourth step of the methods procedure, the categories were grouped by their relationship to the theoretical coding based on SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The data in this study revealed the power of making students feel that they were part of a team, a family, that was protective of their determination to preserve the right of the family to debate within and the differences between members, but to present a unified ethos to the outsiders of the family. The findings under the theoretical code of *Relatedness* included the single category of *Culture of Sacred Community* (see Table 4.3). This category surfaced as the means for the school to make students feel that they were part of a

special group, a particularly distinct formation of special affiliates. This was a large grouping of themes that equated to a special bond of humans who saw themselves as related to each other's needs, desires, and similarities, as well as a desire to see each

Step 4: Theoretical Coding "Relation to SDT"	Step 3: Pattern Coding "Themes Condensed into Categories"	Step 2: In Vivo Coding "Emerging Themes"
RELATEDNESS	CULTURE OF SACRED COMMUNITY	Caring Attitude Family Atmosphere Relaxed Atmosphere Acknowledgment of Other-Commitments Tolerance Mutual Respect Equality Direct Communication Team Work Interconnectedness of School-Components

Table 4.3 Categories and Themes with a Relationship to the Relatedness Theoretical Code from SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

other through. The category of *Culture of Sacred Community* saw members of the community as sharing a caring attitude toward each other which produced a family atmosphere. It was an atmosphere of relaxation towards the others that entailed an acknowledgement of commitments to many other aspects of life. An atmosphere of tolerance, mutual respect, egalitarian sensibility, in which an expectation of teamwork and a need for direct communication existed.

Culture of sacred community. The sixth and final category is the largest of the categories in this study, both in terms of total numbers of themes and occurrences of the themes in the participants' responses. It is the only category that corresponded to the last of the three human needs in SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), *Relatedness.* At the heart of

this category is the bonding that takes place between students and staff. This bonding and the feeling of being part of a family of sorts is repeatedly mentioned as something that was missing for the students in their prior schooling experiences. It appears to have become an embedded culture of the school and is displayed in a collective ethos that presents itself again and again in this study. There are ten themes that make up the category including: *caring attitude, family atmosphere, acknowledgement of other commitments, tolerance, mutual respect, relaxed atmosphere, equality, communication, teamwork, and interconnectedness of school components.* Following is a presentation of findings under each theme.

Caring attitude. The first theme under the category of *Culture of Sacred Community* is one that makes the culture possible. The theme is the second most commonly occurring theme from the transcripts with a count of 41. The fact that the staff and students care for each other's wellbeing and their importance to the whole is fundamental to the other themes being relevant. Without an atmosphere of caring all the other aspects of the school culture fall apart. The data revealed that students felt important and empowered by the fact that they sensed that their success and worth were important to the other members of the school community. As a result, they also saw themselves as responsible to give care to other members of the school community including other students.

Student Eddie promptly helped with the naming of the theme when he paired caring with attitude. He first spoke about the lack of caring in his previous schools, "You're only gonna find probably one teacher whose really gonna care at school." I

followed by asking what the teachers at traditional schools did to show a lack of care and Eddie responded:

> Their attitude. The way they come through the school, like—most teachers, they're just gonna come in like Ann said and just come in, give you a piece of paper, say 'do this and go here' and sit behind their desk and doze off for the rest of the hour.

A girl who couldn't be identified from the audio recording simply said, "They care more here." Interestingly several comments were made about the fact that the teachers going by their first names without the title of Mr. or Ms. gave the students a feeling that they cared for them. Ann said, "you get to know them as a human being and not just as a teacher." She went on to say, "it's just easier to learn knowing people and it's easier to help each other, especially teachers helping students." "They want to see every child here succeed. They want to see every child here graduate, you know, and move on to bigger and better things." Ann, again speaking about her previous school, "Most of my teachers didn't even know my name; didn't even know what I looked like." "But, like here, they care, you know?"

Counselor Clara, "People that have a shared vision of a shared goal that are on the same page and really want what's best for these kids and truly like kids." Counselor Fran:

> Teachers talk to them, uh, not so much on a, a, a—I don't want to speak as a teacher but I notice that they talk to them as a, um, person to person, it's not as a teacher to a child or student and, and I think that helps a lot because it gives them that of, of—that they have self-worth and they're not just another, you know, face in the crowd that the teacher cares about them.

Teacher Doug, "I've always believed in the culture here expresses that belief that the first and most important job is to, not only meet needs, but also to connect with the students to develop relationships with students." Director of Development Hanna

pointed out that care is shown to students who may have court appearances and want a staff member to accompany them. The implication was that care was offered even when the student's actions that caused the need to appear in court were not savory to the staff member, but supporting the student in a time of need was deemed as important. Hanna later told about the school being awarded a grant to offer "grab and go" breakfast items to students who may be arriving too late to make the set breakfast time. The dilemma came up over who could provide this service. Hanna:

> All of a sudden Mario [the custodian] decides [another voice interjects 'stepped up'] you know, without saying anything to anyone. Every morning he grabs the cart, gets all the food on there and he brings it up there and he's just, I mean, interacts with the kids. 'You want some breakfast.' I mean it's like he's selling, it's like he's making money off of this but he's not being you know, he's not benefitted in any way it's just he wants to see these kids have breakfast and he knows that they'll do better and it's all about concern for the kids and that's just an example, I think, of why it works, because every staff is concerned about and wants to ensure these kids are successful.

Teacher Doug, "I have a relationship here where I love and I respect every one of these kids and I let them know that as constantly as I can and in as many different ways as I can." The caring attitude is not just towards students as Teacher Ed professed. Being a new teacher to the school he was impressed when an announcement was broadcast in the teachers' first week that a staff member with bruised ribs could use some help in their room and "20 people were down there in 15 minutes."

Administrator Mary speaking of new teachers coming to the school stated, "They are just going to be there in their [students] corner and if they don't have the heart for it and the love for it and if they're not going to love these kiddos then it's not the place for them." Administrator Lana spoke to a different level of caring attitude. A level that she admitted takes some of the students a little time to adjust to.

> You're not going to go under the radar. We're going to be all up in your business, you know… We want to know where you are and why you're not here and what's going on—how are you, how's school going, and that kind of thing.

Lana later pointed out that, for students "caring is not familiar to them." "It is the relationships that are, are developed, um among staff and then with staff and students that make up this community that we have, and that's so important because these students didn't have a sense of belonging or connectedness."

Parent Denise, "The teachers that care for them, because they show more concern than the average school." Parent Adam, "The teachers here really, truly care about each student graduating, that they make it a success, and like, they're not a bunch of numbers and statistics; they genuinely care for each and every student that walks through their doors." "We're gonna make it easy on 'em, because if we can help them get past their issues, make 'em feel loved, make 'em feel wanted then they're gonna, they're gonna, then they're gonna break down their own walls." Parent Denise, "They show the students that they care about them and what happens to them in their lives." Parent Elly, who was a former student of Alt School reported of her experience, "I started seeing people care about me." Adam, "The students don't feel like they're being talked down to, that it's like they're talking to a friend, you know, somebody who genuinely cares for them." "A counselor is somebody who genuinely cares for them." "Students listen to teachers so well because they know that these teachers care. These teachers truly care for me."

Family atmosphere. The second theme under the category of *Culture of Sacred Community* is one that is closely related to *caring attitude,* but generally included the word family. The theme heavily relied on a close bond between members of the school

community and a feeling that the members were intensely committed to the others. The theme is the third most commonly occurring theme from the transcripts with a count of 34.

The student forum and interviews only revealed this theme twice. It was Hanna who said, “We’re pretty much a big family, that’s all I have to say about it.” It turned out that it wasn’t all she had to say when later Hanna added, “We’re all family orientated.”

Teacher Ed, “Well, oh my God this is a family, I mean, I walked in here and I can tell day one and the kids feel like they belong here.” He added later that the students felt, “I’m an Alt School student, this is a special place.” Ed told of a student who was leaving for what he described as personal reasons. He related that the student told him that the work at the school is not rigorous and when a discussion amongst students ensued about his comments, the students were quick to defend the level of academic work at the school. I inquired if it was a sense of defending the family and Ed interjected, “Don’t talk bad about family.” Counselor Angie commented about the students understanding that there are “confidential areas too and I think that the kids pick up what we have to share and what we don’t have to share too.” This spoke to the unspoken family dynamic of keeping certain things within the family because it would only serve to damage the reputation of all members. Ed, “I just think that, that the way that the administration and the adults in the building have, have bonded as a family, I mean, I’ve seen them as a family coming into it. Fran, “You sort of created this family in the classroom, you know, this sense of belonging.” Jan, “They feel kind of like

they're just part of a big family, and I think that is something I really hear a lot is they feel like family here."

Executive Director Lana gave a description of how staffing of student issues goes on in the weekly staff meetings. I noted in a memo that it reminded me of how a mother or father might inform the other about something they had noticed about their child or an experience they had with that child. The sort of talk that might crop up in the car or the bedroom about something they thought the other should know or that they wanted to compare thoughts about. Executive Director Lana stated that it was important to make time for counselors, teachers, and other staff members to discuss issues or problems with students. Lana, "What the kids say so often is it feels like a family here." Assistant Director Mary thought the Tribes Program gave students an opportunity to bond in a familial way and to find out personal things about the other members of the tribe. The school started using the program to help students get to know one another at the beginning of each six-week period when new classes begin.

Parent Gail, "Whenever I have a problem Alt School is more like family, you know, you can go out there and they take care of whatever you need." Parent Adam commented on the students treating each other like family:

> Here if you watch a kid on day one when he comes in and then come back in a month you would think he's only been here a month, but look at the way he's react—a lot of, a lot of these kids, you know, he's talking to everybody, he's horsing around, he's playing around. It's totally different, because these kids, they just naturally know; he's going through something like I've been through something, so I'm not gonna make it harder on him, you know, that's why they reach out and they accept them. They pull them in, they say, 'hey, you're part of us,' you know, and we all stick together, you know we're family here, we support one another.

Francine noted a behavior more often indicative of a family member witnessing a graduation than a teacher or staff member, “The staff was crying as they walked across the stage and I thought whoa, you know, you just, you just don’t see that very often.” Adam, “Everybody works close knit like a family.”

> They get here, they find a family, somebody who supports them, they have—the other students even support them, say ‘come on, you know you can do this,’ you know, it’s—there’s no, there’s really no cliques here, you know, they’re just one family here.

Elly spoke about the practice of calling staff members by their first names, “Like when they call em their names, they just, you know, that makes them feel like that’s their—not really their mom, but maybe like a brother, or a sister, or a cousin, or a aunt.” Gail has two kids in the school and she senses that the staff is like family, “I talk to Monica [teacher] even when I see her out in public, we all—it’s like we know each other, you know, family.” Gail again, “I think a lot of it is the teachers more care about the kids and to me it’s like family.”

Relaxed atmosphere. The third of ten themes under the category of *Culture of Sacred Community* deals with the vibe of the school being one of a laid back and easy-going climate. It presented itself five times in the interviews and forums but only with the staff and parent groups. A relaxed community where members relate to each other free from tension is generally a community where relationships can thrive without need for formality.

Parent Bryan’s words served to name the theme:

> I think by being a little bit more laid-back atmosphere, it kinda helps the kids to feel more comfortable plus they call the teachers by their first names, so they’re comfortable with them. Uh, I think that makes a big difference. That’s one thing that I do like about it, I mean, they got couches in the, some of the rooms, you know? [laughs] So it’s a more relaxed atmosphere. It’s not so intense.

Bryan used an instance of his son having some sort of problem and he didn't want to talk to his counselor so a teacher took him outside and they chatted while watering flowers. "I hate to use the word flexible. I, I more wanna use laid back."

Teacher Ed, "You know, one of the things I think that adds to our culture here and sense of cool culture for the kids and wanting to be here and not get kicked out, like our, for instance, our dress code and just that we don't have a uniform." He related that he was at a different alternative school the previous year and saw some of his students from there in the Alt School halls. He noted that they seem more relaxed and less combative and he attributed it to the relaxed atmosphere of the school. Counselor Angie, "You know I've gone into classrooms and they'll all be sitting around on the couches just talking, you know, just having a conversation about history or about life skills." Couches and living room style chairs are a common feature in the classrooms at the Alt School. Two classes I observed included them and the students I watched did use them while having class discussion and all students participated. Teacher Doug noted that since some kids leave every six weeks after completing two more credits there is always a slow turnover of students. "And so, there's an opportunity to kind of after six weeks, you know, you're not necessarily the newest kid on the block and so you can kind of relax a little bit."

Acknowledgement of other commitments. The fourth of ten themes under the *Culture of Sacred Community* category is the result of the school and staff understanding that their students have complex and stressful lives. Many students work out of necessity since they have no other support and others are living in situations that tax their abilities to continue school demands at home. This acknowledgement lends to

the culture of connectedness by giving students a sense that other members of the community understand them and their needs because of understanding their personal issues.

Student Ann, “why take schoolwork to home to do as homework, you know what I mean?” “You know, I don’t bring my dishes here to clean them, you know what I mean [laughing]?” Hanna, “Some of us have jobs too. We go to school and then when we get off, we gotta go to work… I believe we’re at school eight hours a day, that’s good enough.” Ann again:

> Um, they understand that students, uh, we have outside lives, um teachers have outside lives, and um, they don’t want us to live at school. They are extremely flexible to students who they know go home and have to babysit five kids because their parents are out working or on drugs or something.

Counselor Jan noted how students use the flexibility that is built into the Alt School system to earn credits in several ways. “I have a student who is a parenting teen and she has a daughter at home and she’s very motivated to finish school quickly so that she can get back home and be with her daughter full time.” Jan explained that the student finishes her class work quickly and then uses extra time to complete online course work to speed up her credit accrual. Development Director Hanna, “If there’s a student that, um is late 15 minutes every day but that’s not going to count against them as far as not getting their time in, but you know the circumstances of why they’re late every day, we make exceptions so that that child does not fail.” Counselor Angie revealed that the school had begun in the current school year to allow students to catch up when they fail to meet the attendance policy by completing online courses or partial courses to achieve the outcomes they missed in class. Angie, “Not ideal but at least if

they have life issues where they can't be here they'll still be able to earn credit." Also, some working students attend half days.

