



Western Connecticut State University
WestCollections: digitalcommons@wcsu

Education Dissertations

Department of Education & Educational
Psychology

Summer 8-24-2018

EXPERIENTIAL CHARTER SCHOOLS: A MULTI CASE STUDY

Karen A. Fildes

Western Connecticut State University, karenfildes@me.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.wcsu.edu/educationdis>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), and the [Educational Leadership Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fildes, Karen A., "EXPERIENTIAL CHARTER SCHOOLS: A MULTI CASE STUDY" (2018). *Education Dissertations*. 86.

<https://repository.wcsu.edu/educationdis/86>

This Dissertation is brought to you via free, open access by the Department of Education & Educational Psychology and by WestCollections: digitalcommons@wcsu, the institutional repository of Western Connecticut State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education Dissertations by an authorized administrator of WestCollections: digitalcommons@wcsu. For more information, please contact ir@wcsu.edu.

EXPERIENTIAL CHARTER SCHOOLS: A MULTI CASE STUDY

Karen A. Fildes

MA in Teaching, 6th Year Degree, Sacred Heart University, 2006
MA Middle Grades Education 4-8, Quinnipiac College, 1997
BS History & Social Sciences, Southern CT State University, 1996

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education in Instructional Leadership

in the

Department of Education and Educational Psychology

at

Western Connecticut State University

2018

EXPERIENTIAL CHARTER SCHOOLS: A MULTI CASE STUDY

Karen A. Fildes, EdD

Western Connecticut State University

ABSTRACT

Since their creation in 1991, charter schools have been controversial within the educational community. As charter school laws lie in the realm of state legislation, there is wide variation in the requirements for charter school application and how accountability is measured. National studies comparing standardized student achievement test scores from charter schools with traditional public schools have mixed reviews, with the strongest schools identified within large, urban districts such as Boston, Washington, DC, and Houston. This qualitative study explored non-urban charter schools that utilized experiential learning as their curricular foundation. The purpose of this multi-case study was to examine two charter schools located in different states on the east coast of the United States. The research investigated (a) best practices utilized in their operation, (b) how they defined student success, and (c) what organizational structures existed to support the model. The findings from this research regarding best practices included founding the school on a strong set of principles, or mission, to provide a focus and shared beliefs that provide purpose to the organization, interdisciplinary, collaboration, and flexibility. The findings from this research regarding measuring student success reveal that using multiple data points, focusing on character development, and encouraging self-reflection as successful practices of these schools. Focusing on recruitment of teachers, support through professional development and mentoring, and cultivating community emerged from the study as three best practices of organizational structures to support non-urban charter school utilizing the experiential learning model.

Copyright by

Karen A. Fildes, EdD

2018

APPROVAL PAGE



*School of Professional Studies
Department of Education and Educational Psychology
Doctor of Education in Instructional Leadership*

Doctor of Education Dissertation

EXPERIENTIAL CHARTER SCHOOLS: A MULTI-CASE STUDY

Presented by

Karen A. Fildes, EdD

Karen Burke, EdD
Primary Advisor

Karen Burke *4/7/18*
Signature Date

Frank LaBanca, EdD
Secondary Advisor Committee Member

[Signature] *7 Apr 18*
Signature Date

Laura Main, EdD
Secondary Advisor Committee Member

Laura Main *4-7-18*
Signature Date

2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this dissertation could not have been possible without the help of so many. To my primary advisory, Dr. Karen Burke, thank you for believing in me at times when I did not believe in myself. This dissertation process was truly a journey with many unexpected challenges throughout. You were always right there to guide me, to push me, and to help me see the possibilities.

To my secondary advisors, Dr. Frank LaBanca and Dr. Laura Main: Frank, you will never know how grateful I am for the email that reached out and ultimately brought me through my writer's block. Laura, you are a living example of the work exemplified in the charter movement, and your willingness to work with me on this study is so appreciated.

To Dr. Marcy Delcourt and all of my professors in the doctoral program at Western, thank you for inspiring and challenging me through the years. Your passion and wisdom had a great impact on me as an educational leader.

I owe a great deal of gratitude to the educators in the two schools in this study, which were so willing to share their experiences with me.

The doctoral process was certainly one that did not unfold in the way that I expected, and I owe a great deal of thanks to my family for supporting me through it all. Although everyone in my family contributed in their own way, there are a few that I need to thank specifically. Wendy, you were my cheerleader and the one that listened for hours over tea as I worked through the research. For all the times I had to pass on a girls' trip or night out because I had to write, I thank you for your always-understanding smile. Tim, thank you for reminding me how important it was to mom and dad that I persevere and finish this journey at a time when I needed

to hear it most. That talk had a huge impact on me and precipitated the final push in its completion. Linda, thank you for always being there in too many ways to count.

Lastly, I thank my husband, David. You took over so much of our lives so that I had the time and ability to attend classes, conduct the research, and ultimately write this paper, even when it stretched you to the limit. I am forever grateful and look forward to finally spending some time together away from my computer.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents, Chester and Alice Szczygiel. Although you were not here to see this journey come to its end, it could never have happened with you. Everything that I am, I owe to you.

Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract	i
Copyright	iii
Approval Page	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Dedication	vii
Table of Tables	xii
Table of Figures	xiii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND IDENTIFICATION OF THE TOPIC	1
Rational for Selecting the Topic	2
Significance of the Research	3
Description of Potential Benefits of the Research	6
Definition of Key Terms	7
Research Questions	8
Chapter Summary	9
CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	10
Charter School Research	10
Theoretical Foundations of the Study	16
Experiential Learning Theory	16
Social Learning Theory	25
Additional Research Topics: Culture, Interest, and Mission	29
Organizational Culture	29

Interest Development	32
Institutional Mission	35
Chapter Summary	37
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	39
Researcher Biography	39
Establishing Trustworthiness in the Study	41
Statement of Ethics and Confidentiality	42
Research Strategy and Design	43
Sampling Procedure	44
Data Collection Procedures	46
Document Review	47
Interviews	48
Focus Groups	49
Field Observations	49
Data Analysis	50
Chapter Summary	51
CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF THE DATA	52
Research Design	52
Description of School Sites	53
School A	53
School B	60
Theme Identification and Findings	66
Discussion of Themes	69

Theme One: Mission	69
Theme Two: Flexibility	93
Theme Three: Beliefs Toward Success	104
Theme Four: Staffing	115
Theme Five: Student Perception of School Culture	127
Chapter Summary	148
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	149
Summary of the Research	149
Review of Findings Related to the Research Questions	150
Theme One: Mission	151
Theme Two: Flexibility	154
Theme Three: Beliefs Toward Success	156
Theme Four: Staffing	158
Theme Five: Student Perception of School Culture	161
Research Question One	164
Research Question Two	167
Research Question Three	170
Discussion of the Literature and Research Findings	174
Charter School Research	174
Theoretical Foundations of the Study	176
Related Research	178
Evidence of Trustworthiness	182
Recommendations and Implications of the Research Findings	184

Recommendations for Future Research	188
Summary	190
Conclusion	190
REFERENCES	192
APPENDICES	199
Appendix A: Document Review Protocol	199
Appendix B: Interview Questions	201
Appendix C: Protocol for Student Focus Group	203
Appendix D: Administrative Consent Document	205
Appendix E: Consent Document for Teachers	207
Appendix F: Assent/Consent Document for Students/Parents	209
Appendix G: IRB Application and Approval	211
Appendix H: Qualitative Audit Report	213
Appendix I: Initial Codes and Frequency	216
Appendix J: Final Themes and Categories	218

TABLE OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1: Large City Subgroup NEAP Achievement Data in Charter and Regular Public Schools	12
Table 2: School A Standardized Test Scores as Reported by the New Jersey School Performance Report for 2014-15.	54
Table 3: School A Participant Identifiers	55
Table 4: School B Standardized Test Scores as Reported by the InfoWorks! Rhode Island Education Data Reporting 2015-16.	61
Table 5: School B Participant Identifiers	62
Table 6: Theme Definitions	67
Table 7: Ten Principles of Expeditionary Learning (EL) Education	76
Table 8: Key Learning Experience Themes	90

TABLE OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: A visual representation of Dewey's Model of Experiential Learning	18
Figure 2: A visual representation of Kolb's Model of Experiential Learning	23
Figure 3: A visual representation of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development	28
Figure 4: A visual representation of Bergin's Four Stages of Interest Development	34

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND IDENTIFICATION OF THE TOPIC

The charter school movement in the United States is one that cannot be ignored. Over the course of the last five years, steady growth in enrollment has outpaced the number of seats available, leaving many students to rely on a lottery to determine their placement options (Kern & Gebru, 2014). “In the 2013-14 school year, there were an estimated 1,043,311 student names on charter school waitlists nationwide” (Kern & Gebru, 2014, p. 2). According to Denise (2014), between 2011 and 2014, two states, Maine and Washington, passed charter school legislation, bringing the total number of states allowing charter schools to 43 (plus the District of Columbia). During this same period, according to data collected by Denise through the National Association of Public Charter Schools’ dashboard, nearly 1,200 new charters schools opened, and enrollment in charters grew by 42%. Clearly, a population existed who saw the charter schools as viable alternatives to traditional locally controlled schools (Denise, 2014). Supporters of charters saw them as incubators of innovation, places where school leaders have the ability to be more flexible with curriculum and school structures to meet individual student needs (Kern & Gebru, 2014). This vision appealed to both parents and students.