Parent Francine, Ann's mother, provided credence to Ann's assertion that Alt School students need some understanding of what goes on in the hours after school and beyond. Francine, "She works full time, and uh, goes to school full time and, um, then still has to come home and clean her own room and do her own laundry, you know, and help me around here, because I'm disabled."

Tolerance. The fifth of ten themes under the category of *Culture of Sacred Community* deals with students and staff treating personal differences as a strength instead of a liability for the school community members. Tolerance is practiced by the staff and passed on to the students through example and when differences arise, the school's policy is to use mediation as a means of coming to terms.

Student Hanna frequently used few words to sum up a theme. "They teach you tolerance." Danny:

> They, they have mediation, which is talking, talking out the problem instead of like, 'uh, well, I hate you' and this other kind of stuff and trying to fight. You see each other's situation, looking at it from not just your perspective, but looking at it from else, from somebody else's perspective. Like, why did you get mad at this person? And all kind of other stuff to try to work it out instead of fight it out.

Ann, "it kinda wipes away judgment of other people, so you're, kind of like, you're able to get to know somebody easier, um, and know what they're going through." Ann later described how she wasn't very social in previous schools and learned to fight rather than be tolerant when she was bullied. She expressed that at Alt School there weren't cliques like in most schools and students relate across the various lines of student types. "We remove those labels, and so we see people for people that

they are." The students get their examples from the actions of the teachers.

Unidentifiable Girl:

> We don't judge each other like that. We don't judge each other by the piercings on our face or the length of our fingernails 'cause they're--our teachers are different. The people we learn from are different, 'cause they don't judge each other either.

Irene also mentioned the practice of mediating when students have differences and spoke of the school's intolerance for fighting or stirring up violence. She mentioned, "if you do that they kick you out." "They don't believe in suspending somebody because they argued, they don't believe in suspending you because you cussed, they don't believe in that, they believe in working everything out with the talking." Ann, "It's this school. It's definitely not the people who go to this school because if you put any of us in a public school, we're gonna hate everyone, we're gonna start crap, like, we're gonna do whatever we want to." Unidentifiable Girl 2 in response to Ann, "Don't you think it's like this school though? Because the school points it out that we have the same problems. In Alt School, they introduce you to everybody so you know everybody's story and what they've been through."

Former student and now counselor, Angie, referred to the school's four guiding principles but did not elaborate on them when she mentioned that she felt a sense of tolerance was derived from them. From the school's policy manual, the following are listed as guiding principles: Mutual Respect, Direct Communication, Community, and Personal Accountability. Since I had not perused the policies prior to the process of condensing themes into categories, I was amazed that these are the exact titles of four of the themes that emerged independently in the study. The two that fit into the category of *Culture of Sacred Community* include *mutual respect* and *direct communication.*

Executive Director Lana echoed the belief that the school's use of mediation was a main factor in pushing tolerance. She thought the students showed remarkable abilities to handle the process, maybe even beyond what adults might be able to gain from the process.

> They'll hear each other and most of the times, it's a handshake or a hug, and they'll go forward. They have some clarity, or they'll just say, 'we're going to have to agree to disagree, but we're both gonna coexist here.'

Mutual respect. The sixth of ten themes under the category of *Culture of Sacred Community* came only from the staff participants. There were seven instances where it presented itself in the staff forum and individual interviews. Most of the cases revolved around maintaining discipline and control. Respect is the ingredient that holds a community or family together.

In my efforts to understand how the teachers keep classes under control while having such a relaxed atmosphere and little worry about reliance on rule following, I asked several interviewees about how control was achieved. Counselor Angie:

> The mutual respect, um, because you see different behavior of the same kid in different classrooms, you know, that it just depends on the teaching styles as well, but really it has to do with if they respect the teacher they'll listen and if they don't they won't. That mutual respect is the best way that teachers control the classroom.

Doug: "It's kind of the way you teach manners, you teach it sort of one gentle correction at a time and one, uh, observation at a time." Doug told that he starts every new class and frequently thereafter by telling the students "The way that you talk about one another as well as with one another is always done with a measure of respect." "I encourage kids to call me on it if they think that any of my comments are even arguably disrespectful towards them or anybody else." "It's out of the relationship that I have of

respect for one another that I depend, probably 95% of my classroom management is based on personal relationship." "I think the discipline we have here is getting kids to understand that there are some shared expectations that we have at this school."

Counselor Jan:

> Our rules that we have in place and there's not very many of them [chuckles], but uh you know the guidelines that we have here, one of the main things we really focus on is mutual respect and if kids have conflict with somebody, um, then we sit down and get everybody in the room and just work it out.

Jan, while commenting on providing for student success mentioned that the students at Alt School have not had positive regard given to them previously. "I think that when kids come here, um they get treated with respect, they get treated as if they're cared about and valued and, um you know, we don't say hurtful things."

Equality. The seventh of ten themes under the category of *Culture of Sacred Community* recounts the feelings of being in an egalitarian community. Participants noted feeling that students and staff were given a sense of equality as human beings even though there are obviously members who have more authority to take decisions and actions. The participants used the word, equal, much of the time so the theme was given the title *equality* but it probably resembles respect rather than literal equality.

Student Ann expressed her thought that by calling teachers by their first names "we're put on an equal basis with them. She mentioned this feeling three times in her two interviews. The practice of staff members being called by their first names ran across several themes but seemed particularly powerful in this theme.

Teacher Doug's take on the equality theme equates to authority not being outwardly felt but rather an unmentioned fact regarding staff interactions. "I think there are clear lines of authority but they are rarely exercised just for the sake or need for

authority. I would say that 99.99% of what happens in this building is done in a collegial fashion as opposed to an authoritarian fashion." Executive Director Lana pointed out that the school's practice of going to elementary schools to read to young students can help struggling high school students feel capable. "They feel good, because even our poorest high school reader can read at a kindergarten and first grade level." "I think it's so equal on who benefits, who benefits the most." This statement was coded as *equality* because of the attempt by the leader to bring the feeling of being the same as others to her students.

Parent Francine, "The way they communicate with them, I think, uh, puts it—makes the students feel more on a equal footing, and I think that gives them a sense of ability and accountability when it comes to performing their work." Parent Adam, "all the staff treats the kids the same way." Parent Gail, "I think the kids take it more openly 'cause they are treated equal, you know, just like adults. And they like the respect of being treated like adults." Adam again, referring to typical approaches at regular schools:

> 'Well, you know, I'm the teacher; you have to do what I say, you know, I'm over you,' and this and that. But here, there is a level of respect, you know. They do know the difference between student and teacher, and the student knows that, but at the same time, the student don't feel like they're being talked down to.

Direct communication. The eighth theme under the category of *Culture of Sacred Community* overlaps with many other themes in the category. While the preliminary coding entailed looking at large chunks of data, the process of assigning themes entailed breaking the data into smaller pieces. The smaller pieces sometimes spoke to more than one theme. In the case of the theme of *direct communication,* the overlap was significantly higher than in other themes. This is because direct

communication was often the vehicle that was used to convey a *caring attitude,* for instance, or part of the mechanism for instilling *tolerance* through mediation, or for relating *mutual respect.* It stands alone as a theme due to its independent contributions to the category of *Culture of Sacred Community* and because variants of the words communicating, talking, and explaining were found in the theme's presentation from the transcripts. It was only found in the interactions with the staff and parent groups.

Geoff, "Our counselors know how many credits each student has and exactly what classes our kids need in order to graduate and they know what EOIs [End of Instruction Exams] have been passed and haven't, and they communicate that regularly with the students." Geoff is the intake counselor. His job is very specialized among the staff. He handles the many aspects of interviewing, assessing, and placing students into the program which ensures that the school and student are a good fit for the limitations of the small school. He took over for a long-time intake counselor that was, in many ways, the face of the school and whose sudden illness and death rocked the school community. His input was reserved during the second staff forum, but he offered this, "I'm far more authoritarian than it would be my inclination just to do and not have to explain, uh, but that's what this school does, it spends a lot of time explaining."

Development Director Hanna chimed in after Geoff's comment. She agreed that it was not her first instinct either to take the time to explain reasons for the school's actions but she related that she sees the value in communicating actions to students. "So even if that's not your first nature, I think you get into this culture and it just kind of comes and builds." She told of the school's decision to take out vending machines:

> A lot of times I think you, you have, like, adults and you have kids and there's no explanation given as to why we're doing this it's just because we think it's a

> good idea that you do this and it was OK, this is why we're doing it and, you know, these are the consequences, good, bad, ugly, or you know, how this and they, they [students] bought it because we educated them about it [several unidentified voices, 'yeah, yeah'].

Counselor Clara talked about the importance of opening students up to the idea that communicating future goals is important and how the counseling department ensures a regular discussion of future plans. Counselor Angie added, "we have conversations about that," referring to the agreements that students sign about abiding by school expectations of students. Development Director Hanna:

> We have weekly staff meetings where it's all staff and we, that we staff the kids and the counselors talk about their kids and the teachers talk about their kids and so administration, everyone is involved in that process and so we all know what's going on, we're all on the same page unless it's something that they can't disclose, but you know, I really think that helps to, for us to all be on the same page with them and just, you know reinforces that culture.

Angie:

> Teachers always work with us and we get phone calls and emails throughout the day, so you know, that reciprocity is really nice… that's hard to duplicate, you have to have the right people with the right levels of respect to make it really work.

Referring again to the four principles of the Alt School, one of which is Direct Communication, Angie said, "you have to actually talk." Angie also said, "You're talking you know, and that's how people learn, that's how we grow and interact as people and we've kind of tapped into that, you know, we are trying to reach kids in a way that they critically can think." Counselor Jan commenting on the mediation processes the school uses, reduced it to "talking."

Parent Corinth, "They communicate. It's not just they're talking to—at the children, they're talking to the children. They ask them questions, they get feedback from the kids." Francine, "It all starts with the intake process, um, the way they

communicate with the kids." "So, I know that they're real on target with the kids as far as communicating with them what needs to be done and what they have to do in order to get that diploma." Corinth speaking about the students, "They just don't feel so compelled to being stuck somewhere and, you know, and they, and they're able to ask, and they get good answers. They get good information." Corinth related that her son was very enthusiastic about school and learning since coming to the Alt School and mentioned, "it's the one-on-one, the communication they have."

Parent Bryan about regular schools, "cause you're not allowed to speak in class unless you want to get in trouble and go to the principal or something like that, whereas here, they, they seem like they more—they encourage communication with everybody." Bryan evidently visits the school a lot and told me that he was notorious for monitoring the school's activities. Speaking about his son:

> He's in crafts right now, in the art class. I was watching them, I went in there, and I was watching them, and they all say, 'Hey you oughta try this, you oughta try.' The teacher kinda sits back a little bit and lets the students help each other and communicate.

Speaking about her niece, who attended Alt School and is now in college, Francine stated, "She's the one—I went to her Alt School graduation and I saw how they communicated with the students and I, I saw how they was there rooting for them." This event led her to consider the school for her child. She had said that her niece was devastated when her father, Francine's younger brother, died of a methamphetamine overdose when the girl was eleven. Francine praised the school, "cause I honestly didn't think that this kid was gonna graduate. I thought she was gonna be another product of the streets." Perhaps the school's good communication paths are responsible for many students not succumbing to a negative and painful life.

Teamwork. The ninth theme under the category of *Culture of Sacred Community* had only four occurrences in the staff forums and one in the parent group. It most often overlapped with another theme but stood out enough to become an independent theme and ultimately fit with the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) construct of *Relatedness.* It included both staff to staff applications and students working together. Communities require teamwork to benefit the whole.

Counselor Angie used the word "reciprocity" to describe the constant communication between counselors and teachers to keep abreast of the students' situations and issues which I noted was like a team passing the ball back and forth towards a goal. Teacher Ed mentioned the call over the intercom for some assistance for an injured teacher to set up their room which figured into the *caring attitude* theme, but also fit the *teamwork* theme. Teacher Doug used the word collegial to describe the overwhelming majority of how he and his colleagues worked together towards school goals. Iris described the school's efforts in team building with kids at the beginning of each new six-week session through their Tribes Program. Finally, Parent Corinth, speaking of the algebra teacher, mentioned that she noticed "he was working with them in groups, showing them how to work as a unit instead of working just individually, because at work you don't just do things by yourself usually, you do it as a whole sometimes."

Interconnectedness of school components. The last of ten themes under the category of *Culture of Sacred Community* is the theme that ensures all the others in the category work to form the culture. The *interconnectedness of school components* is the glue that holds them together as well as the themes in the other five categories. The

theme involves the interwoven nature of the school's planning, teaching and learning approaches, programs, staff and student interactions into a unified effort to achieve Alt School's vision.

Executive Director Lana mentioned giving students opportunities to find "intrinsic satisfaction" in my interview with her. Since intrinsic motivation is the crux of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), I asked her some follow up questions about intrinsic satisfaction, but before she got to the meat of the answer to my question she introduced the theme of *interconnectedness of School Components.* I asked, "Uh, what is intrinsic satisfaction? Do you think it has any impact on, um, on the successes you talked about when it comes down to individual students?" Lana:

> Um, I would hope so, you know, I think that it all, to me, it's just so woven, and it's so interconnected here, and it's just part of who we are and what we do that I think it's hard for me to, to step back and think, If we didn't have that, would our students be less successful? because to me, I just look at all these parts kind of on this well-oiled machine, if you will, and that it — we need all those parts for the students to be successful.