Opponents, however, believed that charters were a means for private organizations to pilfer public funding and operate outside of the established rules and regulations required of traditional public schools (Lam, 2014). Decisions regarding the creation and funding of charter schools were difficult to make, primarily because clear-cut data were difficult to find. Charter schools lie in the realm of state legislation, and, as a result, states vary in how they measure success (Denise, 2014). In addition, valid studies focused on broad national data or urban populations provided information that was narrow in scope, leaving gaps in the body

of research (Betts & Tang, 2011). Addressing these gaps benefit stakeholders across the educational spectrum, from policy makers and administration, to teachers, parents, and students.

Rationale for Selecting the Topic

Although there is a growing body of data being collected on charter schools as a whole, studying large, national data sets, such as the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), can elicit more questions than answers (Betts & Tang, 2011). A 2012 study found that examining the data at a national level showed traditional public schools outperforming their charter counterparts, but when focusing on urban areas, the charter schools were clearly favored (Chudowsky & Ginsburg, 2012). Upon further analysis, certain subgroups, including low-income black and Hispanic urban students attending charter schools, had remarkable gains in achievement in reading and math standardized test scores when compared to their regular public school counterparts. Others, however, especially those identified as special education students, did not fare as well.

Many of the urban schools that demonstrate the most success, such as the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) schools, ascribe to the *No Excuses* educational approach that “emphasizes discipline and comportment, traditional reading and math skills, instruction time, and selective teacher hiring” (Angrist, Dynarski, Pathak, & Walter, 2013, p. 2). KIPP, a 501(c)(3) charitable association, was a specific charter school organization founded in 1994 by Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin, two Teach For America corps members. The two initial KIPP schools opened in Houston and New York City in 1995 with the mission of targeting underserved communities, and by 1999 were performing higher than many of the schools in their respective communities. After being featured on a *60 Minutes* program regarding their

success, Doris and Don Fisher, founders of Gap, Inc., asked Feinberg and Levin to replicate their schools nationwide with \$15 million in financial support (<http://www.kipp.org/kipp-foundation/history/>). With 162 schools operating and 59,000 students enrolled within the national KIPP network (<http://www.kipp.org/>, 2015), these schools tend to be the focus of charter school research largely because they have a great deal of data from which to cull results.

There were smaller, successful charter schools, however, which operated outside the urban environment and offered a pedagogical approach in contrast to *No Excuses*, incorporating an array of experiential learning models. Since these schools made a much smaller impact due to their size, they had largely been ignored in the current body of research. An in-depth examination of non-urban charter schools that incorporate experiential learning curricula was warranted to determine the efficacy and viability of these schools. The current research was conducted with the focus of exploring (a) best practices, (b) how student success was defined, and (c) organizational structures used to support the model. The following section will explain the significance of this research study to the educational field.

Significance of the Research

This study filled a void in current educational literature by providing an in-depth examination of charter schools built upon an experiential learning framework and located in a non-urban setting. As the majority of the body of research on the charter school movement has been focused on the more populous urban environments, this study is valuable to the greater educational establishment in that its results may be more generalizable to the larger country. The results of this research could potentially be applied to multiple stakeholders

including policy makers, school board members and administrators, teachers, parents, and students.

Research from this study could be informative to educational policy makers who are charged with the decisions regarding the status of the charter school movement. If evidence from the research indicates that charters beyond the well-studied urban environment and *No Excuses* pedagogy have success, this could open the door for those whose constituents reside in contrasting areas. Students in these non-urban areas could perhaps benefit from an alternative educational approach not currently available to them as an option within their local school districts. In the event that the research were to show that these schools do not have a positive impact on student success, educational policy makers could use that information to inform future requests for similar charter schools. Studies such as this provide educational policy makers another lens through which to view the charter movement.

Research from this study could be informative to members of boards of education and school administrators, especially in rural and suburban districts, when looking at the curricular models of their traditional public schools. Although charter schools may not have yet encroached upon their local areas, understanding the perspective of students and parents who elect to attend them can help public schools proactively address perceived shortfalls. The need to access data on best practices and organizational structures, regardless of charter or traditional school model, is necessary to support student-centered learning. Educational research has advocated for this type of learner experience, but there has been a lack of research in its application in non-urban charter environments. This research could also benefit curriculum writers who struggle with the challenge of providing meaningful educational programs that address the needs of continually evolving state and national level

standards, while also addressing the demand for college and career readiness skills. At the core of these goals lies the need to engage students in relevant, meaningful learning experiences that allow them to delve deeply into content knowledge and process. The conclusions reached through this study include the best practices for varied methodologies that incorporate student-centered, experiential learning opportunities evident in the participant schools. The need for identifying multiple measures of success beyond merely standardized assessments was also a critical component of this research study, allowing for the broader discussion of what constitutes student achievement and ultimate success. School administrators who are looking to establish a charter school on the experiential education model would benefit from the findings of this study to assist in structuring a successful school from the experience of others who have forged this path.

While members of boards of educations and school administrators work at the macro level, teachers face the task of implementation of instructional goals on a daily basis in the classroom. Data collected through this research study could potentially inform teaching and learning through the perspective of teachers in schools that employed experiential learning pedagogy. Through teacher feedback and observation, specific data on implementation that can provide helpful guidelines for teachers wishing to explore this mode of instruction.

Parents and students, as demonstrated through presented enrollment statistics, have looked for alternatives to traditional educational design offered through local schools. The data collected through this study, including student perspectives, can inform the school choice movement and provided important material for reflection. The following section will explore the potential benefits of this research study to the educational field.

Description of Potential Benefits of the Research

This research study of non-urban charter schools that utilized a foundation in experiential learning was conducted with the focus of exploring (a) best practices, (b) how student success was defined, and (c) organizational structures used to support the model. Examining the best practices of these schools can benefit future charter school operators who wish to open a school with a similar pedagogical foundation. The schools selected for inclusion in this study had operated for over five years and interviewees at both locations reflected that much had been learned through that time. Having the benefit of another's experience could help future charter schools launch with a stronger foundation from which to grow.

Whether charter or not, the data from this study could potentially assist school personnel interested in experiential learning to define best practices and organizational structures that could be replicated. Personnel at both schools in the study were able to provide experiential learning models while still adhering to national and state educational standards. This research helps support school personnel that wish to begin experimenting with more student-centered learning, but may be concerned with meeting standards. This study may also benefit those involved in developing curriculum by exploring the important role of student engagement in the experiential learning model.

District and school administrators may benefit from the identified best practices and organizational structures that were identified to support student-centered learning. The findings regarding the definition of student success may also help school personnel who are looking to move beyond standard testing as the primary measure of student achievement. By broadening the definition of what success looks like, this study may benefit them through the

exploration of these schools' definition of student success and their focus on multiple measures.

A secondary area in which school administrators may benefit from this research study is in the area of institutional mission, staffing, and culture, which can all be intertwined within a school. Organizations require a sense of purpose, and the findings in this study reflect the importance of developing rituals and structures to maintain focus on that purpose, even amidst difficult times. This could have implications to school administrators with regard to recruiting and retaining quality staff members. It also pertains to organizational structures that can nurture or damage institutional mission and culture.

Teachers may benefit from the findings of this study associated with implementation of an experiential learning model and in identifying ways in which assessment in this model is conducted. Teacher interviews provided insight into the day-to-day management of student learning goals, measurement of standards, and classroom management in the experiential learning classroom. Studies that provide usable pieces of data that inform practice could benefit all teachers, regardless of whether they reside in a charter or traditional public school.

The following section provides a definition of key terms used throughout this research study.

Definition of Key Terms

The following terms were used for the purpose of this research study.

1. *Charter School* - The three characteristics that define a charter school are (a) they are public schools (publically funded and accountable to a government body), (b) they are schools of choice that allow students to attend regardless of

where they live, and (c) they are privately run using guidelines established in their charter (Ncsl.org, 2015).

2. *Experiential Learning* - “Experiential education is a philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities” (Association for Experiential Education, 2015).
3. “*No Excuses*” – The No Excuses model of instruction “emphasizes discipline and comporment, traditional reading and math skills, instruction time, and selective teacher hiring” (Angrist, et al., 2013, p. 2).
4. *Institutional Mission* – A statement that provides purpose and direction for an organization (Clifton & Nelson, 1992, p. 122).
5. *Interdisciplinary learning* - Interdisciplinary studies (a) is “a process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline or profession,” and (b) “draws on disciplinary perspectives and integrates their insights through construction of a more comprehensive perspective” (Klein and Newell, 1998, p. 3).

Research Questions

This qualitative study was undertaken to explore non-urban charter schools that incorporate experiential learning curricula in an effort to answer the following three research questions:

1. What best practices can be identified from non-urban, charter schools that incorporate experiential learning curricula?
2. How do non-urban, charter schools that incorporate experiential learning curricula measure success?
3. What organizational structures (e.g., schedules, teacher professional development, teacher recruitment, length of school year, funding) have non-urban, charter schools that incorporate experiential learning curricula utilized?

Chapter Summary

The charter school movement in the United States is one that cannot be ignored. Over the course of the last five years, steady growth in enrollment has outpaced the number of seats available (Kern & Gebru, 2014). While charter schools have been on a trajectory of steady growth, the body of research available that has examined their impact has been very narrow in scope (Betts & Tang, 2011). The vast majority of these studies include a focus on urban schools, especially those utilizing the *No Excuses* model of instruction. Educational policy makers, members of school boards and school administrators, teachers, parents, and students could all potentially benefit from continued study of the charter school impact.

This research study examined non-urban charter schools that utilized a foundation in experiential learning with the focus of exploring (a) best practices, (b) how student success was defined, and (c) organizational structures used to support the model. It is hoped that the findings of this study can be used to support a greater understanding of charter schools in non-urban environments and the impact of experiential learning as a pedagogical model.

CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This qualitative study was undertaken to explore non-urban charter schools that incorporate experiential learning curricula in an effort to (a) identify best practices (b) define success, and (c) identify supporting organizational structures. After the completion of coding and analysis, five themes emerged, and a review of relevant literature was conducted.

This chapter has been divided into the following sections (a) an historical look at relevant charter school research, (b) theoretical foundations of the study, and (c) related research regarding factors that emerged as best practices - organizational culture, interest development, and institutional mission.

Charter School Research

As charter schools have become more prevalent and school funding more scarce, there has been a growing body of research examining the effectiveness of the charter school model on student achievement. Many of the recent studies conducted examine national level data that can provide general information on charter school performance in comparison to traditional public schools. Due to the vast differences in state regulations, the national level data are not always conducive to a deep understanding of schools at the local level (Chudowsky & Ginsberg, 2012). Regardless, there is information that can be gleaned from reviewing these studies as a starting point for understanding the current state of charter schools from a wider perspective.

A 2012 study by Chudowsky and Ginsberg, under the auspices of the National Assessment Governing Board, conducted an exploratory analysis of National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) data for charter schools across the United States using descriptive statistics and reading and math standardized test scores. The purpose of this

study was to examine descriptive statistics to determine who attends charter schools and to analyze test scores to determine how they compare to their regular public school counterparts. The results of the study indicated that in 2011 approximately 3% of students nationwide were choosing to attend a charter school, an increase from 1% in 2003. A higher percentage of students in large, urban areas attended charter schools, with black students showing the largest increase (4% of grade four students in 2003 increased to 12% in 2011). Traditional public schools, according to the NAEP data, had a significantly higher population of white students, students with disabilities, and English language learners and, in urban areas, Hispanic students (Chudowsky & Ginsberg, 2012).

When examining how these charter school students compared on standardized test scores, national NAEP level data showed that although both regular public and charter schools revealed an increase in fourth and eighth grade reading and math scores between 2003/2005 and 2011, the growth was statistically significant for regular public school students only. However, when the data were disaggregated with a focus on large city urban schools, scores were similar between the two school types. The difference came when examining subgroups; for example, as shown in Table 1, urban charter school black and Hispanic students performed significantly higher in grade 8 reading and math scores in 2011 than previously in 2003/2005. Examining the same achievement score data, Asian and white students performed significantly higher in traditional public schools (Chudowsky & Ginsberg, 2012).

Table 1

Large City Subgroup NEAP Achievement Data in Charter and Regular Public Schools.

	Large Cities 2003 (gr 4) and 2005 (gr 8)		Large Cities 2011		Change 2011- 2003/2008	
	Charter	Regular	Charter	Regular	Charter	Regular
Grade 8 Reading						
White	220	226	225	233*	5	7
Hispanic	202	197	210*	203	8	6
Grade 8 Reading						
Black	241	239	250*	244	9	5
Black low-income	233	237	250*	242	17	5
Grade 4 Math						
White	230	243*	249	251	19	8
Black	210	212	227*	221	17	9
Hispanic	217	219	232*	228	15	9
Black low-income	207	210	225*	219	18	9
Grade 8 Math						
Hispanic	272	258	278*	267	6	9
Asian/Pacific Islander	295	289	281	297	-6	8
Low-income	256	256	272*	265	16	9
Black low-income	244	246	265*	257	21	11

Note. Adapted from “Who Attends Charter Schools and How Are They Doing?” by Chudowsky, N. & Ginsberg, A., 2012.

* Indicates the difference between charter and regular schools is statistically significant at the .05 level

A second national level study by Betts and Tang (2012), both economists at the University of California, San Diego, and sponsored by the Center on Reinventing Public Education, conducted a meta analysis of 52 studies utilizing data that compared students who win versus lose a charter school lottery. The results of this study showed that when examining effect sizes, charter elementary and middle schools on average outperform their district-run public school counterparts in math. For example, the most nationally represented middle school charter school effect sizes were 0.011 in reading and 0.055* in math without

the inclusion of the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) schools, which would have dominated the results (Betts & Tang, 2011, p. 28). Reading scores tended to be about the same or better, but not significantly so. High schools, being the newest addition to the charter school system, had a wide variation in effectiveness by study and location but showed significant improvements in performance since the previous study conducted. One group of schools, the KIPP schools, had a particularly positive effect in both reading and math.

Betts and Tang found that location played a large role in the effectiveness of the school with urban schools having the largest effect size. It also reported that variables other than achievement data (e.g., high school graduation, college enrollment, student disciplinary referrals, incarceration) showed positive impacts from charter schools. A major implication of the study was that researchers must work toward identifying the conditions that make some charter schools successful as a means to replicate them in traditional public schools.

The Boston Foundation and NewSchools Venture Fund commissioned a series of studies conducted through MIT's School Effectiveness and Inequality Initiative (SEII) to study the effectiveness of charter schools in Massachusetts, where they have been legal since 1993. The initial report from 2009, *Informing the Debate*, included information about both charter schools in the state and "Pilot Schools," defined as autonomous schools formed by the Boston Public Schools (BPS) and the Boston Teacher's Union (BTU) beginning in 1995. "Of the public school students in Boston, roughly 17 percent of 10th grade students and 21 percent of those in 7th grade enrolled in Charters and Pilots in the fall of 2007" (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2009, p. 7).

The study addressed the concern that while the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) standardized test scores showed positive results for charter and

pilot schools overall, there was still a great deal of skepticism about their formation. The study posited that this could be due to two factors (a) the volunteer aspect of the population, and (b) suspicion of attrition of low-performing students. The first factor was related to the volunteer nature of the population in these schools. All members apply to enter the school either through an application or lottery process. This leads some to believe the population is not representative of the greater community. The second factor was related to the suspicion by critics that charter and pilot schools “hand-picked” students by encouraging low-performing students to leave the school (Abdulkadiroglu, et al., 2009, p. 8). The foundation accounted for these concerns in their research methodology by taking two different approaches in the methodology.

First, we use newly-available data from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts’ data system to follow individual students over time, and use those data to control for each student’s achievement, demographics, and program participation prior to attending a Charter or Pilot School. In other words, we compare Charter and Pilot students to traditional public school students who had similar academic achievement and other traits during an earlier school year (8th grade for high school students and 4th grade for middle school students). We refer to these results as the “observational” results since they rely on using observed student traits for all Boston-area students, whether or not they applied to Pilot or Charter Schools, and then controlling for these traits. (Abdulkadiroglu, et al., 2009, p. 8)

A second method was used that compared students who applied to schools with lottery systems by studying those who were accepted and those who were not over time. Regardless of which of the two methodologies were used, the researchers reported largely positive

effects for charter schools in raising English Language Arts and math scores. In particular, the positive impact on middle school math achievement was “extraordinarily large” (Abdulkadiroglu, et al., 2009, p. 9). The study found more ambiguous results for the Pilot schools in the study.