The remainder of the theme lay in the input from the two staff forums. Angie, "I've said it before, a systematic empowerment that takes place that kids transform as far as how they see themselves and their abilities." The systematic empowerment spoke to me as the system being the components of the school's parts working, as Lana put it, as a "well-oiled machine." Betty was previously quoted for her thoughts that the school allowed staff more ability to make individual professional choices, therefore the analogy of a machine would have to be a machine in which the cogs were able to modify their interactions with each revolution if need be. This would be a very flexible machine. Doug brought some interesting texture to the discussion of this point. "We are trying to put in place some of the structure that allows more flexibility than we have.

We have a new attendance policy, for example, that moves students from work on campus to work off campus through some online resources." He said the school took a year to work out the details of how a seat-time based system could interconnect seamlessly with an outcome-based system. I noted that the interconnectedness was not accidental or poorly thought out.

Counselor Angie pointed out that although the counselors spend a lot of time pulling students away from academics to achieve the benefits from intensive counseling, they are very cognizant of the timing of the pull outs so that both academics and counseling achievements are not hampered. Doug made several more points about how the school's features work to make other features interconnected. One was that he mentioned that students were mostly free to seek counseling during class time when needed, but the feature of half day class periods made this less intrusive on the students' ability to get back into the objectives of the class. Another point was that the theme of *The World is our Classroom* meshed well with the instant ability to use one of the small busses that were available at any time. This worked to serve spur of the moment opportunities. He told about when the air conditioners went out in his classroom and he transferred to the cool shade of a nearby park for class discussions via the busses that were available, again because the school sought to get out into the community regularly. As he put it, "the flexibility was built into the program."

Clara was quoted under the *small schools* theme revealing the ability to know all the students and the ability to see more of what was going on with the students and this spoke to the enhanced ability to be interconnected. Special Education Teacher Betty pointed to the schools limited size as one reason why she could gain better cooperation

from teachers for compliance of IEP modifications. “At a bigger school, I am constantly telling teachers, like you have to give them options. You have to give them longer time on a test. And here I rarely ever have to say anything because the teachers all just do that.”

“The procedures or everything that we do here and tying everything back” is extracted from the middle of one of Doug’s statements that covered many other themes, but is powerful in pointing out that the school’s features are interconnected. Hanna is the Development Director. She has an important role because the school is dependent on charitable funding and she oversees those efforts. She made comments that spoke to the interconnectedness of the school’s departments and functions and how the students were exposed to the interdependent roles of the different units within the school. She noted that students could see the roles of the various components of the school because of the transparency of the units. This included her door being open and the culture of the school contributed to students feeling safe to inquire about her role. She mentioned that many students did that and some found her to be a source of empowerment for their individual needs. I noted that of all the staff roles in the school, hers could have easily been viewed as separated from those that directly impacted students. The fact that the fundraiser’s role was included in the students’ menu of available adults who could provide resources showed a very interconnected school. To amplify the authenticity of Hanna’s claim of being connected to students, Geoff, the Intake Counselor, reported:

> Our Development Officer and Community Relations Officer also have caseloads of their own, they have students that come to them who have found a rapport with them, that’s really special and those administrators with those very unique positions make themselves, uh, put themselves on the frontline to make it right with these kids, keep those doors open, so important, it’s such an impact.

Teacher Iris pointed out that she had been affiliated with schools previously that had programs like Alt School's programs. Clubs, during and after school, are not unique to Alt School, nor is the Tribes Program, nor is a homeroom concept, nor activity periods, as she pointed out. "I think it's sort of the entirety of the culture of the school, um that sort of comes together, all of it works together to create, um, that overall sort of sense of belonging."

Teacher Iris is in her first year with the Alt School but her observations were poignant. She has already witnessed that there is no thought by counselors that a student is not on their caseload, therefore not part of their responsibility. She has seen that teachers take it upon themselves to interact with students who may not have been assigned to their classes yet.

> As far as I've been able to tell it's we're all here, we're all here for all of these kids, if any kid feels a level of connection to us, even for five minutes and they want to exercise that connection, and in order to vent something, get something out, ask a question and then, you know as a staff we're just, we're going to do it, whatever it is that needs to be done.

Hanna's earlier quoted story about the maintenance man's stepping up to the plate to ensure the breakfast program worked is a powerful testimony that even the school's auxiliary staff are connected to the mission and efforts of the school.

Summary of Findings Under Research Question 3

The findings under the theoretical code of *Relatedness* included the single category of *Culture of Sacred Community* (see Table 4.3, p. 118). This category surfaced as the means for the school to make students feel that they were part of a special group, a particularly distinct formation of special affiliates. This was a large grouping of themes that equated to a special bond of humans who saw themselves as

related to each other's needs, desires, and similarities, as well as a desire to see each other through. The category of *Culture of Sacred Community* saw members of the community as sharing a caring attitude toward each other which produced a family atmosphere. It was an atmosphere of relaxation towards the others that entailed an acknowledgement of commitments to many other aspects of life. An atmosphere of tolerance, mutual respect, egalitarian sensibility, in which an expectation of teamwork and a need for direct communication existed.

Summary of Findings

The findings under the theoretical code of *Competence* included the categories of *Pastoral Care, Individuation,* and *Self-activation* (see Table 4.1, p. 71). As mentioned before, these categories surfaced as the means for the school to make students feel efficacious in their attempts to do school work, gain credits, and finally show success through graduation with a high school diploma.

The findings under the theoretical code of *Autonomy* included the categories of *Enhanced Motivation to Learn* and *License to Choose,* (see Table 4.2, p. 98). As mentioned before, these categories surfaced as the means for the school to make students feel that they had chosen to accept and participate in the activities that lead to graduation.

The findings under the theoretical code of *Relatedness* included the single category of *Culture of Sacred Community* (see Table 4.3, p. 118). As mentioned before, this category surfaced as the means for the school to make students feel that they were part of a special group, a particularly distinct formation of special affiliates. This was a large grouping of themes that equated to a special bond of humans who saw themselves

as related to each other's needs, desires, and similarities, as well as a desire to see each other through.

Chapter V: Discussion and Interpretation of Findings

The purpose of this case study of an established alternative school program was to explain the conditions of school structure that may contribute to increased likelihood of student success. School structure was generally defined as the conditions, elements, and features of the school, as perceived by the students, staff, parents, and researcher. Student success was generally defined as behaviors that lead to graduation from high school. The "social—contextual conditions" of Self-determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68) guided the investigation. Researcher observation, forum discussion, interviews, and document collection were used to explain the questions.

In this chapter I will provide a summary of the study. I will follow with an in-depth discussion of the findings in two sections including the relation to the theoretical framework and then the relation to the literature review. In both of these I will organize the discussion in the same order as in the previous chapter in which the findings were presented. Therefore, each discussion will be presented under the applicable theoretical code taken from SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), then the categorical code followed by the themes that fell under each category. After the discussion of findings, I will provide consideration of the issues surrounding validity and limitations of the study. I will proceed to offer the significance of the study and close with recommendations for future research.

Summary of the Study

Three research questions, informed by SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68), guided this study:

1) How does the school support student competence?

2) How does the school support student autonomy?

3) How does the school support student relatedness?

This study followed the case study tradition as described by Creswell (2007). He indicated that this approach is best suited for "developing an in-depth description and analysis of a case or multiple cases" (p.78). There exists a limited body of knowledge regarding alternative schools (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2001; Cox et al., 1995; Raywid, 1983). Because of this, I chose the case method which provided an especially effective approach for gaining an understanding of alternative school environments. Though alternative schools differ greatly on many dimensions (Kellmayer, 1995; Lange & Sletten, 1995; Neumann, 1994; Reimer & Cash, 2003), the literature reveals that alternative schools have historically attempted to address the neglected needs of students (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2001; Lange & Sletten, 2002). Lange and Sletten categorized the limited research into three outcomes on which alternative schools were designed to concentrate; these categories revealed striking likeness to the concepts underlying Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The case study approach allowed for the discovery and exploration of concepts, yet undefined in context, and since the questions stem from a need to discover the *how* of the concepts the case method was appropriate (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009).

Yin (2009) stated that the single case design is extremely appropriate when the case represents "a critical test of existing theory" (p. 52), which in this case was Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The selected case of Alt School included success attributes of high graduation rates, longstanding community partnering dating to

1973, and having an autonomous board of directors with the stated focus of attacking the graduation rate decline.

Nine students were selected to participate in a forum and two of those were interviewed separately at a later date. The students included six females and three males. Ten teachers, counselors, and other staff members participated in one of two forums; one counselor and one teacher were interviewed separately at later dates. Seven parents were interviewed individually since attempts to invite volunteers to come to the school for a forum failed. The parents were eventually found on an evening for parent conferences and interviewed there or by phone at a later date. Two were parents of two of the student participants. Several partial class sessions and two full class sessions were observed including one teacher who was interviewed and one teacher not in either of the forums or separate interviews. Other observations were recorded over the period from September 2 through October 25, 2013 including 12 days with instances including the cafeteria, assemblies, hallways, offices, and staff meetings.

Four steps were involved in the data coding process of this case study. The first involved using preliminary codes based on the three constructs of Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and five subcategories derived from the alternative school literature (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Statements from participants' responses to questions derived from the guiding research questions were fit into the preliminary code framework (see Table 3.1, p. 55). The second step involved "direct interpretation" (Creswell, p.163) of participants' comments and the resultant coding of emerged themes (see Appendix A). Themes were grouped and regrouped into patterns or categories, which constituted the third step (see Appendix B: Condensing Themes into Categories

and Their Relation to SDT). Lastly, the fourth step involved an examination of the relationship of the categories to the constructs of Self Determination Theory which guided this study (see Appendix B).

Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework

"Self-determination theory emphasizes the significance of three basic psychological needs in humans' acquisition of self-motivation and healthy psychological growth—the need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy" (Nie & Lau, 2009, p. 185). Ryan and Niemiec, (2009) assert that schools can be judged as to whether they provide students with the three needs by assessing whether they are: "(1) autonomy supportive versus controlling; (2) competence supportive versus over-challenging, inconsistent, or otherwise discouraging; and (3) relationally supportive versus impersonal or rejecting" (p. 269). The findings will be analyzed using these three assertions conceptualized as continuums. Following is an analysis of the findings under each of the three constructs of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) .

Findings under the theoretical code of competence. People tend not to choose to participate willingly in challenges that are above their perceived abilities (Levesque, Stanek, Zuehlke, & Ryan, 2004). As humans, we all have "the need to experience oneself as capable of producing desired outcomes and avoiding negative outcomes" (Connell & Wellborn, 1991, p. 51). What Maslow labeled as physiological and safety needs (Alderfer, 1969) cannot be overlooked, as the data collected in this study served to remind, when it was revealed that attending to basic human needs is essential before asking students to proceed to higher pursuits.

Competence is a necessary component for student internalization of motivation that begins externally (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students are more likely to take on activities necessary for learning if they feel they are capable of performing them. The findings from the case study of Alt School suggested that students' internal motivations were heightened by actions and features of the school through the school's ability to impart *pastoral care*, a process of *individuation*, and a sense of *personal accountability*. SDT promotes the premise that students first have a need to feel competent before fully attempting any ventures that will lead to success in academics. The study found that certain mechanisms within the school led to individual student feelings of competence to succeed by way of tending to the students' needs that related to competency. Firstly, these included dealing with basic issues such as shelter and food, ways to cope with personal problems, ways to achieve feelings of happiness in their endeavors, and feelings that they could extend themselves personally without fear of failure before their peers and teachers (*Pastoral Care* category). Secondly, the school dealt with the unique individual learner needs by individualizing the content which was heightened by the compact size of the school (*Individuation* category). And thirdly, the school dealt with empowering students, boosting their self-esteem, and ingraining personal accountability (*Self-activation* category).

Pastoral care category. In the report of findings, it was revealed that Alt School provided pastoral care for students from the very beginning of the students' acceptance into the school. Four emerged themes combined to make this category and they were subsequently linked to the theoretical code of *Competence* from SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The reason for this linkage is because the analysis provided evidence

that these themes were associated with students feeling that they were capable of success in their schooling, many for the first time.

The notion that students would need pastoral care was a departure from my preconceived thoughts that a sense of competence would be achieved only through giving students help academically. I did not foresee the elemental needs students might have to erase concerns of a more basic and personal level before being able to handle their academic issues. In other words, I failed to imagine that students would not be able to handle academics due to pressing personal issues outside of school. The data showed that the school's efforts to alleviate or at least mitigate students' pastoral care deficiencies provided a base from which they became psychologically competent to move forward.

Basic needs. The first theme under the *Pastoral Care* category dealt with provision for fundamental human needs. Alt School attended to the needs for students to have food, clothing, shelter, income, medical care, and psychological counseling. Without this assistance students could not have been expected to be competent to attend school, nor to attend to the business of schooling. With these needs solved students were given a chance to aspire to higher order needs. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to competence, "competence supportive versus over-challenging, inconsistent, or otherwise discouraging" (p. 269), the determination can be made that without basic needs being met students could not be up to the challenge of school work. Students in many cases could not be up to the challenge of regular attendance in fact. Therefore, the practice of consistently handling basic needs was very competence supportive.

Personal problems. The second theme under the *Pastoral Care* category involved provision for students to handle situational issues caused by their environments at home and elsewhere. Alt School realized there were issues that students faced that caused stress, maladaptive behaviors, trauma, and issues with psychological well-being. By hiring counselors with certifications beyond school counseling credentials and teachers who were empathetic to the issues, Alt School staff helped to give students the tools needed to become competent for the rigor of being a successful student by dealing directly with their personal problems. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to competence, "competence supportive versus over-challenging, inconsistent, or otherwise discouraging" (p. 269), the determination can be made that giving assistance with personal problems made the school supportive of competence. The students' issues with dysfunctional family lives, previously programmed detrimental personal behaviors, or situations including deaths of family members, or becoming suddenly homeless certainly made many prone to inconsistent life situations and discouraging psychological barriers. Alt School's attendance to these issues showed an attendance to competency supportiveness.

Personal happiness. The third theme under the *Pastoral Care* category dealt with students' need for being in a state of mind that allowed them to feel happy. Alt School provided the atmosphere that allowed students to feel happy with their endeavors in their school work. A lack of happiness in a student's world leads to a lessened condition of capacity to perform the necessary work of a student because reluctance is an outcome of unhappiness. Student Ann summed it up better: "Whenever

you've got happy people the productivity is exponential." Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to competence, "competence supportive versus over-challenging, inconsistent, or otherwise discouraging" (p. 269), student unhappiness would fit the notion of a discouragement. However, the school was found to be a happiness fostering institution in every observation, therefore it was highly competence supportive.

Safety. The fourth and last theme under the *Pastoral Care* category involved creating an atmosphere that reduced feelings of risk while participating in schooling. Alt School had mechanisms in place that allowed students to gain a newfound freedom to express themselves without fearing they would be criticized for expressing themselves. The school and its staff provided students with the strength and fortitude to take chances and to extend their own views into discussions and decisions about the schoolwork at hand. This freedom allowed the students to feel competent to participate even when failing on first or subsequent attempts. At the heart of the data findings was the key element of students feeling a familial safety or the sense that they would not be rejected for mistakes and failed attempts. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to competence, "competence supportive versus over-challenging, inconsistent, or otherwise discouraging" (p. 269), the school's provision for student safety reduced discouragement and made challenges much less difficult to overcome. The school again provided for a highly competency supportive environment in this theme.

Individuation category. In the report of findings, it was revealed that Alt School provided a path to individuation for students. The term was borrowed from the

field of sociology, meaning the process of becoming a unique individual in society. Two emerged themes combined to reveal this category and they were subsequently linked to the theoretical code of *Competence* from SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The reason for this linkage is because the analysis provided evidence that these themes were associated with students feeling that they were capable of success in their schooling. This category was the predicted case unlike the previous category that dealt with nonacademic assistance. The data showed that the school's efforts to assist students at an individual level led to students gaining the sense of ability or competence to achieve the scholastic skills necessary to become competent learners and move forward. The two themes dealt with individualized academics and the structure of being a small school that allowed for the individualized attention. Both contributed to the individuation of students' uniqueness within the school micro society, hence the name of the category.

Individualization. Individualization came in many forms including: abilities, interests, learning styles, talents, and more. Combined with various time-based classroom strategies, computer assisted self-paced approaches, and internship opportunities the Alt School's attention to individual learning needs provided the support needed for every student to become competent to succeed academically. Students were encouraged to be part of the decision about individualizing the learning plans. It was the most frequent theme in the study and therefore weighed in heavily as a major component of the success of Alt School. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to competence, "competence supportive versus over-challenging, inconsistent, or otherwise discouraging" (p. 269),

this theme begged for attention as major evidence of a competence supportive feature of the school. It ensured the most appropriate level of challenge for each student. It was consistently applied across the school and encouraged each student in a way that most had never felt the level of success it provided.

Small school. The second theme in the category of *Individuation* presented another level of individualization that included knowing the students and counseling the students on an individual level as well as making academic individualization possible. Its contribution to student competency came from the fact that the size of the school and student to staff ratio affected each student's ability to achieve the capabilities that wouldn't have presented themselves in a larger more unwieldy school. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to competence, "competence supportive versus over-challenging, inconsistent, or otherwise discouraging" (p. 269), the school's purposeful limit on size reliably mitigated issues with individual student challenge and encouraged a competence supportive environment by being the foundation of the school's ability to individualize.

Self-activation category. In the report of findings, it was reported that three themes came together under a category that linked them to empowering student self-activation. The term was meant to convey the ability the students gained to initiate and self-start the necessary actions for performing school work. It enabled them to gain a sense of efficacy through addressing their personal attributes of self-worth and ability to be in control of their own destinies. The linkage to competence came when the data revealed that these qualities aided the students in realizing that they had characteristics within themselves to feel confidence in their individual abilities to be efficacious. The

three themes under the *Competence* category involved giving students and staff the power to lead and make decisions, boosting students' feelings of self-worth and esteem, and imbuing personal responsibility and accountability. All three spoke to students' learned capabilities to activate their inner abilities to make progress in their academic goals, hence the category title.

Empowerment. The first theme under the *Self-activation* category, empowerment, embodies both staff and student evidence of increased personal capacity, because of being given authority or enhanced abilities, to accomplish their tasks. Teachers reported the ability to make curriculum choices and being treated as professionals who could make decisions without being guided by mandates and this empowerment was seen to trickle down to the students' ability to do the same. Students were treated more like adults without formalities needed to decide if the time was appropriate to see a counselor or go to the bathroom. Every staff member took turns making the weekly meeting agenda and chairing the proceedings. Every student was empowered to set their own goals and learning plans. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to competence, "competence supportive versus over-challenging, inconsistent, or otherwise discouraging" (p. 269), Alt School leaned heavily on the side of supporting competence by allowing the students, and staff, to default to the assumption that they were competent because they were given the empowerment that led to that assumption. There was no under or over challenging, there was self-appointed challenge.

Self-esteem. The second theme under the *Self-activation* category involved students being enabled to boost their feelings of worth. Feelings of worth precede

feeling esteem for oneself. Feeling unworthy of self-respect cannot lead to a sense of competence, it is antithetical. The data gleaned in the Alt School study revealed that the school's characteristics fed students a high dose of self-esteem and it showed the outcome of causing a higher probability of students feeling competent to complete their regimens. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to competence, "competence supportive versus over-challenging, inconsistent, or otherwise discouraging" (p. 269), Alt School rated highly for its ability to encourage competence feelings by making students feel worthy and therefore boosting their esteem.

Personal accountability. The third theme under the *Self-activation* category involved the students' taking a stake in their own success. They wouldn't really be competent if they relied on others to provide their success. As I've written in the last chapter, personal accountability was noted as important for activating students towards the actions needed to succeed in school alongside empowerment, and self-esteem, because its absence would make the other two useless. Without personal accountability students could not be expected to enjoy the power given to them nor the feelings of self-worth to make them competent to succeed in school. Indeed "taking ownership over their own learning" as Teacher Ed noted, was an important cornerstone in producing a sense of competence in Alt School students. Because they owned it, they became competent, because if they owned it they had to be or become competent. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to competence, "competence supportive versus over-challenging, inconsistent, or otherwise discouraging" (p. 269), Alt School's mechanisms for increasing students'

personal accountability fueled the self-activation of students and encouraged their tendency towards feelings of competence.

Findings under the theoretical code of autonomy. Connell & Wellborn (1991) define autonomy as “the experience of choice in the initiation, maintenance and regulation of activity and the experience of connectedness between one’s actions and personal goals and values” (p. 51). Autonomous behaviors come from within the individual and not outsiders or the outside world (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Levesque, Stanek, Zuehlke, & Ryan, 2004). The data in this study revealed that students found that they chose to dig deeply when they were given opportunities to apply real-world skills within their own community and while surrounded with subject matter that was personally satisfying to their own interests and needs and to those of their fellow citizens.

Enhanced motivation to learn category. In the report of findings, it was revealed that four themes came together under the categorical heading of *Enhanced Motivation to Learn*. The category name reflected the themes’ tendencies to cause students to be more motivated to engage in the learning process. It was a reflection of the students’ discovery that they liked learning, that they were being given a chance to discover and follow their own personal interests, that there was an actual application to their lives, and that it affected others directly among them in the community. The linkage to autonomy came when the data revealed that the students’ tendencies toward enhanced motivation meant that they were more inclined to feel that they had a personal reason to engage in the processes of learning hence they chose to apply themselves. The students’ responses showed they were not unlike that of a motivated customer to buy a

product; the salesman only had to show them that they were as motivated to have the product as the salesman was to make the sale.

Love of learning. The first theme under the *Enhanced Motivation to Learn* category involved students finding an affinity for learning. The data revealed that this was due to taking the emphasis off of good grades because good grades wasn't the end goal at Alt School, learning was. The good grades were a consequence of good learning. An excitement was aroused and many students discovered that learning was pleasurable. This happened when it was revealed to them that their assignments were not markers of learning in and of themselves, but rather they were connected to an outcome of learning. Then their successes synergized the affinity they now connected to learning because they equated learning with success and were therefore more and more motivated. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to autonomy, "autonomy supportive versus controlling" (p. 269), Alt School moved away from the very controlling concept of making good grades as the purpose of being a student. They moved quite to the other end of the spectrum by guiding students to the love of learning that happened to improve their grades. In this way, Alt School was very autonomy supportive.

Personal stimulation and student interests. The second theme under *Enhanced Motivation to Learn* revealed Alt School students were seeking a relief to boredom and the school was attending to stimulating the students' interests. The data showed that the school's staff, procedures, and other characteristics prevented students from feeling put upon to learn by raising the students' level of intrigue. Besides teachers guiding the curriculum towards students' shown interests, the structure of the school also proved to

provide a stimulating momentum. The policy of providing two courses per day for six weeks was reported as being stimulating by the students while at the same time providing less distractions to mastery of the concepts being taught. While concentrating a half of a day on one subject may, on the surface, appear to be grueling, the practice of frequent ventures outside the classroom may explain why it was not perceived that way by students. The many choices that students were given to accomplish an academic outcome in various ways proved to be an avenue to individualize for each student's interests. In the bigger picture students were guided towards thinking about how they wanted their learning plans to coalesce into their future goals. This tended to tie what students were doing each day to their future interests. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to autonomy, "autonomy supportive versus controlling" (p. 269), Alt School moved students to understanding that their interests were being attended to in their daily education. This stimulated them personally and therefore added to their perception of autonomous choice to involve themselves. Feeling personally stimulated is antithetical to feeling controlled or forced by outside entities to participate, therefore Alt School was very autonomy supportive.

Real life application. In the third theme, under the *Enhanced Motivation to Learn* category, the data revealed that students were given an enhanced motivation by way of showing them an avenue to use their learning in their lives. Both currently and in the future. The theme revealed that application was, at one end of the spectrum, a very practical hands-on skills base and at the other end, a useful broader skill of social interaction. The school's theme, *The World is our Classroom*, provided a basis for the application to real life. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for

assessing schools' attendance to autonomy, "autonomy supportive versus controlling" (p. 269), Alt School provided student motivation by giving students examples of how their learning was useful and pertinent. By way of Alt School imbuing students with a sense of personal purpose in their learning, students were motivated to know. Students being motivated to know is empowering to their decision to choose to learn as opposed to being told to learn. Again, Alt School proved the opposite of controlling the students' decision to learn.

Community involvement. The last of four themes that related to the category of *Enhanced Motivation to Learn* is one that shows that when Alt School students were given exposure to involvement in their own community they were given a motivation to apply their learning in a way that proved to them that they could be interlocutors in their own community of residence. This power caused a motivation to learn because it gave them power that they lacked in previous education settings. The choice to involve themselves in causes and activities that they found purposeful added to their sense of having self-appointed these involvements. This sense of choice divorced itself from the academic credit the students received for the involvement and added to their sense of motivation to move forward regardless. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to autonomy, "autonomy supportive versus controlling" (p. 269), Alt School showed a reliance on giving students a sense of independence in choosing their preferred causes in their community. Students, in this case, were motivated to learn mainly because of their choice in cause. When given this great control of choice over chosen causes, the students could not feel controlled, but

rather empowered by the freedom to work towards the community goals that they felt most meritorious. Alt School was very much on the side of autonomy support again.

License to choose category. In the report of findings, it was revealed that three themes came together under the categorical heading of *license to choose*. The themes all relate to student choices being honored and facilitated by Alt School which fit under the theoretical code of *Autonomy*. Because students were given the autonomy to decide on most of their actions in classes and the school at large, they owned their decisions and more often than not acted on those decisions. Because the choices were deep and meaningful decisions they were even more effective in producing motivated behavior. Finally, their goals, both long and short term, were not given to them but were self-generated with guidance.

Autonomous decisions. The first theme under the category of *License to Choose* came about when the data revealed that students and teachers were given great latitude in decision making. This began with deciding to attend the school which only allowed voluntary admissions. Teachers reported having the lion's share of the decision about the curriculum and methods of teaching and students reported being given the ability to make suggestions about their preferred learning styles and the methods to assess their learning. Student products were most usually left to individual decisions about how to show evidence of learning. Students were routinely given the freedom to decide what to read. Students also reported that they were not compelled to conform to rigid rules and standards. Rules were treated as guidelines to be reinforced when violated except in serious issues like fighting. Students were free to dress in self-expressive ways. Most decisions that could be left to the students and staff were left to them. Using the Ryan

and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to autonomy, "autonomy supportive versus controlling" (p. 269), Alt School showed great reliance on leaving autonomous decisions to the individuals in the school and was very low in the area of control. Alt School's practice of leaving decisions to individuals revealed a highly autonomy supportive atmosphere.

Depth of choice. The second theme under the category of *License to Choose* was a continuance of the first but reflected that individual choices were meaningful and deep. There was a sincere lack of rigidity, for example students were assigned a counselor but were not denied seeking advice or counsel from whomever they felt could best help them. Also, the school was the opposite of rigid when, for instance, a student fell below the required attendance level to acquire credit. Students had choices about how to follow another route to gain the credit without weakening the attendance policy's purpose. Staff members credited the school's depth of choices with empowering the students to feel, not only that they had autonomy, but that it was leading towards a goal of graduation and this empowerment led to a confidence that they would definitely achieve their goal. The staff members and administrators alluded to a lack of electives, yet Alt School's Friday program of mini courses showed a depth of choice for students to be involved in offerings that they found inspiring to them. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to autonomy, "autonomy supportive versus controlling" (p. 269), Alt School again showed a tendency to lean heavily towards autonomy and away from controls.