In a follow up report funded by the Boston Foundation and NewSchools Venture Fund in 2013, researchers examined data beyond the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test scores to outcomes such as high school graduation, college scholarships, Advanced Placement (AP) and SAT scores, college enrollment, and college choice. This study used a randomized lottery winner versus loser approach to compare like students, providing a more accurate representation of student comparisons. The findings of these studies showed positive, persistent gains for charter school attendees, including an increase in scores on AP and SAT testing, especially in math, MCAS pass scores and college choice. For example, findings indicated attendance at a charter school increased the likelihood of a student taking an AP test and “earning a score of at least 2 by 15 percentage points, a statistically and quantitatively significant gain” (Angrist, et al., 2013, p. 21). AP tests are scored on a 5-point scale that is used by colleges to determine whether college credit will be awarded. A score of 2 on the test indicates “possibly qualified,” although most colleges grant credit for a score of 3 or above (<https://apscore.collegeboard.org/scores/about-ap-scores/>). Findings from the study also showed that charter school attendance increased the likelihood of a student achieving competency on the MCAS exam on the first try by 13 points (Angrist, et al., 2013, p. 17). Charter school attendance also “induce(d) a clear shift from two-year to four-year colleges, with the most pronounced at four-year public institutions in Massachusetts” (Angrist, 2011, p. 8).

Many of the charter schools included in the Angrist study as well as many of the urban charter schools showing the highest academic results, including the KIPP schools, adhered to the *No Excuses* instructional approach to education, credited to Thernstrom and Thernstrom in their 2003 book, *No Excuses: Closing the racial gap in learning*. This instructional approach is characterized by high academic and behavioral expectations, strict adherence to discipline without regard to extenuating circumstances, a longer academic school day and year, and selectively hired teaching staff members with a focus on teacher training and evaluation, and traditional direct teaching pedagogy with an emphasis on reading and math. Although not all charter schools follow this policy, the vast majority of the research on charter schools pointed to this method as the basis of the highest performing schools.

Theoretical Foundations of the Study

The theoretical foundations upon which this study was conducted included experiential learning theory and social learning theory. The following sections contain a review of the relevant research regarding these topics.

Experiential Learning Theory

The origins of experiential learning can be traced to multiple educational theorists. However, one of the most influential was John Dewey (1938) and his work, *Experience & Education*. In the opening chapter of this seminal work, Dewey refers to the “Either-Or philosophies” that existed in educational circles, and provided as an example two opposing viewpoints held toward education, which he referred to, as *traditional* and *progressive*. The traditional model was the one most associated with the highly structured, teacher-directed classrooms seen historically in America. “Call up in imagination the ordinary school-room,

its time schedules, schemes of classification, of examination, and promotion” (Dewey, 1938, p. 18). This organization was in sharp contrast to the average family dynamic from which young children emerged prior to formal schooling and where they retreated to each evening. By contrast, the progressive model was a more unstructured, student-centered approach that incorporated individual experience into the learning process. Dewey cautioned against the Either-Or mindset he saw in play that purported if progressive education was desired, traditional education must therefore be removed. Instead, he posited, education should be a careful balance and that neither model was perfect in isolation (Dewey, 1938).

One element of the progressive education movement that Dewey firmly supported was the belief that “genuine education comes about through experience” (Dewey, 1938, p. 25). He cautioned, however, that experience and education were not interchangeable terms. Experiences that lacked organization or clearly defined subject matter could, in reality, become “mis-educative” (Dewey, 1938, p. 25) and cause harm to students. Lived experience, he explained, influenced future experience, a concept he termed the *experiential continuum*. “The principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (Dewey, 1938, p. 35). The act of experience in the moment was not where the actual learning took place. Instead, this cycle of experience collected observations from oftentimes dialectic concepts, through which students would, through intellectual freedom, ultimately draw conclusions to form personal judgments, feelings, and purpose. That element of freedom was critical to the process and an important part of the progressive education movement. The traditional classroom, Dewey explained, “with its fixed rows of desks and its military regimen of pupils who were permitted to move only at certain fixed

signals, put a great restriction upon intellectual and moral freedom” (Dewey, 1938, p. 67). The implication to educators was to carefully craft experiences that allowed time and freedom for observation and reflection that led students to form meaning and purpose. This cycle of learning is illustrated in Figure 1.

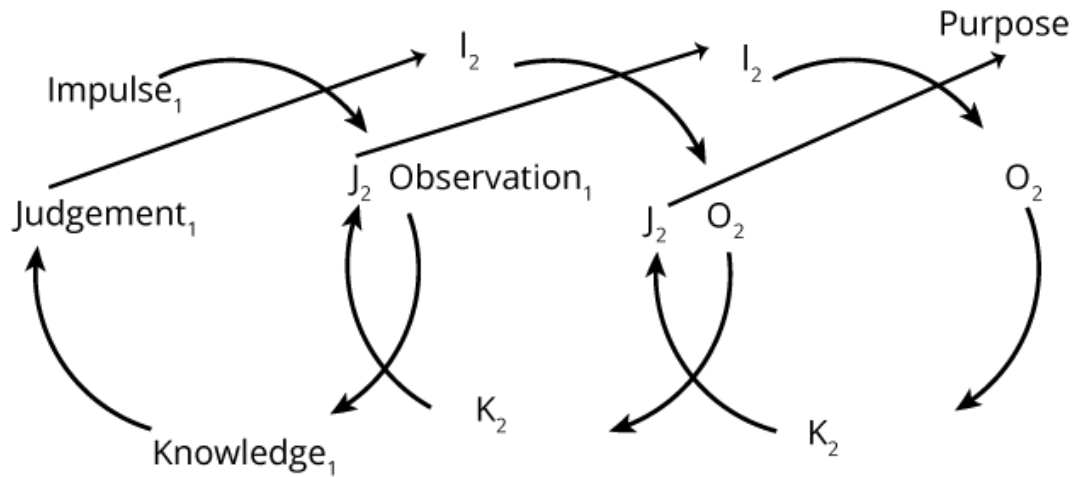


Figure 1. A visual representation of Dewey’s Model of Experiential Learning. Adapted from: Kolb, 1984, p. 23. Retrieved from <http://www.seekhley.com/research-dewey>.

Dewey cautioned against applying the Either-Or mentality to his suggestion of freedom to imply it meant no order. Absolute freedom with no framework for learning would simply lead to experiences that were “planless improvisation” (Dewey, 1938, p. 28). When preparing and leading these experiences in the classroom, Dewey referred to the changing role of teachers as the adults responsible for facilitating the learning, which included the recognition of the environmental factors under which the experience would play out. “They should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile” (Dewey, 1938, p. 40).

Dewey (1938) believed that education through experience was more akin to the norms of life outside of school, and as such, social implications for this type of learning would occur. An ordinary good citizen, he posited, naturally exercised a great deal of social control without undue restriction of personal freedoms from external forces. Even children, when given the freedom of play at recess, often organized themselves into games that involved rules of play, which they collectively agreed to follow without adult interference. Traditional classrooms incorporated high degrees of teacher-directed order and discipline as a result of students not feeling the social responsibility of self-directed order. Providing opportunities for experiences that mimicked life outside of school would return this responsibility to the students. “The primary source of social control resides in the very nature of the work done as a social enterprise in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute and to which all feel a responsibility” (Dewey, 1938, p. 56).

Dewey’s contribution to experiential learning theory was the introduction of the importance of personal experience into the education process. This was in direct opposition to the model of traditional education at the time and was one of the first student-centered models of learning. His implication to teachers to modify their role in the learning process to that of facilitator was also a key element of his theory. Dewey’s cyclical theory of learning as intertwining experience, reflection, and purpose would be a foundation upon which later theorists would build.

Kolb’s six propositions. David Kolb (1984, 2015) was an American educational theorist whose original work on experiential learning theory was followed 31 years later with his work on experiential learning styles. Drawing not only from Dewey, but from other scholars in human learning such as Lewin, Piaget, and Jung, he synthesized common

elements of their work to form six propositions they all shared (a) learning is best viewed as a process, not an outcome, (b) all learning is re-learning, (c) learning requires conflicts to occur between opposing viewpoints, (d) learning is holistic and requires adaptation, (e) learning involves an interaction between a person and their environment, and (f) learning is the process of creating knowledge.

Kolb's first proposition that *learning is best viewed as a process, not an outcome*, was in direct opposition to the behavioral theorists Watson, Hall, Skinner, Locke, and others, who saw learning as "simple ideas" that were fixed facts or habits. The role of education in this model was to impart content to students, measuring success by how many of these fixed ideas were accumulated. Kolb's learning theory was founded on a completely different premise that knowledge was not made up of fixed facts, but instead are ideas that are formed and re-formed through experiences. Kolb argued, "No two thoughts are ever the same, since experience always intervenes" (Kolb, 1984, p. 28). Kolb felt that looking at knowledge as a series of outcomes would actually imply non-learning in that, "the failure to modify ideas and habits as a result of experience is maladaptive" (Kolb, 1984, p. 28).