Goal setting. The third and last theme under the category of *License to Choose* involved the choices associated with setting goals. This theme mainly rested in the

counseling efforts of Alt School. These included academic, personal, post-graduation, and social goals. The evidence showed that students were given autonomy to conclude which goals they would like to set for themselves. This was gently guided by the counselors but ultimately left to the students. These included treatment goals for addictions and personality issues as well as personal behavior flaws that may have been a problem in past situations. Although this theme is a continuation of autonomous choices it is specific to goal setting which is often overlooked in public schools as a formal piece of a schools' purpose for student development. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to autonomy, "autonomy supportive versus controlling" (p. 269), Alt School, as in the previous themes regarding decisions and choices, did not show a reliance on controlling students. It was very autonomy supportive in this regard.

Findings under the theoretical code of relatedness. "It follows that relatedness describes the need of the student to have close personal relationships with teachers and adults within the school setting" (Mitchell & Forsyth, 2004, p. 11). Students have the need to feel that their teachers are in sync with them (Levesque, Stanek, Zuehlke, & Ryan, 2004). The data in this study revealed the power of making students feel that they were part of a team, a family, that was protective of their determination to preserve the right of the family to debate within and the differences between members, but to present a unified ethos to the outsiders of the family.

Culture of sacred community category. In the report of findings, it was revealed that ten themes came together under the categorical heading of *Culture of Sacred Community*. The category name reflected the themes' overarching motif which

pointed to a school culture of closely knit and galvanized stake holders who bonded to create a unique attribute of belongingness and togetherness. The connection to the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) construct and theoretical code of *Relatedness* is not difficult to deduce. Though it was the only category fitting under relatedness, it included ten themes. All of the themes spoke to various features of what makes a family or team bond and continue to work together. The themes featured the concept of care at their core. They reflected a created atmosphere of being relaxed and family like. They included a sense of respect for one another and tolerance for each other. There was an element of egalitarianism in which each member felt able to speak directly to their feelings and desires. Finally, the themes shared elements of teamwork within a school structure that showed connections between all programs, features, and aspects of the school.

Caring attitude. The first theme came from the prevalence of care being expressed by staff and students and was the second most common theme expressed by participants in the study behind *individualization*. This care was generally reported as coming through relationship building and communication patterns. Features such as teachers going by their first names and the informal nature of adult-to-adult style conversations were cited. Direct expression of concern for members of the school community was evident in areas including personal issues, academic success, emotional well-being, and fulfilment of basic needs such as food. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to relatedness, "relationally supportive versus impersonal or rejecting" (p. 269), the data revealed that Alt School

was extremely personal and accepting. Therefore, Alt School was intense in its support for relatedness.

Family atmosphere. The second theme and third most common differed from the previous in that references to "family" were generally included in the responses but the motif of caring was still involved. The data revealed that there was a presence of the feeling of a familial quality between the school community members. Members helped each other out and encouraged one another in their efforts. When a member needed help, others rushed in to fill the needs of those who were struggling. The communication between members was mentioned to have a structure more like a family such as the use of first names as one would do to refer to cousins or aunts. Also, the practice of the adults sharing details about students so that there would be no gaps in providing support for the issues they might be noticing. The fact that staff members were noted to show emotions usually exhibited by family and friends at events such as graduations showed a family type bond. A sense of belonging was reported as well as a sense of wanting to protect each other. The parents also reported being given a sense of belonging to the family even outside of the school and into the wider community. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to relatedness, "relationally supportive versus impersonal or rejecting" (p. 269), Alt School easily leaned heavily away from being impersonal and certainly did not have any rejecting features but rather was very strong in the area of providing relatedness support.

Relaxed atmosphere. The third theme under the *Culture of Sacred Community* related to Alt School's power in providing an atmosphere of ease. Again,

communication played a part in the theme and staff going by their first names was mentioned as an element of causing the relaxation of tension. The informal nature of furnishings in the classroom contributed as couches are literally more relaxing than stiff school desks. Less tendency for formal rules including strict dress codes added to the theme as well as a tendency to use less formal spaces for discussions such as a flower garden instead of an office. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to relatedness, "relationally supportive versus impersonal or rejecting" (p. 269), Alt School scores very highly towards relational supportiveness and very low in feeling impersonal.

Acknowledgment of other commitments. The fourth theme revealed the importance that students gave to feeling supported in their lives outside of school hours. The school acknowledged and factored in situations such as students having to contribute to their family's finances, having stressful home lives, being expected to care for siblings and disabled parents, and even being parents themselves sometimes. Students feeling understood led them to higher commitment while at school and on projects that did require outside work. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to relatedness, "relationally supportive versus impersonal or rejecting" (p. 269), Alt School supported students through a conveyance of understanding and this added greatly to the feelings of relatedness. It was the opposite of students' previous perceptions that teachers didn't care about the root reasons that many suffered in their academic work.

Tolerance. The fifth theme under *Culture of Sacred Community* deals with students and staff treating personal differences as a strength instead of a liability for the

school community members. Through modeling, staff imbued the practice of tolerating differences and constructive discourse was encouraged while violence was strictly forbidden. Alt School used the process of mediation when personal differences boiled over and the outcome generally led to agreement or at least a pact to tolerate the differences. Students reported the outcome of bringing students together through tolerance in a way that distracted from the normal school phenomenon of clique formation. This was attributed to the fact that students were made to realize that they had similar reasons for coming to Alt School even though they had different interests and tastes. One student noted that the same students at the school would not be tolerant in other school settings and she attributed the tolerance to the school's characteristics and not to the nature of the students who attended it. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to relatedness, "relationally supportive versus impersonal or rejecting" (p. 269), the evidence indicates Alt School promotes students' acceptance of each other. It provides a highly supportive condition for relatedness through the practice of tolerance.

Mutual respect. The sixth theme involved staff and students treating others with respect. This respect was noted by Counselor Jan as having been absent in the students' previous school settings and was a factor in gaining a sense of care and of being valued. Teacher Doug related that he made a point at the beginning of each new term to address his expectations that students should be respectful towards others. He attributed the aspect of respect being the main feature in his classroom management. Other staff members agreed that respect was the key to maintaining discipline. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to relatedness,

“relationally supportive versus impersonal or rejecting” (p. 269), Alt School showed a high degree of relatedness support through its’ encouragement of mutual respect. The concept increased students’ feelings of being accepted and being personally valued.

Equality. The seventh theme under *Culture of Sacred Community* revealed the perception of being an equally valued person by those that could exert power but chose not to just for the sake of feeling powerful. This is another theme that started with the staff being free from authoritarian style management and then trickled down to the student management approaches of staff. Again, staff being referred to by their first names instead of a formal title appeared to aid in the perception of this theme as well as the practice of treating students as adults. Parents reported feeling that all students were given the same treatment without favoritism. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools’ attendance to relatedness, “relationally supportive versus impersonal or rejecting” (p. 269), Alt School showed no impersonal or rejecting tendencies and formed an extremely supportive environment through the practice of treating students fairly.

Direct communication. The eighth theme under the category of *Culture of Sacred Community* reflected Alt School’s use of frank and forthright verbal communication. This tendency to encourage discussions was two sided with the students being expected to take a roll in the interchanges and not simply adults telling students to do something. The adults engaged in discourse about the kids they served and the students were noted as being left to use communication between each other as a method of instruction. Parents and staff mentioned the importance of the high level of quality in the information being communicated to the students. Two staff members

mentioned that feeling the need to explain decisions or reasons for the school's processes to students was not natural to them but that they had seen the benefit once joining the staff of Alt School. The students were found to respond by showing more motivation to go with the flow instead of obstructing as is often the tendency for adolescents in school settings. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to relatedness, "relationally supportive versus impersonal or rejecting" (p. 269), Alt School found that using direct communication was beneficial and the data revealed that this practice was highly supportive of nurturing relatedness.

Team-work. The ninth theme represents Alt Schools' use of members working together to achieve student successes. The words that participants used were important to arriving at the label of this theme. "Reciprocity" "offers of help," "collegial," "team-building," and "work as a unit" were words and phrases that helped identify the team-work theme. The first three described staff team-work while the last two were applied to describe students working together as a team. While not a large theme, it did further the evidence of a school culture being a strong component of Alt School and served to bind it to the theoretical code of *Relatedness*. Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to relatedness, "relationally supportive versus impersonal or rejecting" (p. 269), Alt School again proved to be high in supporting relatedness and no connections were made indicating any features of being impersonal or rejecting. Being a valued member of a team thwarts feelings of being rejected.

Interconnectedness of school components. The tenth and final theme under the category of *Culture of Sacred Community* amplified the tendency to ensure that interactions, practices, programs, and procedures were carried out in a way that all were serving the needs and purposes of the others. There was no conflict between these features in realizing the goals of each part and all served to bolster the overall mission and vision of the school.

One staff member equated the school's parts to a "well-oiled machine." Others pointed to the staff being free to make professional decisions autonomously which was viewed as the lubricant needed to enable the functioning of the machine in a very flexible way. Policies were also noted as aiding this flexibility and it was found that Alt School tended to ensure an appropriate amount of time to make plans which added to the insurance that practices would indeed be interconnected. There were several accounts of certain school features enabling other features to be more productive towards student success. These included the provision for student counseling at the time the student deemed it was needed being aided by the daily class schedule. On the other hand, a counselor noted that the counseling staff was mindful that academics was an emphasis for the school. Even the practice of encouraging the use of vans to get into the community found overlapping benefits when the air conditioning was not working. The limited size of the school was an important feature that made knowing each student and their needs easier and provided a better possibility of attending to student individualization. There were no departments that were disconnected from the others. Even the fund-raising arm of the school and the Community Relations Officer were involved with students and their needs at school and were involved in weekly staff

meetings. The auxiliary staff were viewed as being involved as well in ensuring the school's vision was promoted. It was noted that many other schools had the same kinds of programs and features that Alt School had but the interconnectedness of these were often not in evidence.

Using the Ryan and Niemiec (2009) derived continuum for assessing schools' attendance to relatedness, "relationally supportive versus impersonal or rejecting" (p. 269), Alt School leaned heavily towards being supportive of the need for relatedness by ensuring the various parts were connected. Though this included programs and features as well as the human components, it served to promote the ability of the staff to provide a personal and inviting culture.

Summary of the Interpretation of the Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework

Ryan and Niemiec, (2009) asserted that schools can be judged as to whether they provide students with the three needs that make up SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) by assessing whether they are: "(1) autonomy supportive versus controlling; (2) competence supportive versus over-challenging, inconsistent, or otherwise discouraging; and (3) relationally supportive versus impersonal or rejecting" (p. 269). Though these assertions were conceptualized as a continuum, there was no quantification used in the rankings within the continuum. Rather, the evidence was weighed in terms of determining if the data revealed a preponderance of leaning to one end or other of the continuum. The results found that Alt School ranked highly in favor of supporting the constructs in all comparisons and never showed evidence of leaning towards the negative. In summary the results, though not quantified, never revealed a

middle ground nor a propensity for Alt School to fall into the areas of being controlling; over-challenging, inconsistent, or otherwise discouraging; or impersonal and rejecting.

Discussion and Interpretation of the Findings in Relation to the Literature Review

As stated in the discussion of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework, "Self-determination theory emphasizes the significance of three basic psychological needs in humans' acquisition of self-motivation and healthy psychological growth—the need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy" (Nie & Lau, 2009, p. 185). The literature contains little evidence of tracing successful alternative programs to a theoretical base (Raywid, 1983). Lange and Sletten (1995) have been frequently cited for their work that shed light on three *outcomes* that the literature points to as the main focus points of alternative school studies. These *outcomes* have been noted in this study as overlapping with the three constructs of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), therefore this section will concentrate on the practices found within the literature and their conformity or lack of conformity to the themes and categories that were found in this study. Continuing with the format of presenting the discussion under the theoretical constructs of the theoretical framework, following is an analysis and interpretation of the findings in relation to the literature review.

Findings under the theoretical code of competence. If students feel they cannot participate due to a lack of a sense of competence, they generally will not choose to participate (Levesque, Stanek, Zuehlke, & Ryan, 2004). Humans generally want to feel capable before pursuing a task or a set of tasks (Connell & Wellborn, 1991).

Pastoral care category. This category came about as the Alt School dealt with basic student issues such as shelter and food, ways to cope with personal problems,

ways to achieve feelings of happiness in their endeavors, and feelings that they could extend themselves personally without fear of failure before their peers and teachers

Basic needs. Students cannot move toward self-actualization, in the sense that Maslow (1945) described, until meeting more fundamental needs including physiological and safety-security needs (Kershaw & Blank, 1993). The lack of avenues to satisfy physical and emotional needs is a reason many students seek or are guided to alternative schools in the first place (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2001).

Deci, et al, (1989) explained that workers within an organization cannot be expected to react to the constructs of SDT, even if they are well supported by the organization, without adequately ensuring certain basic minimum needs. Specifically, they were referring to sufficient pay and the perception that workers' jobs were secure. They acknowledged that self-determination was a higher order than the need for basic provisions and security.

While students may not receive monetary compensation, they must have basic needs fulfilled before being expected to react to Alt School's high level of support for the three component needs of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) presented in the findings under the theoretical framework. The literature includes this concept and the findings concluded that Alt School recognized that students' basic needs must be met with assistance from the school.

Personal problems. Kellmayer (1995) promoted treating crises, suicidal students, and drug and alcohol abuse issues for students because these are issues that bring students to the alternative school setting in many cases. Raywid's (1983) *Type III* alternative schools were described as programs designed to include treatment of

psychological and emotional issues in students. Her description of these programs sometimes placed the treatment as paramount over the academic focus but was only intended for a short term with the idea that students would be reintegrated to the regular school as soon as possible.

Alt School most closely resembles Raywid's (1983) *Type I* alternative school because it is intended to be a school of choice and is an end in itself with graduation from the school as the goal. Raywid's definition of a *Type I* school does not preclude it from having a strong counseling element and Alt School was founded with an intent to provide these services that have served to provide a basic need before students are expected to move forward in successful academic pursuits.

Personal happiness. This theme was not articulated in the literature review. As a theme, it is a reflection of other components in its category, therefore relates to the literature through the themes such as *personal problems*.

Safety. As a theme, safety at Alt School was defined as students' feelings of security to interact and take on academic and social risks. Ryan and Deci (2000) noted that infants had greater proclivity to explore their environments when they gained a secure feeling from having parents that supported autonomous behaviors and they assumed that this would carry through to later stages of development.

Individuation category. This category came to life surrounding the ways the school dealt with the unique individual learner needs by individualizing the content for students. This ability to individualize was heightened by the compact size of the school which was limited to just under 100 students. The category name was taken from sociology as the means that individuals become unique in society.

Individualization. Neumann (1994) traced humanistic psychology as a defining element in shaping alternative education philosophy and as such believed that alternative schools were inclined to individualize for student interests and needs. Alt School indeed incorporated individualization and it was the most common theme presented in the study. Neumann noted that many alternative schools devised learning plans that were designed for the unique needs of every student. While there was no evidence of a formal individualized plan at Alt School, there was great evidence that this was being followed on a more informal basis by most teachers. As for counseling plans, there was great evidence of a formal approach for each student with much student input into the plan.

Kellmayer (1995) emphasized the need for each alternative school to examine the specific needs of schools to look at their own unique characteristics and needs when designing curriculum. This is viewed as being consistent with drilling down to the individual needs of learners. Saunders and Saunders (2001) asked students for input into what could be improved in traditional schools and heard that among others, flexibility was needed in instruction which also fits the individualization for student learning theme. Saunders and Saunders advocated for small school size in order to allow for greater individualization which ties over into the next theme.

Small school. As noted in the last chapter, Alt School's small size was the prominent feature that allowed for the possibility of individualizing. Large schools were clearly not promoted in the literature as good alternative school practice. Saunders and Saunders (2001), Kershaw and Blank (1993), Darling-Hammond, Ancess, and Ort (2002), and London (1992) all promoted small alternative schools. London was specific

in advocating for the appropriate size being from 30 to 50 students. Neumann (1994) claimed that site based management of alternative programs is as important as other characteristics mentioned and this is noted because Alt School has maintained a decentralized management of the school since its inception. The latter point is credited with Alt School's ability to understand the benefits and insist on the limitation of the size of the school to under 100 students.

Self-activation category. This category revolved around how the school dealt with empowering students, boosting their self-esteem, and ingraining personal accountability. It was found to be the foundation of getting students started towards feeling efficacious and competent.

Empowerment. As noted in the previous chapter the *Empowerment* theme embodies both staff and student evidence of increased personal capacity, because of being given authority or enhanced abilities, to accomplish their tasks at Alt School. Kershaw and Blank (1993) listed several attributes of successful alternative school programs. Those that Alt School included and that added to the *Empowerment* theme were: "choice, extended roles, relative autonomy, . . . teacher participation in management, …strong academic leadership, academic innovation, clear standards for conduct, and small school size" (p. 3). Neumann (1994) claimed that site based management of alternative programs is as important as other characteristics mentioned and evidence was found that this was passed on to the teachers and staff of Alt School as "teacher participation in management" (Kershaw & Blank, 1993, p. 3).

Kellmayer (1995) and Neumann (1994) agreed that student involvement should be integral to the design of the individualized student plans. Neumann, recalling a

specific case in point from the 1970s, reported that students were active in a curriculum task force.

> The task force surveyed classmates' interests and reported the results to faculty members, who, depending on the extent of interest and faculty expertise, might include student-requested topics in an existing course, develop a separate course or seminar, or enlist a member of the community with special knowledge to conduct a mini-course under the supervision of a faculty member (p. 549).

Though less formal than a student task force, Alt School data showed that students and faculty interests and expertise were used to develop individualized instruction and special mini-courses. In addition, the school's insistence on outside-of-school learning revealed the use of other community experts, such as the instance of involving the glass blowing artisans.

Neumann (1994) also noted that the teachers were given great latitude in designing curricula, relating it to the freedom college professors enjoy. Alt School data revealed that teachers were very much in control of curriculum decisions. When the faculty is able to work in schools having enabling structures, enabling structures for the student body tend to emerge (Hoy, 2001). Empowerment is synonymous with enabling and the Alt School study revealed that there was a trickle-down effect to students.

Empowerment is antithetical to external control. A controlling form of administration, both for staff and students will result in less intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1989; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001). Alt School allowed both staff and, as a result, students to feel empowered to proceed towards their roles and goals and resulted in the empowerment of their feelings of efficacy to achieve those roles and goals.

Self-esteem. Alternative school "curriculum content is often supplemented by courses in self-esteem and self-development" (California State Department of

Education, 1995, p. 11). While Alt School had no coursework to attend to self-esteem, the data revealed that students and staff felt that esteem was intertwined with the factors that led students towards feeling capable of success. Although esteem is the second to highest in Maslow's (1943) original hierarchy, self-esteem was found to be a fundamental building block to a feeling of competence in the Alt School study. The data revealed that success led to more success through increased feelings of the capability of success.

Personal accountability. This theme was not articulated in the literature review but was noted in the last chapter as being important to the other two themes under the category of *Self-activation* because it was a building block for enabling *empowerment* and *self-esteem*. These two themes were lessened without students being held accountable for their decisions and actions.

Findings under the theoretical code of autonomy. Autonomy is a connection between the decision to pursue a goal and the feeling that the pursuit is one that is agreeable to us internally (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). Autonomous behaviors come from within the individual and not outsiders or the outside world (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Levesque, Stanek, Zuehlke, & Ryan, 2004).

Enhanced motivation to learn category. This category name reflected the themes' tendencies to cause students to be more motivated to engage in the learning process. It was a reflection of the students' discovery that they liked learning, that they were being given a chance to discover and follow their own personal interests, that there was an actual application to their lives, and that it affected others directly among them in the community.

Love of learning. For students to feel they have chosen to take on learning activities and tasks, Alt School showed an ability to convert students' feelings to a desire to learn. By avoiding micromanagement, perceptions of meaningless work, and tedium (Ryan & Deci, 2000) Alt School gave students a work ethic that enhanced their success by giving students a feeling that they had an inner desire to proceed with the tasks of learning. The students' previous experiences of work that was meaningless to them and useless to their future thwarted their desire to learn. This was overcome by Alt School's ability to provide a context of supportive autonomy. This was bolstered by the findings of Ryan and Deci who found that "Contexts supportive of autonomy, competence, and relatedness were found to foster greater internalization and integration than contexts that thwart satisfaction of these needs" (p. 76).

Personal stimulation and student interests. Neumann (1994) attributed humanistic psychology as the driving force behind alternative schools. He felt that alternative schools involved the idea that "education should be tailored to students' needs and interests as much as possible" (p. 548). He noted that alternative schools often included students' personal interests when making decisions on curriculum delivery. The data in this study revealed that teachers at Alt School were attuned to finding individual student areas of interest to peak their feelings of involvement in the subject matter.

Students are naturally motivated towards activities that they find interesting, stimulating, or novel (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Alt School teachers were found to introduce ways for students to relate their own interests into subject matter that was not previously linked to issues of interest for their students by giving practical examples of how subject

matter, in fact, applied to them. For instance, the math teacher's ability to show that equations could apply to students' interest in buying a car. For activities that do not naturally appeal to children's interests, adults have the ability to influence the incorporation of activities, rationales, behaviors, and norms that evolve into interests (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT helps teachers understand how to motivate students through linking their interests to the subjects being taught and Alt School showed great prowess in this area.

Behaviors originated by forces outside the student generally are not of interest to them (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Although this statement by Ryan and Deci was geared towards the concept of relatedness for students to gain internalization of the decision to move towards the act of learning, it speaks to students at Alt School feeling a desire to incorporate for themselves the decision to learn.

Real life application. Back to Neumann (1994) who attributed humanistic psychology as a driving force behind alternative schools; he noted that alternative schools tended to include students' needs to involve "practical areas of knowledge" (p. 548). As a theme, the data revealed that Alt School was very attentive to this issue. Like student Danny said, "More of a hands on at the same time, so it's like, not just learning the information." "It's learning and applying, cause at school [regular public school], you're just writing it down and looking at it, you know the knowledge, but you're not applying it."

Kellmayer (1995) advocated for internships and externships to extend the curricula of an alternative school so that students might benefit from real-life learning. He added that the need for real-life learning was a precipitating factor in many

alternative school candidates' needs in the first place. The California State Department of Education (1995) also cited externships as an example of moving beyond the normal school schedule to address alternative students' needs.

Raywid (1983) included internships and social service as one of five parts to define a proper alternative school. Student Ann recalled that, "In our cafeteria we have a slogan and it says, 'The World is our Classroom,' um, and for that reason the teachers here know that kids aren't just going to learn out of a book." "We go out into the world. We've had students go meet with bank tellers, you know, ask them about their job. Get in with the real world." This leads perfectly into the next theme.

Community involvement. The theme of involving students in the community mainly related to connecting students to service and charitable work within the school and the wider community. While only Raywid (1983) alluded directly to community service, the benefits of those contributing to the literature of alternative school practices in the last section also fit the emphasis of getting students into the community. Alt School was obviously convinced that community connectedness was an essential part of helping its students be successful. It is associated with increasing students' feelings of having chosen to serve and learn because the students were urged to find their own causes that spoke to their interests and personal connections.

License to choose category. This category reflects Alt School's support for students getting to decide on most of their actions in classes and the school at large, they owned their decisions and more often than not acted on those decisions. Because the choices were deep and meaningful decisions, they were even more effective in

producing motivated behavior. Finally, their goals, both long and short term, were not given to them but were self-generated with guidance.

Autonomous decisions. Kellmayer (1995) recommended that students and teachers should have great latitude in choosing the ways and means of going about the learning process. He recommended developing individualized program plans to accommodate even more student choice. Alt school showed a great deal of choice given to both staff and students in the areas of curricula and how to go about showing mastery.

Kershaw and Blank (1993) listed several attributes of successful alternative programs including "choice, extended roles, relative autonomy, and academic innovation." Each of these were found to be evident in the structure of Alt School. Giving students the ability to choose to participate for themselves and feel that they have the inner resources within an environment of caring can stimulate feelings of satisfaction and success in school (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Depth of choice. This theme was separated from the last because students were not only given the ability to make their own decisions but to make them from a wide range and within a depth that caused feelings of autonomy. Kellmayer (1995) suggested that having choices between time-based and mastery-based curricula gave greater flexibility to alternative students' needs. Alt School, after careful deliberation had made available these options. Certain students with needs to work, or take care of their children, for instance, were afforded the ability to attend half-days or gain credits faster by allowing computer-based mastery choices as well as giving credit for studies tied to their work experiences. Also, students who found themselves unable to complete

minimal attendance standards for credit were able to choose a combination of the two in order to maintain their building of school credits even when circumstantial issues arose. Programs in Minnesota (Lange & Sletten, 1995) and California (California State Department of Education, 1995) also revealed the benefits of a flexible method of achieving credits.

Neumann (1994) noted that there is “empirical evidence that thematic, learner-directed approaches to education were as effective as, if not more effective than, conventional teacher-directed, discipline-centered instruction” (p. 548) and Alt School’s provision for this very type of approach caused a depth in the choices students were able to make. Neumann (1994), London (1992), and Hanson (1992) centered their approaches to alternative curriculum on student projects. “More often student learning was assessed in terms of the products they created: theses, reports, journals, performances, artwork, and so on” (Neumann, 1994, p. 549). The evidence at Alt School pointed to a great deal of reliance on student products over quizzing and testing. London (1992), wrote that alternative school missions “provide a curriculum emphasizing developing problem solving and coping skills versus emphasizing the acquisition of knowledge” (p. 1). “Projects would be the primary vehicle to provide the student with a comprehensive education” (p. 2). Hanson (1992) also promoted using student projects including portfolios, debates, learning logs, interviews, mock trials, and research reports in lieu of traditional testing methods.

Environments rich in autonomy support provide students with choices and the freedom to act on their own. The need to comply is not expected or pushed on them.

Only then can students perceive that they got to that point on their own and want to be there (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Goal setting. This theme was not articulated in the literature review but does attend to the ideal that students at Alt School were given great latitude in making their own educational and personal plans. Because the theme is connected to students choosing their own goals the links to the literature in the *autonomous choices* and *depth of choice* themes apply here.

Findings under the theoretical code of relatedness. Relatedness is a need that students have for a personal connection to the staff and teachers of their school (Mitchell & Forsyth, 2004). Students have the need to feel that their teachers are understanding of them (Levesque, Stanek, Zuehlke, & Ryan, 2004).

Culture of sacred community category. This category contained more themes than any other. It resulted from the themes' coalescence into a perception of being part of a bigger picture. According to a study by Kaczynski (1989), developing a strong sense of community was the one single largest suggestion from students who were comparing the problems they faced in traditional schools to better outcomes in alternative schools.

Caring attitude. The first theme under the category of Culture of sacred community was the second most frequent in this study. The theme reflected the pervasiveness of all members showing and feeling cared about and for. SDT researchers have used the term *involvement* when describing an environment that conveys relatedness (Nie & Lau, 2009). Involvement in this sense describes the relationship between teacher and student as caring, interested, and affectionate. This climate exudes

relational harmony for the purpose of developing the components necessary to promote self-directed and motivated behaviors in students.

I noted that care replaced a good deal of the need for staff to use control measures to manage students. The student interviews reflected this difference from their experiences in regular schools where they felt that teachers were less interested in them personally and more interested in insuring that students just followed directions. Nie and Lau (2009) felt that most traditional classroom management followed a behaviorist viewpoint that focused on controlling misbehavior while Alt School staff tended to follow a viewpoint that showing care and concern and being involved with students was the key to gaining appropriate behavior.