Kolb's second proposition that *all learning is re-learning* builds upon the cyclical concept of knowledge building addressed in proposition one. The implication was that students do not enter the classroom as blank pages, but instead bring with them previous experiences that have formed some measure of beliefs about a topic, regardless of their quality. Therefore, the job of an educator is "not only to implant new ideas but also to dispose of or modify old ones" (Kolb, 1984, p. 29). To be successful in this process, educators must bring out the learner's personal beliefs and theories about topic in order to facilitate experiences that will help with their refinement and growth.

Kolb's third proposition that *learning requires conflicts to occur between opposing viewpoints* has its roots in the works of Lewin, Dewey, and Piaget. Each theorist saw grappling with conflicting concepts as a critical component of the learning process. Kolb theorized that learning was achieved through four elements of experiential learning (a) concrete experience (CE), (b) reflective observation skills (RO), (c) abstract conceptualization (AC), and (d) active experimentation (AE).

They must be able to involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences (CE). They must be able to reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives (RO). They must be able to create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories (AC), and they must be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems (AE). (Kolb, 1984, p. 30)

These four different kinds of abilities were polar opposites that together made learning a two-dimensional process: *concrete* at one end and *abstract* at the other.

Kolb's fourth proposition that *learning is holistic and requires adaptation* refers to the interconnectedness of multiple human processes such as thought, emotion, and perception in the learning process. Humans are complex creatures whose systems do not work in isolation, therefore a tenet of Kolb's experiential learning theory was concerned with how behavior was reflective of thoughts and feelings to form adaptations. Adaptation through divergent (concrete and reflective) or convergent (abstract and active) thinking were continuously used by humans in the process of forming new knowledge, whether formally within a school environment or in their day-to-day lives.

Kolb's fifth proposition that *learning involves an interaction between a person and their environment* was in contrast to the traditional model of education that saw learning as

an internal process that required only access to books, a teacher, and a classroom. Kolb remarked that earlier behavioral studies conducted in laboratories did not take into account the two-way interaction between a learner and their environment. Instead, environmental factors were looked at as “independent variables manipulated artificially by the experimenter to determine their effect on dependent response characteristics” (Kolb, 1984, p. 34). Instead, Kolb built on Dewey’s earlier concept of a two-way relationship between learner and environment but saw it as even more complex and transactional, with both being impacted and changed through the act of the experience.

Kolb’s sixth and final proposition was *learning is the process of creating knowledge*. This creation of knowledge occurred as “a result of the transaction between social knowledge and personal knowledge” (Kolb, 1984, p. 36). Social knowledge referred to the accumulated understanding obtained by previous humans and thought of as culture, while personal knowledge was that which was formed through concrete experience. The reformulation and interaction between these two banks of knowledge was where true learning occurred.

Kolb’s Model of Experiential Learning. Kolb utilized these six propositions in the creation of his Model of Experiential Learning, which followed the dynamic four-stage cycle illustrated in Figure 2. Each stage in the cycle built upon the previous to inform and mold the learning process. In this model, learning began with a concrete experience in which the learner actively participated, felt, and experienced an interaction with their environment. The second stage required the learner to consciously reflect on the observations obtained during that experience, grappling with prior bits of knowledge, and draw some conclusion from the process. Active reflection was critical to the experiential learning process, for “you cannot learn from experience unless you reflect” (Seaman & Rheingold, 2013, p. 155). In the third

stage, abstract conceptualization, the learner would “conceptualise a theory or model and utilise these generalisations as guides to engage in further action and experiment with different scenarios in the final cycle of active experimentation” (Chan, 2012, p. 406).

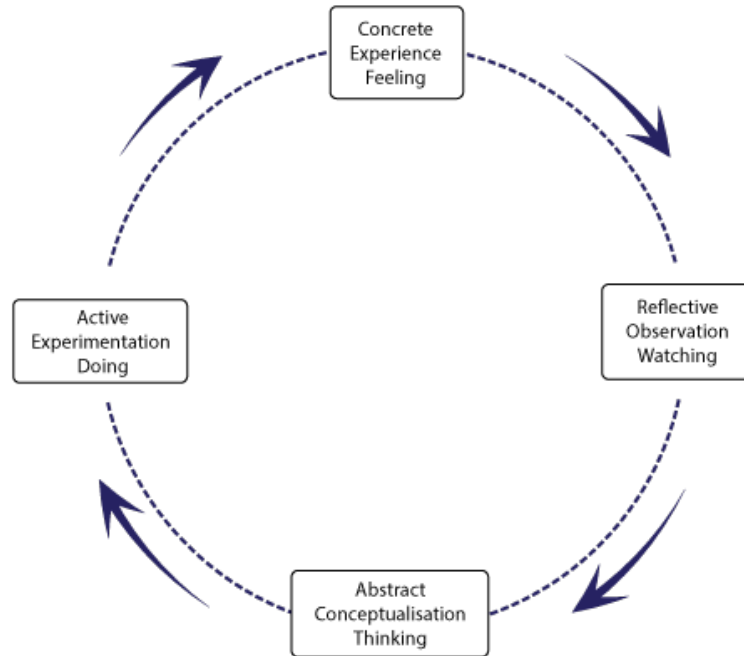


Figure 2. A visual representation of Kolb’s Model of Experiential Learning. Adapted from: Kolb, 1984, p.23. Retrieved from <http://www.seekhley.com/research-kolb>.

Kolb argued that his Model of Experiential Learning worked best when students had the ability to consciously connect with each stage of the four cycles as a concrete experience (Jenkins & Clarke, 2017, p.155). For this reason, educators who use his model should carefully design assignments that include specific aspects for each stage of the process. Jenkins and Clarke (2017) provided one example of how the use of Engaged Journalism to provide a specific method of in-class journaling that incorporated each of the four cycles of Kolb’s model. Over the course of four years, this activity was used in over 12 different course sections at four different universities as part of a research study. Their findings concluded that “Engaged Journaling (1) offers a more holistic measurement of student

comprehension, (2) engages potentially disengaged students, (3) enriches class discussion and cross-interaction, and (4) creates additional entry points for clarification” (Jenkins & Clarke, 2017, p. 156). This study supported the concept of designing experiential learning activities with discreet focus on each of the four stages in the cycle to be most effective.

Other researchers have examined the effectiveness of experiential learning as a general educational model. In a 2012 study by Chan, the researcher followed teachers, staff and 43 engineering students as they embarked upon a service-learning project to earthquake-ravaged Sichuan, China to examine the effect of experiential learning. The participants in the study worked to rebuild various engineering projects involving the Yuanjia Sichuan Primary School that had been devastated by the earthquake. Results from this qualitative study concluded that this real-world problem based experience left students with a “a deeper impression than learning merely from textbooks, which enable more fruitful observation, reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation. The community service type of experiential learning is particularly effective as such learning connects students’ emotions and empathy towards the subject matters besides the usual cognitive linkage” (Chan, 2012, p. 413).

Kolb’s (1984) four-cycle model has been widely used as the basis of experiential learning theory, but one area in which it has been criticized is its lack of attention played to the social context in which learning takes place. Kolb’s model primarily focused on the individual and their direct interaction with the environment through experiences, but social learning theorists extend this concept to incorporate the aspect of observation and modeling of others into the learning cycle. The following section will look at the theorists whose work influenced the concept of social learning.

Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura is a Canadian-borne social scientist at Stanford University whose pioneering work in psychology included his 1977 book, *Social Learning Theory*, in which he suggested that humans learn best through observation, imitation, and modeling. A follow-up book in 1986, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*, developed this concept in more depth. The idea of learning through modeling was in direct contrast to earlier behavioral theorists, such as Skinner (1938), who believed learning occurred as a result of rewards and punishments through operant conditioning. These earlier behaviorists believed that the environment acting upon individuals created their behavior. Bandura's work with adolescent aggression led him to believe that concept was far too simplistic. Rather, he saw learned behavior as a three-way interaction, which he termed *reciprocal determinism*, between (a) behavior, (b) personal psychology, and (c) environment. In his theory, he posited that either inner forces or the external environment did not control individuals alone, but instead, a constant interplay between them existed (Bandura, 1997). Out of this interactive process between internal and external stimuli, social learning occurred in two distinct ways: *enactively* or *vicariously*. Enactive learning happened by completing an activity first hand, while vicarious learning happened by indirect sources, such as hearing about an experience or witnessing modeling, and relating to the event through thinking or feeling as the main character (Bandura, 1977).

Bandura identified four separate processes needed for an individual to learn via modeling (a) attention, (b) retention, (c) motor reproduction, and (d) motivation (Bandura, 1977). Observers are unable to learn from an experience unless they pay attention to what is happening around them to recognize the behavior to model. This is where engagement in an

experience matters in social learning. How much a learner enjoys the experience, or the persons with whom the experience occurs, will impact the success of this process. “People cannot learn much by observation unless they attend to, and perceive accurately, the significant features of the modeled behavior” (Bandura, 1977, p. 24). Learners must not only recognize the behavior they are to model, but also retain it for some time into the future. This process requires the cognitive functioning to code and store information for later retrieval. Bandura suggested the use of two different symbolic systems, such as an image and a description, as means to improve retention (Bandura, 1977). Learners must be capable of physically and intellectually reproducing the modeled behavior for it to be learned. If the skillset requires prerequisite skills that the learner has yet to acquire, they will be unable to complete this aspect of the modeling process no matter the desire. Lastly, the learner must be motivated and have an internalized reason to learn the behavior. Using punishment and reward has been used to produce the motivation required for this process, although Bandura suggests this was best used as an expectation in advance. “Reinforcement does play a role in observational learning, but mainly as an antecedent rather than a consequent influence. Anticipation of reinforcement is one of several factors that can influence what is observed and what goes unnoticed” (Bandura, 1977, p. 37).

Beyond Bandura’s social learning theory, Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) also focused on the role of social interaction as the strongest component of learning. He believed that social learning began in very early childhood and preceded individual development. “Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological)” (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 162). Much of Vygotsky’s

work focused on the role of play in the development of children, and of the motives and incentives that brought them to act. Play, as he explained, arose out a need for children to realize desires they were not able to immediately attain. Young toddlers, for example, were unable to imagine immediate desires happening in the future, but only in the moment. As they developed and learned that not everything they wanted could be had immediately, they learned coping behaviors. “Henceforth play appears which in answer to the question of why the child plays must always be understood as the imaginary, illusory realization of unrealizable desires” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 88).

Another element of Vygotsky’s input to social learning theory was his concept of the *zone of proximal development (ZPD)*, illustrated in Figure 3. He described this as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). He ascertained that students working in collaboration allowed for students at differing zones to support the scaffolding of their peers, thereby allowing for all students to achieve at a higher level. “Vygotsky can therefore offer us a model for understanding student learning; it is a developmental process in which concepts are internalized through social interaction” (Nordlof, 2014, p. 56).

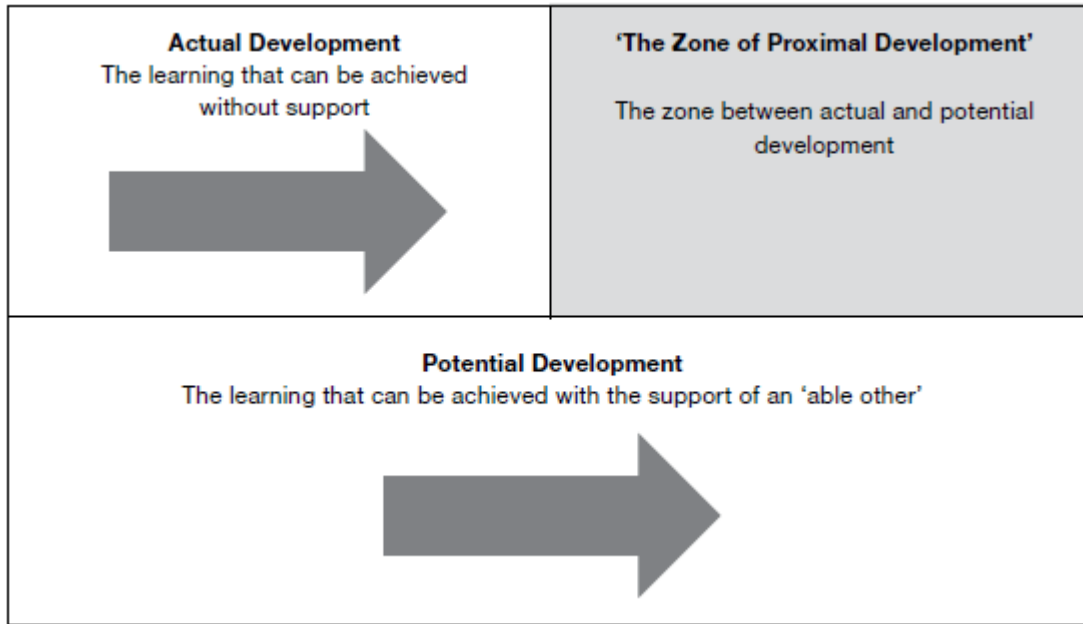


Figure 3. A visual representation of Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development. Adapted from: Vygotsky, 1978. Retrieved from <https://journals.gre.ac.uk/index.php/compass/article/view/23/56>.

Social learning theory has been applied in education not only to classroom learning through instructional practices such as collaborative grouping, but also to professional learning of adults, including teachers. Although, historically, teacher professional development was seen a very passive activity, the movement toward more socially engaging professional learning communities, and communities of practice have evolved. Meijs, Prinsen, and de Laat (2016), surveyed 110 teachers to examine *how social learning minded teachers are* and found 96.4% indicated they were “at least slightly” social learning minded. Thirty percent of those surveyed indicated they were “social learners at heart.” Ninety-four and one half percent, almost all of the teachers in the study, indicated they enjoyed collaborating with peers to enhance knowledge. Teachers in this study also indicated a

strong desire to decide for themselves what the topic of professional development would be, rather than that decision being made by administrators (Meijs, et al., 2016, p. 99).

To effectively incorporate social learning theory practices into schools either with students or teacher professional development, the organizational culture must be one that supports its basic tenets. The following section explores the research in this area.

Additional Research Topics: Culture, Interest, and Mission

Organizational Culture

The organizational culture of a school influences all aspects of its operation (Deal & Peterson, 1994). Culture, also referred to as climate, can be defined as the “underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that has built up over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges” (Deal & Peterson, 1998). A positive school culture exists when leaders, staff, and students feel “comfortable, wanted, valued, accepted, and secure in an environment where they can interact with caring people they trust” (Borkar, 2016). School leaders, including administrators, teachers, and parents, play an important role in shaping school culture by communicating, acting upon, and supporting core values in their daily interactions (Deal & Peterson, 1998). Having a positive school culture can have impact on factors including student achievement and teacher retention, and therefore attention to it should merit focus by school leadership.

Although the primary focus researchers took when examining the effectiveness of schools was student academic success as measured through standardized test scores, researcher Richard M. Ingersoll (2003), felt this approach overlooked important aspects of what was happening in schools.

From a societal perspective, one of the main purposes of schooling is to socialize the next generation. What students learn in schools has as much to do with the character of relations among and between students and teachers – what is sometimes called the climate of schools – as it does with the content of the academic curriculum. (Ingersoll, 2003, p. 192)

Ingersoll concluded that a positive school climate is a prerequisite to student academic achievement (Ingersoll, 2003). He urged schools to give weight to the importance of school culture and its influence over other areas within a school organization. This body of research led to the idea that schools should focus on specific and meaningful organizational structures that support positive interactions between leaders, teachers, and students as a means to promote positive school culture.

Seligman, Ernst, Gilliam, Reivich and Linkins (2002) built upon the importance of positive interactions within an educational culture by looking at developing the personal skills of each *individual* member. This research team developed a whole-school positive education model premised on a definition of individual well-being, which included three distinct pathways: positive emotion, engagement, and meaning. Seligman and his colleagues believed engaging students in targeted exercises that focused on these three pathways could teach well-being and improve overall school culture. For example, in his study examples of exercises used with students included (a) to write and deliver in person a note of gratitude to someone who had been kind to them, (b) to examine a moment when they were at their very best, reflecting on their personal strengths, and (c) for one week to write a description of three things that went well each day with supporting explanation.

Seligman's research team conducted a study of their Strath Haven Positive Psychology Curriculum with 347 ninth grade students. Their Language Arts classes were randomly assigned to include the positive psychology curriculum (condition) or not (control). Students, their parents, and teachers completed pre- and post-questionnaires, with additional data collected through two years of follow-up. The questionnaires measured "students' strengths (e.g., love of learning, kindness), social skills, behavioural problems and enjoyment of school" (Seligman, et al., 2009, p. 300). Student academic grades in Language Arts were also examined. Results of the research indicated students reported increased enjoyment and engagement with school. Teachers reported an improvement in students' strengths related to learning and engagement in school. Both parents and teachers reported an improvement in social skills, including empathy, cooperation, assertiveness, and self-control. Based on the findings, Seligman concluded, "well-being *should be taught* and that it *can* be taught in school" (Seligman, et al., 2009, p. 302).