Wooten and McCroskey's (1996) findings confirmed that teacher responsiveness produces trust between students and teachers, but a level of teacher assertiveness is an important ingredient as well for student participation. It may seem contradictory but in Alt School the assertiveness was mellow and emanated more from what the Executive Director referred to as "We're going to be all up in your business," meaning that although new students may have not been used to staff members showing so much interest in students' issues, problems, current situations and the like, it was a form of assertiveness. In this way Alt School was able to control situations by reminding students that self-chosen goals and desires may be at odds with what makes for a productive learning environment but this was generally done in a way that did not call out students in front of other students. Teacher actions that convey concern for student needs along with balanced control of student actions promote student performance. Balanced "behavioral control was a significant negative predictor of

classroom misbehavior and care was a significant positive predictor of satisfaction with school" (Nie & Lau, 2009, p. 185). Order, according to Nie and Lau, is not only the removal of misconduct; instead it requires that students act with purpose and show signs of psychological wellness.

Family atmosphere. The second theme under the category of culture of sacred community was the third most recurring theme in this study. "A secure relational base does seem to be important for the expression of intrinsic motivation to be in evidence (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71)." The biggest difference between this theme and the former was the inclusion of the word *family* in the participants' responses. Most students probably did not immediately gain intrinsic motivation from Alt School's enhanced abilities to support competence and autonomy. SDT helps to explain how children's' desires to proceed with tasks that may not be entirely within their inner desires can be, nonetheless, driven by the desire to please adult figures that they feel are connected to them.

Behaviors originated by forces outside the student generally are not of interest to them; as a consequence, students primarily act only to impress or emulate another person whom they respect or who acts as a model (Ryan & Deci, 2000). "This suggests that relatedness, the need to feel belongingness and connectedness with others, is centrally important for internalization" (p. 73). Internalization is connected to a structure of support that amplifies the likelihood that students will perceive belongingness. "For example, Ryan, Stiller, and Lynch (1994) showed that the children who had more fully internalized the regulation for positive school related behaviors were those who felt securely connected to, and cared for by, their parents and teachers"

(Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 73). For many Alt School students connections are absent from parents but well compensated by their teachers and counselors.

> "Anderson, Manoogian, and Reznick (1976) found that when children worked on an interesting task in the presence of an adult stranger who ignored them and failed to respond to their initiations, a very low level of intrinsic motivation resulted, and Ryan and Grolnick (1986) observed lower intrinsic motivation in students who experienced their teachers as cold and uncaring" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71).

Relaxed atmosphere. This theme resulted from input that Alt School had a laid-back vibe. The reasons dropouts and at-risk students sometimes become successful in alternative schools can be credited to the informal control some students report in the alternative setting (Kaczynski, 1989). These informal controls included the concepts of freedom and choice.

Among the first studies challenging conventional assumptions about rewards and motivation were those in the school setting (Deci et al., 1989). "These studies showed… that teachers who were oriented toward supporting student self-determination had a positive effect on the intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, and perceived competence of their students, relative to teachers who were oriented toward controlling their students' behavior" (p. 581). Effective control in the classroom is less about a controlling management style and more about attending to the psychological needs of students. Alt school data revealed that students were given an impression of freedom from overt controlling policies. This was expressed in everything from the dress-code to the way that staff chose to address students and the way that students were allowed to informally address staff.

Differentiating between external and behavioral control is key to understanding why some studies point to teacher control as positive and motivating, while other

studies find that control lowers student involvement and motivation (Nie and Lau, 2009). External control uses coercive methods such as setting guidelines and offering rewards for compliance, or punishment for non-compliance (Deci et al., 1989; Nie & Lau, 2009). When external controls are minimized, students are surrounded by autonomy support that encourages self-initiative and self-control. Ryan and Deci (2000) "found that conditions supportive of autonomy and competence reliably facilitated this vital expression of the human growth tendency, whereas conditions that controlled behavior and hindered perceived effectance undermined its expression" (p. 76).

Acknowledgment of other commitments. This theme was not articulated in the literature review. It occurred in nine separate data slices, therefore remains a fairly stable theme on its own, however, it may be a further example of caring attitude and other themes found in the literature.

Tolerance. Kershaw and Blank (1993) advocated for "clear standards for conduct" (p. 3). Alt School was documented as having few standards for conduct that were not malleable enough to move past, if students offended them, through a system of informal counseling and mediation. Among the few expectations that were emphasized and not open to compromise included this theme of *tolerance* and the next of *mutual respect*. For instance, fighting and violence were known to be instant expellable offenses. The data leading to this theme revealed that there was a strong connection between the staff examples of behavior leading to students following suit. The students told of the power of bringing people together through efforts to include everyone in the community setting of the school, leading to a sense of respecting and tolerating each other in a way that was not common in regular schools where cliques were the norm.

Mutual respect. This theme was not articulated in the literature review. It may be an example of a characteristic that goes without speaking for a successful program or organization to be successful.

Equality. The original alternative programs of the 1960s included the concept of a democratic decision-making process that included students (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1983). Many if not most alternative schools lost this founding principal in the 1980s but Alt School supported the concept of democratic decision making.

Direct communication. In the previous chapter, it was noted that this theme saw much overlap with other themes under the category of *Culture of Sacred Community* and that specific words in the transcripts were found under this theme including communicating, talking, and explaining. It was one of the most frequently occurring themes in this study.

When there is good communication of expectations, procedures, and norms and the setting is well defined, Nie and Lau (2009) posited that a school can benefit from increased structure and behavioral control. Structure, they noted, was mostly associated with instruction while behavioral control was associated with classroom management but both communicate expectations. In both cases the communication is more likely to be consumed as useful and welcome and thereby supports students' feelings of having chosen to oblige. The instance of staff reporting that directly communicating why the school moved to provide only healthy vending machine choices was accepted readily by the students is a case in point.

The "interpersonal context" (Deci et al., 1989, p. 581) within which communication is used is an important variable that determines whether students will

accept the information offered as being acceptable or overbearing. The data from the Alt School study showed that the factors of providing support for all three SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) human needs synergized to form this context. For integration to take place, students must understand the rule or norm in question, and they must be able to fit it in with their other internalized ambitions and values (Ryan & Deci, 2000). While the mechanisms used by organizations to prime worker behavior are fairly consistent, the dynamics involved in interpersonal communication and interaction show more variability and this provides a window to see the importance of the power of direct communication to effect positive instead of unproductive behaviors of students (Deci et al., 1989).

Kellmayer (1995) promoted peer mediation and Alt School showed a dependence on the concept for resolving issues between students. This was a form of using the power of direct communication to influence student behavior choices that were communicated by the staff as an alternative to students' traditional ways of handling differences. It amplified Alt School's expectations.

Team work. This theme was not articulated in the literature review.

Interconnectedness of school components. The last of ten themes under the category of *Culture of Sacred Community* was noted in the last chapter as the theme that ensures all the others in the category work to form the culture. The *interconnectedness of school components* is the glue that holds them together as well as the themes in the other five categories. The theme involves the interwoven nature of the school's planning, teaching and learning approaches, programs, staff and student interactions into a unified effort to achieve Alt School's vision.

Students' perceptions of problems in traditional schools and their suggestions for more effective schools led to the following summary from Saunders and Saunders (2001): "1) Move toward a connected and focused curriculum; 2) Use a more flexible instructional system; and 3) Develop a strong sense of community" (p. 13). Saunders and Saunders' first point obviously relates interconnectedness to curriculum issues. Their second point of instructional flexibility still aims at equating flexibility to connecting with student learning needs. Their third point aims straight at this category that includes the concept of community. The data from this study of Alt School revealed that the school showed a high degree of interconnectedness of all aspects of the school. This included curricula, revealed a very strong flexibility of instructional approaches, and showed a heavy emphasis on providing a great sense of school and civic community. According to Kaczynski (1989) the sense of community was one that carried the most weight with alternative school students from his experiences as an alternative school professional. He emphasized that relationships between students, teachers, and other school staff was the most resonant among students who felt success in their schooling experience.

Summary of Findings in Relation to the Literature Review

Alt School practices compared positively with both the components of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and best-practices for alternative schools found in the literature. Of 25 themes in the study, 19 showed resemblance to entries in the literature. Some themes from this study were not articulated in the literature. The consideration of this issue produced the possibilities of the themes being semantical equivalents with themes that were found, or being unstated truths that were assumed but not articulated. The

themes not articulated included: *Personal happiness, personal accountability, goal setting, acknowledgment of other commitments, mutual respect, and team-work.*

Validity and Limitations

The limitations with this study began with the fact that it is a single case study. Its generalizability cannot, therefore, go beyond the boundaries of the unit of study which was Alt School itself. The students served by the school represent grades 9-12 and number under 100. The possibilities which arise from the findings within these limitations are somewhat countered by the strength that comes with the match to well defined theoretical bases (Yin, 2009). Within the case study process other limitations can arise due to the issues of researcher bias and influence (Yin, 2009). Having been interested in and studying alternative schools since 1989 and also having been an administrator over alternative programs at two stages in my career, I had to consider my philosophical predispositions during the analyses.

"For case study analysis, one of the most desirable techniques is to use a pattern-matching logic" (Yin, 2009, p. 136). "If the patterns coincide, the results can help a case study to strengthen its internal validity." In assessing the gathered evidence, I looked for a match to the expected outcomes in terms of supports for the constructs of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000) leading to student success factors. The school proved to be highly supportive of all three constructs of SDT and the participants' claims that coalesced into themes and further into six categories equated easily back into the framework of SDT.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The most significant addition to the literature on alternative school design and practice from this study, results from its use of a theoretical base from which to consider possible reasons for Alt School's success over many years. Raywid (1983) proclaimed that a theoretical base was absent in previous research, therefore this case study could provide a springboard for consideration of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) as the link to the original aspirations of alternative school philosophy, and what Lange and Sletten (1995) cited as the outcomes that alternative schools have traditionally been aiming for. The Alt School administrators, and assumedly the Alt School founders, were unaware of the constructs of SDT, but somehow attended to them very well as this study found. If future research confirms the possible link asserted here, then school districts and alternative school designers should attend to the constructs of SDT to ensure successful outcomes for alternative school students.

The fact that the emerged themes and resultant grouping of these themes into categories then fit into the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) framework with ease, provides implications that the categories can give direction to practicioners on what foci will result in success for their students. The best practices of alternative schools in the literature have long focused on what Lange and Sletten called outcomes that they grouped into three areas. In this study those outcomes have been shown to be congruent with the three component human needs in SDT. Although no previous studies concentrated on this coincedence, it appears that the practices were aligned with SDT and this could explain why the practices were assumed to be effective for alternative schools and their students. Alt School incorporated these best practices since its

inception without knowledge of SDT and this study lends credence to the practices being, in fact best, through the linkage to SDT.

SDT has been established for decades as an explanation for providing the conditions necessary to enable humans to be inwardly motivated towards tasks in business, athletics, economics, and education settings among others (Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989; Deci et al., 1999). SDT has continued to be a dominant line of thinking in social psychology, economics, and organizational studies. Educators in schools have mistakenly clung to the thought that strong incentives and punishments will assure motivation. Bénabou and Tirole (2003) pointed to the fact that repitition of rewards is not likely to lead to continued motivation, in fact it thwarts it. Data were clear in the findings that Alt school provided many supports for competence, autonomy, and relatedness and that these supports led to most students moving past previous impediments towards successful graduation with a diploma.

Although this study is not generalizable beyond Alt School itself, it is more likely that alternative school students can benefit from supports for the components of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) to a greater degree than regular schools. The science appears to be overwhelming that all students could benefit from supports for the three needs, however alternative students are more likely to show greater results when these supports are present because they have fewer resources outside of school that can overcome the lack of supports within the school setting.

Alt School data revealed that the staff's reliance on providing "balanced behavioral control" (Nie & Lau, 2009, p. 269), explained how previously unruly, disconnected, and disaffected students could make the drastic shift to become polite,

engaged, and deeply interested students. By stripping away all but essential rules and showing care for students' situations and interests, Alt School staff gave their students the sense of autonomy to choose to become part of the engaged community of the school without forcing it from external sources. As Nie and Lau pointed out, a sense of order requires not only the removal of bad behavior but that students are given the opportunity to act with purpose and show signs of psychological wellness. Future policy and practice should include "balanced behavioral control" as a foundation of effective education.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this qualitative study may add to many that have preceded it, the addition of a theoretical base gives way to quantitative research that may better confirm the findings. Many tools are already available to gauge the degree of a school's attendance to SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Studies that include a large number of alternative schools could point to evidence of how successful alternative schools are linked to practices that support SDT.

Conversely to studying successful alternative schools, a similar look at unsuccessful schools could add value to the knowledge base. As schools veer away from the components of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), finding that there is less chance of successful student outcomes would further the proposition that attendance to SDT is best practice. For instance, the dismal history of boot-camp style programs might be explained. In summary, a large-scale study of alternative schools might find that the greater an alternative school's attendance to SDT, the greater the students will find success.