Research indicated that organizational culture also impacts teachers. A study conducted by Song, Martens, McCharen, and Ausburn (2011) examined the relationship between four constructs grounded in the human resource development (HRD) field: *supportive learning culture, innovative work climate, level of job-related autonomy, and perceived turnover intention*. The rationale for this study included examining the potential for a supportive organizational culture that reduced teacher attrition to positively impact student achievement. The reasoning was that reducing attrition would allow teachers to gain more classroom experience and qualifications, and therefore be more effective. This study was used to survey 320 Career and Technical Education (CTE) teachers using a survey administered through the Oklahoma State University online web survey system. The

researchers specifically targeted CTE teachers due to high rates of teacher turnover in this particular area. The results of the study supported earlier findings in HRD research that supportive learning cultures have a direct positive influence on school innovative climate, job autonomy, and perceived teacher turnover intention. “This conclusion in turn implies a need for school administrators to recognize the benefits of fostering a supportive learning environment for teachers and taking action to encourage its growth” (Song, et al., 2011, p. 18).

The findings from this body of research can be used to conclude that organizational structures within school environments that contribute to a positive school culture can improve student outcomes as well as faculty retention and should be a focus of school designers and administrators.

Interest Development

The study of interest development is of value to educational researchers because of its relationship to learning. “When people are interested in a topic or thing, they are more likely to orient toward it, pay attention to it, and learn about it” (Bergin, 2016, p. 7). Understanding how interest develops and what role teachers could play in facilitating its growth could assist educational leaders with issues of engagement and academically unmotivated students. The underlying experiential learning theory that this study was founded on requires attention to be paid to the role of motivation, which could often be tied to interest. As such, interest development was include in the literature review for this study.

The concept of interest can be conceptualized in a variety of different ways related to the research questions under which it is studied. However, what most of these interpretations have in common is that interest is “a phenomenon that emerges from an individual’s

interaction with his or her environment” (Krapp, Hidi, & Renninger, 1992, p. 5). Research refers to two types of interest, one in the moment and one that is embedded within a person’s disposition. Interest that arises in the moment of attention is referred to as *situational* interest and is generally a response to stimuli in the environment. A teacher selecting a text that catches a student’s attention would be considered situational. *Individual* interest is considered to be more stable and tends to develop with increased knowledge over time. An athlete who plays and studies football would be an example of individual interest.

David Bergin (2016) of the University of Missouri has concluded in his research that a key influencer of individual interest is social experience. According to his work, individual interest begins to be influenced early in life, when toddlers and preschoolers start to notice and pay attention to preferences. As they mature, families, peers, schools, and their community culture influences the interests they take. This process is described in his work as a sequence that results in well-developed individual interest illustrated in Figure 3.

The first step of interest development is *exposure* to a topic, either in person or vicariously. If an individual is not aware of a topic, no interest can be developed. Much of what students are exposed to in school can have the effect of meeting this first stage of interest development by exposing students to topics with which they may have been previously unfamiliar.

The second stage of interest development is *triggered situational interest*, where an individual pays attention to a topic. Individuals are often bombarded with information on a daily basis, so to meet this stage the topic must connect with them in some way in order to trigger the desire to focus on it. This could be due to the topic having some personal relevance or due to a social interaction, where peers were focusing on it (Bergin, 2016).

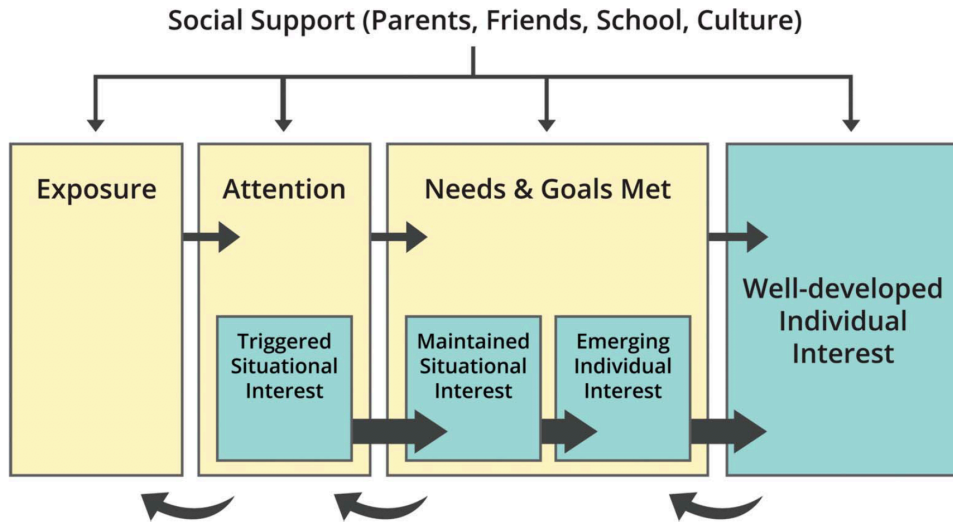


Figure 4. A visual representation of Bergin’s Four Stages of Interest Development. Adapted from “Social Influences on Interest” by David A. Bergin, 2016, *Educational Psychologist*, 51, p. 9. Copyright 2016 by American Psychological Association.

The third stage of interest development is determining whether the topic has the ability to *satisfy needs or goals*. Some common needs that could be met by interest are *belongingness* in a social group (joining a photography club) or achieving a *goal* (joining a the cross country team to win a race). As these needs and wants are met through interaction with the interest environment, the individual moves toward maintained situational interest (Higa & Renninger, 2006).

The final stage of interest development is *individual interest*, when knowledge has increased and the individual is now controlling the environment as a means to continue to develop a set of skills. Throughout all of these stages, social support influences the progression through access to resources, information, mentoring, modeling, and funding (Bergin, 2016).

Higa and Renninger (2006) discussed the implications that interest development research had on educators through its impact on attention, goal setting, and learning strategies. Three implications were suggested for educators, including to (a) teach discreet and overt skills to help students sustain attention to a topic even when it was difficult, (b) provide opportunities for students to ask “curiosity questions,” and (c) select materials and activities that promote problem-solving and the generation of strategy. Most importantly, “research suggests that positive feelings about activity and solid content knowledge are important if students are to attend to content, set goals, and learn” (Higa & Renninger, 2006, p. 121).

Institutional Mission

All organizations are founded with some statement of principles, often referred to as a mission statement, which at its most basic level provides purpose and direction to the organization. Researchers who study organizational development will often contrast mission with vision. Mission defines the why and the purpose behind an organization, as well as what differentiates it from others, while the vision looks forward in time for what the organization aspires to be in the future (Bonewits Feldner, 2006). Mission statements justify the reason for the very existence of the organization (Connell & Galasinski, 1998), and are generally closely tied to its culture, “giving meaning to the organization itself” (Bonewits Feldner, 2006). According to Abrahams (1999), organizations without a clear mission face the prospect of losing their direction and purpose.

To be effective, the value of mission for an institution must go beyond its mere language, however, to “reach into people’s hearts and souls and motivate them to collaborate toward a cause that provides them with the opportunity to make a difference in the world”

(Woodrow, 2006, p. 314). Trice and Beyer (1993) spoke to the role that rituals can play in communicating and maintaining a sense of organizational mission that focuses on the core values and purpose. Few researchers have studied the role of these rituals in communicating and maintaining the organizational mission, but they can be seen through many of the events and activities seen in schools today.

For people to connect with the mission at a personal level, they must feel that the organization has a commitment to its practice. “Mission gives purpose to life. It adds meaning to what one does. In its purest form, it is so deeply felt that it explains why one does what one does ... a mission must benefit the world” (Clifton & Nelson, 1992, p. 122). To investigate this point, Bonewits Feldner (2006) examined how organizational mission could be used as a construct by faith-based schools to provide “a foundation for a search for greater meaning and exploration of human experience” (p. 72). Interviews were conducted with 26 attendees to a three-day conference in the summer of 2004 for Jesuit school staff members. Findings from the study suggested that organizational mission, and the rituals used to support them, could be an avenue for employees to blend strong personal beliefs with their work lives. Bonewits Feldner found that attendees interviewed felt “the conference inspired them and affirmed their desire to continue to find ways that they can better live out the mission in their jobs” (p. 74). A second finding from the study was that delegates recognized inconsistencies in how the mission was communicated and the actual practices of the organization. “Delegates commented on the degree to which they felt their institutional leaders did not live out the mission when it came to handling issues such as layoffs, raises, and hiring” (Bonewits Feldner, 2006, p. 78). Building fortress-type fences around urban

schools that were founded on a social justice mission was one of the examples of inconsistencies documented in the study.