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Appendix A: List of In Vivo Codes

GS	Goal Setting
BN	Basic Needs
PP	Personal Problems
CA	Caring Attitude
PS	Personal Stimulation
RLA	Real Life Application
I	Individualizing
PH	Personal Happiness
LOL	Love of Learning
AOC	Acknowledgment of Other Commitments
M	Motivation
AD	Autonomous Decisions
DOC	Depth of Choice
T	Tolerance
FA	Family Atmosphere
E	Equality
S	Safety
C	Community
SE	Self Esteem
SI	Student Interests
ISC	Interconnectedness of School Components
SL	Shared Leadership
NLP	Natural Learning Processes
RBP	Research Based Practice
RA	Relaxed Atmosphere
SS	Small School
TW	Team Work
DR	Direct Relatability
PA	Personal Accountability
Em	Empowerment
COM	Direct Communication
SSK	Social Skills
KS	Knowing Self
Tr	Trust
MR	Mutual Respect
SEx	Shared Expectations
RT	Risk Taking

Appendix B: Condensing Themes into Categories and Their Relation to Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

Count of responses by emerged-themes	Step 2: In Vivo Coding "Emerging Themes"	Step 3: Pattern Coding "Themes Condensed into Categories"	Step 4: Theoretical Coding "Relation to SDT	Total Responses in 3 Human Needs of SDT
6	Basic Needs	PASTORAL CARE	Competence	122
14	Personal Problems			
6	Personal Happiness			
5	Safety			
Total 31				
48	Individualization	INDIVIDUATION	Competence	
16	Small School			
Total 64				
17	Empowerment	SELF ACTIVATION	Competence	
6	Self Esteem			
4	Personal Accountability			
2	Motivation [moved to Empowerment]			
1	Knowing Self [moved to Empowerment]			
2	Risk Taking [moved to Empowerment]			
2	Shared Leadership [moved to Empowerment]			
Total 27				
7	Love of Learning	ENHANCED MOTIVATION TO LEARN	Autonomy	77
17	Personal Stimulation & Student Interests			
21	Real-Life Application			
5	Community Involvement			
Total 50				
9	Autonomous Decisions	LICENSE TO CHOOSE	Autonomy	
12	Depth of Choice			
6	Goal Setting			
Total 27				
41	Caring Attitude	CULTURE OF SACRED COMMUNITY	Relatedness	162
35	Family Atmosphere			
5	Relaxed Atmosphere			
9	Acknowledgment of Other Commitments			
14	Tolerance			
7	Mutual Respect			
9	Equality			
22	Direct Communication			
5	Team Work			
15	Interconnectedness of School Components			
1	Direct Relateability [moved to Caring Attitude]			
1	Social Skills [moved to Family Atmosphere]			
1	Trust [moved to Family Atmosphere]			
1	Shared Expectations [moved to Mutual Respect]			
Total 162				

Appendix C: Recruitment Letter to Participants

Your Assistance Could Be Valuable. If you can help me with a research study I'd like to buy your meal.

Hello I'm Phil Garland, a doctoral candidate at the University of Oklahoma and long-time high school and alternative school teacher and principal. I'm writing a dissertation about psychological conditions that alternative schools provide which may help their students succeed. I could use your help in my research.

I'm looking for volunteers including students, teachers, staff, parents and others who have been involved with the Tulsa Street School for at least 2 full semesters. These volunteers will help me by giving me an hour or so of their time during which they would be involved in participating in a group forum answering some questions I have come up with to help me understand the school and how it works. Your participation would not be shared with the school officials or teachers, or anyone else. The forums are going to include around 10 people so they will hear what you offer and some of your responses may be based on what the group brings out. I will provide dinner or lunch so that the time spent won't take too much away from your daily routine.

The forums will take place at the school on Tuesday Sept. 10th. The teacher/staff forum will take place right after school hours at the Street School, the parent forum after 5pm, and the student forum will take place during school hours at the school. A few of the participants will be asked to help on a later date for an hour or so by having a personal interview, but that is purely by choice. Students and teachers will be taking a short survey when they participate in the group forums. Those that want to participate in the personal interview can determine where they would like them to take place depending on what is most convenient.

An example of a question that people will be answering and discussing includes: "How does this school do with regard to making students feel like part of a group or team—a sense of belonging?" Another example is: "In what ways does this school support students in being able to be part of their education plan, independently decide on how to accomplish school goals, and showing flexibility to different student needs and preferences?"

If you are willing to volunteer to help in this research please call or email the numbers below to tell me you are willing. I am looking for about 10 people in each of the three groups I mentioned so I will be enlisting the first 10 that contact me. I think this research can help alternative schools and traditional schools understand what they can do better to help students succeed. Thanks for thinking about participating.

The University of Oklahoma is an Equal Opportunity Institution.

Phil Garland

Contact numbers
Phone (918) 698-2422
Email Thelandofgar@gmail.com

Appendix D: Interview and Forum Protocol

Protocol for Dissertation Study-Garland

Students:

1. In what ways, if any, does this school support you in knowing what you need in order to be capable of handling schoolwork and for the future?
2. How does this support differ, if any, from your previous traditional school(s)?
3. In what ways does this school support you in being able to be part of your education plan, independently decide on how to accomplish school goals, and showing flexibility to different student needs and preferences?
4. How does this support differ, if any, from your previous traditional school(s)?
5. How does this school do with regard to making students feel like part of a group or team—a sense of belonging?
6. How is your sense of belonging different here than in previous traditional schools?

Staff, Teachers, Parents:

1. In what ways, if any, does this school support students in knowing what they need in order to be capable of handling schoolwork and for the future?
2. In what ways does this school support students in being able to be part of their education plan, independently decide on how to accomplish school goals, and showing flexibility to different student needs and preferences?
3. How does this school do with regard to making students feel like part of a group or team—a sense of belonging?

Administrators:

1. In what ways, if any, does this school support students in knowing what they need in order to be capable of handling schoolwork and for the future?
2. In what ways does this school support students in being able to be part of their education plan, independently decide on how to accomplish school goals, and showing flexibility to different student needs and preferences?
3. How does this school do with regard to making students feel like part of a group or team—a sense of belonging?

Appendix E: Sample Transcript from Staff Forum

Interviewer: My first question is: in what ways, if any, does this school support students in knowing what they need in order to be capable of handling school work? And if you would, kind of say your name before since it's a recording and that way when I have to transcribe it later we'll know.
Geof: I didn't understand the question.
Interviewer: Well the question is in what ways, if any, does this school support students in knowing what they need in order to be capable of handling their school work?
Geof: My name is Geof, I don't handle this, but one thing that is extraordinarily different about this school is that our counselors, not our teachers, our counselors know how many credits each student has and exactly what classes our kids need in order to graduate and they know what EOIs have been passed and haven't. And they communicate that regularly with the students.
Hanna: Uh Hanna and I, I would actually say from my perspective it has a lot to do with the counselors and that they actually take into account the mental well-being um of the students as well. It's not just the academics you know that you get in a lot of other schools.
Interviewer: So how does that, they take into account, how does that come out?
Hanna: And I think so they actually know what a, a kid is, his ability, what he can do and can't do or she can't do and so I think that actually enables them to be successful.
Interviewer: Do they share it with the teachers or are you saying they consider it in their scheduling of the…
Hanna: I think both I think they share it with the teachers and I think they consider it when they meet with the kids. I don't, I think that the kids here aren't set up necessarily, they are necessarily set up for failure in some instances because we don't have to have that cookie cutter type of learning atmosphere.
Interviewer: Right.
Hanna: Yeah.
Geof: And this is Geof and the counselors know that though, because the teachers are very aware and interested in each student and communicate that with the counselors.
Jan: This is Jan and I think that one of the things I think you know a lot of the kids come in here knowing what doesn't work because they've been to your conventional high school and so I think part of knowing what works is knowing what is, knowing what hasn't worked and so I think when they come in they've been through a process of orientation with Geof and they have friends a lot of the kids do that have come here and they share their experience here and the kids you know already have a sense that this is going to work better for them than a traditional public high school did so, I think you know then when they come in and tour with Geof and they see the classroom and what the teachers are doing, um I think they get an even greater sense that this is something that is going to work well for them because I think you know they're the experts on themselves, they know what hasn't worked and what will work. When they see the program they get a good sense that this is going to be a good fit for them. And so, I think they come in kind of with renewed hope that uh this is going to be a jumping off point of being successful in school so I think they come in here you know really with a

kind of a positive um energy you know for themselves and the classroom and I think that helps a lot.
Fran: And this is Fran uh to piggy-back off of what Jan um I think is what's also more important to the success of the students here is the fact that um you know not only do they come in with the idea that this is a second chance for them, that it is a new beginning um they go into a classroom that has teachers they know by name uh, those teachers talk to them uh not so much on a, a, a, I don't want to speak as a teacher but I notice that they talk to them as a um, person to person is not as a teacher to a child or student and, and I think that helps a lot because it gives them that of, of, that they have self-worth and they're not just another you know face in the crowd that the, the teacher cares about them, that they have a counselor that they know their name and they know Hanna and they know Geof and they know Lorie and they know all the administrators here down from the highest to where ever and um I think that that really uh promotes the success of these students because they don't feel like they're a face in a crowd.
Interviewer: They feel more capable because of the relationship that's garnered?
Interviewees: um hmm.
Interviewer: Anything else to add to that? OK.
Iris: Um this is Iris I would say that one of the things that um creates that level of confidence and that sense of capability in the students is the fact that um the teachers take the time to express the relevance of what they're learning to, uh like you know, real-world application of the things that they learn in the classroom you, it's not, this is not a place of you know do this worksheet to get this grade or even pitching the whole concept of you go to high school so that you can finish high school so that you can go to college. No, we, we, I think that the educators have um an understanding that there are a lot of different pathways and interests for these kids and so that you know we're talking about if you're interested in opening a business, if you want to go directly into the workforce to do such and such, if you to try to do this trade you, these are the ways in which this learning that you're getting is going to apply to do that. If you want to do the traditional college thing this is what you need to know for that we're kind of like, I think that educators and counselors I think are supporting in that too, covering so many bases I think um that in sort of traditional education environments there's such a huge emphasis on you go through K through 12, you go to college tradition, you know traditional sense and then you go into the workforce and get a good job and blah blah blah and I think that there's a huge acknowledgment of multiple paths to success here and so they have a sense of capability in doing their school work because they know how the learning is going to apply to the future that they want for themselves.
Interviewer: Capability, a feeling of capability comes from it being geared to something they're headed towards?

Appendix F: IRB Inactivation Evidencing Approval for Human Subject Studies

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Continuing Review – Administrative Inactivation

Date: May 11, 2016 **IRB#:** 3277

To: Phillip Clark Garland II, M.S. Ed **Inactivation Date:** 05/10/2016

Study Title: The Psychological Conditions in an Alternative School Leading to Academic Success: A Case Study

This letter is to notify you that the above referenced study has been administratively inactivated and you are no longer authorized to continue research under this approval number. Federal regulations require periodic Institutional Review Board (IRB) review of studies involving human participants once every 365 days from initial approval. Our records indicate that approval for this study expired on 04/30/2016.

Note that this action completely terminates all aspects and arms of this research, and therefore all research activities related to this study must stop. Should you wish to reactivate this study, you will need to submit a new IRB application.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB at (405) 325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.
Vice Chair, Institutional Review Board

Appendix G: Example of Consent Form

University of Oklahoma
Institutional Review Board
Minor Student Assent to Participate in a Research Study

Project Title:	Psychological Conditions Alternative School Case Study
Principal Investigator:	Phillip Clark Garland
Department:	Education Administration and Curriculum Supervision

You are being asked to volunteer for this research study. This study is being conducted at the Tulsa Street School. You were selected as a possible participant because you have been a student associated with the school for at least 2 semesters and answered a flyer.

Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to take part in this study.

Purpose of the Research Study
The purpose of this study is to find if there are any things the Street School is doing to help students to succeed beyond what they were doing in previous schools. I'm looking to see if the approach the school takes has anything in common with a theory about self-determination. Self Determination Theory looks at 3 factors that lead people to be more self-motivated including: feeling like they belong, feeling they have choices, and feeling they are capable.
Number of Participants
About 35 people will take part in this study. This includes approximately 10 students, 10 teachers, 10 parents, and 5 other stakeholders.
Procedures
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to take a short survey, participate in a focus group lasting about 1 hour where you and about 9 others will discuss some questions I have, and possibly be asked to participate in a voluntary 1 hour individual interview at a place that suits you. Also, the investigator in the course of the school day may observe individual interviewees and the observations may be recorded in writing. An example of a question that people will be answering and discussing includes: "How does this school do with regard to making students feel like part of a group or team—a sense of belonging?" Another example is: "In what ways does this school support students in being able to be part of their education plan, independently decide on how to accomplish school goals, and showing flexibility to different student needs and preferences?"
Risks of being in the study are that your confidential student records and information you give during focus group and interview sessions are being accessed by the person

conducting the study. Please note the sections below on Confidentiality and Request for Record Information to see how you are being protected.

Benefits of being in the study are none.

Compensation

As a way of thanking you for your participation you will receive a meal at the scheduled focus group session for your time involved.

Confidentiality

In published reports, there will be no information included that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be stored securely and only the approved researcher will have access to the records.

The OU Institutional Review Board may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis. This is an independent committee that insures your rights are being taken care of appropriately.

Request for record information

If you approve, your confidential records will be used as data for this study. The records that will be used include school records including grades, discipline, attendance, and transfer history. These records will be used for the following purpose: determination of "school success factors". Your real name will be erased from the records when the study is written.

_____ I agree for my school records including grades, discipline, attendance, and transfer history to be accessed and used for the purposes described above.

_____ I do not agree for my school records including grades, discipline, attendance, and transfer history to be accessed for use as research data.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you withdraw or decline participation, you will not be penalized or lose benefits or services unrelated to the study. If you decide to participate, you may decline to answer any question and may choose to withdraw at any time.

Audio Recording of Study Activities

To assist with accurate recording of your responses, (interviews or focus groups) may be recorded on an audio recording device. You have the right to refuse to allow such recording without penalty. "If you do not agree to audio-recording, you cannot participate in this study." Please select one of the following options:

I consent to audio recording. ___ Yes ___ No

Future Communications

The researcher would like to contact you again to gather additional information if needed.

_____ I give my permission for the researcher to contact me in the future.

_____ I do not wish to be contacted by the researcher again.

Contacts and Questions
If you have concerns or complaints about the research, the researcher conducting this study (Phil Garland) can be contacted at Phillip.C.Garland-1@ou.edu (918) 698-2422. Faculty sponsor Dr. Patrick Forsyth can be contacted at (918) 660-3870 email: Patrick.forsyth@ou.edu
Contact the researcher(s) if you have questions, or if you have experienced a research-related injury. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints about the research and wish to talk to someone other than individuals on the research team or if you cannot reach the research team, you may contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board (OU-NC IRB) at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.
You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records. If you are not given a copy of this consent form, please request one.
Statement of Consent
I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received satisfactory answers. I assent to participate in the study.

Participant Signature Print Name Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Assent Date

Print Name of Person Obtaining Assent

Signature of Witness (if applicable) Date

Print Name of Witness