Schools that are founded on strong missions provide a purpose and direction to teachers and students that make up their organizational membership. The research supports the importance of documenting and communicating this mission and suggests incorporating rituals that reinforce its message. Research also cautions against developing organizational practices that are in conflict with the ideals encapsulated in the stated mission (Bonewits Feldner, 2006).

Chapter Summary

The focus of this qualitative study was to explore non-urban charter schools that incorporate experiential learning curricula in an effort to (a) identify best practices in instruction, (b) define student success, and (c) identify supporting organizational structures. This chapter provided a review of literature to support this research study.

The chapter opened with an historical look at relevant charter school research and provided context for where this study fit in relation to the existing body of work. The majority of the research to date had focused on charter school in urban environments that utilized traditional classroom pedagogical methods.

A literature review of the theoretical foundations of the study, including an in-depth examination of John Dewey and David Kolb's contributions to Experiential Learning Theory and Albert Bandura and Lev Vygotsky's Social Learning Theory were explored. From this literature review emerged key themes that supported the findings referenced in Chapter Five.

Related research topics that emerged include organizational culture, interest development, and institutional mission, which support the findings regarding best practices in this study that are discussed in depth in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research study was to investigate a segment of the charter school population that has been largely disregarded by the majority of educational study to date. This included charter schools located outside the urban setting that utilize experiential learning as a primary curricular design. The researcher specifically sought to gain a better understanding of what best practices could be garnered from these schools, how student success was defined, and to identify organizational structures that were utilized to support it. This chapter provides details of the methodology used to examine this topic and includes the following sections (a) biography of the researcher, (b) efforts to support the trustworthiness of the study, (c) ethics statement, (d) research strategy and design, (e) sampling procedures, (f) data collection, and (g) data analysis.

Researcher Biography

According to Merriam (2009), one aspect of qualitative research that is inherent is that the researcher acts as the primary instrument used in data collection. The advantages to the model are the adaptability and responsiveness that a researcher can bring to the data, and the unique ability that humans have to interpret non-verbal data. The shortcomings of this model, however, can be the biases and “subjectiveness” that all humans bring to the research process (Merriam, 2009, p. 15). A short biography has been included to disclose any potential researcher bias and to help explain its connection to the topic.

I am a school administrator with 17 years of experience in education. I began my career as a middle school teacher, and subsequently have taught in grades four through graduate school. While teaching at a suburban high school, I was approached to pilot a new program that was an interdisciplinary approach to teaching science, technology, engineering,

and digital media. The program was funded through an inter-district grant from the National Science Federation with the aim of increasing student achievement while also integrating urban and suburban schools into authentic, experiential, research-based work. Teaching in this program became the inspiration behind this research study. My school superintendent and principal allowed me the freedom to organize the program any way that I felt would most benefit the students, and as a result, our group of 25 initial students redesigned the high school experience. For three years I was able to experiment and provide immersive experiences that had life-changing effects on my students, and I witnessed the engagement and achievement of these students in that time. Many of these students have graduated from college and are in the first year of their professional lives as of the writing of this dissertation, and I am so proud of the outcomes of our “leap off the cliff” as it was referred to at the time.

When trying to replicate this model in a subsequent school later in my career as an administrator, the largest barrier that seemed to appear was the need to have flexibility of structures that would accommodate the needs of immersive experiences, and secondly, to select teachers that were passionate enough to work through its establishment. I kept being told that a traditional public school had too many requirements and logistical impediments to make this model of education work. Although I do not necessarily agree with that summation, I decided to look to the charter school model as a possible means to alleviate the strict adherence to tradition. Being that charters are built on non-traditional models and usually with a foundational mission, this was the direction I wanted to learn more about. It was my hope that examining more formal research in the area of experiential learning within a charter school model would help provide empirical data to address the question about whether this school design was possible and desirable. I embarked upon this study to help

contribute to this cause, and to answer personal questions I had about the feasibility of establishing a charter school that would support this learning model. Learning the lessons that existing school personnel had learned, including their best practices and organizational structures, were of personal and professional importance to me. I believe more research needs to be done to understand the implications of experiential learning on student success, if it has a positive impact, and, if so, how schools can incorporate its use.

Establishing Trustworthiness in the Study

Lincoln and Guba (2006) have identified four criteria that should be present to establish trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Krefting (1991) also suggests four similar criteria to establish trustworthiness and ensure the quality of the research: truth-value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality. Multiple strategies were implemented during the course of the study to reduce any threats to validity and ensure the trustworthiness of the research.

To establish credibility and truth-value in this study, the researcher spent two days onsite for each participating school. This allowed for adequate engagement with participants and the setting to see recurrent data emerge. The establishment of mutual trust is an important element in ensuring credibility and truth-value, so the researcher spent time explaining the purpose of the study to all participants to ensure their understanding and comfort, and answered any questions requested. Additional time was spent with school leadership in a casual manner, such as eating dinner with school personnel and engaging in conversation to develop rapport and comfort. This encouraged a cordial and friendly relationship that supported the truth-value in the formal interviews.

To establish transferability and applicability in this study, the researcher utilized thick descriptions in all observation notes. The researcher also audio recorded reflections after each day of the site visits to record recollections, feelings and perceptions in the moment. The small sample size in this study is a limitation to the transferability of the findings to any larger population, however, the use of systemic methodology along with thick descriptions were utilized to mitigate this limitation.

To establish dependability in a qualitative study, Krefting (1991) recommends including detailed methodology for how the data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted to allow subsequent researchers to replicate the study. This study includes a detailed description of the methodology utilized in Chapters Three and Four in the hopes that researchers could easily replicate the process. Environmental factors are unable to be controlled, however, and could therefore interfere with dependability. Triangulation of data was used to check that findings presented were consistent across the cases.

To establish confirmability and neutrality, the researcher maintained reflexive notes after each day of the site visits to provide summaries of the experiences and to capture personal perceptions. Additionally, an external audit was conducted to ensure researcher bias did not impact the findings of the study. An independent researcher conducted the audit with experience in qualitative research and responded in Appendix H.

Statement of Ethics and Confidentiality

Western Connecticut State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted approval for the study on April 2, 2014 (see Appendix G). Potential participant schools in this study were initially approached via email and provided an overview of the methodology, time commitment, and offer to answer any further questions. Once approved for

participation, permission to participate and consent forms were signed by the school administrative team (see Appendix D), teachers (see Appendix E) parents and students (see Appendix F). To assure confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym and is referred to as such throughout this research paper. All data were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home or office and was maintained there until the findings had been published, accessible only to other researchers for whom the data will prove useful in further comparative analyses and who are enrolled in Western Connecticut State University's Doctor of Education in Instructional Leadership Program.

Research Strategy and Design

This study utilized the case study research strategy with a qualitative multi-case design. "Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (case) or multiple bonded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents), and reports a case description and case-based theme" (Cresswell, 2007, p. 73). This study sought to find participant charter schools to serve as individual case studies that met a specific set of characteristics, including (a) location in a non-urban locale, (b) a minimum of three years in operation to allow for accessible data, (c) servicing middle or high school grade levels, and (d) utilizing a curriculum that included an experiential learning philosophy.

The multi-case study design was selected to employ a holistic, exploratory investigation of each participant and to identify possible commonalities across the cases as a means to identify themes. According to Patton (2002), the multi-case study design is

particularly effective when an investigator is examining unique, identifiable cases where rich data can be collected.

Qualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive. (Merriam, 2009, p. 23)

The researcher began the project by seeking to identify participant schools that would serve as the basis for a rich, exploratory study with the sampling process described in the following section.

Sampling Procedure

Participant schools for this research study were determined by matching potential schools that met a specific set of criteria within the states of Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island. The requirements for schools in the study included (a) being situated within a non-urban location, (b) being in operation for a minimum of three years to ensure accessible student data, (c) including grade levels that fell within the range of 6-12, and (d) utilizing an educational model that included some aspect of experiential learning.

For the purposes of this study, experiential learning was defined as an umbrella term by the researcher to include practices such as (a) the use of direct, hands-on activities to engage and immerse the learner into deep study of a subject or skill, framed around a real world project or activity, (b) the incorporation of an aspect of reflection of the learning that took place, which could include a public presentation or action based on their learning,

and/or (c) the connection of learning to some community benefit beyond the learner themselves.

The researcher began the selection process by utilizing the *Public Charter Schools Dashboard*, a “comprehensive data resource from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools” (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, n.d.). In 2014, the most recent data available, the Dashboard indicated that there were 608 charter schools in operation within the six named states. The next step in identifying potential schools came through examining each individual state’s Department of Education website, which published information regarding charter requirements and a list of existing schools, corresponding characteristics, and state specific reports. Using information obtained from these sites, the researcher conducted a process of elimination to identify charter schools within the available sample that meet the requirements of the study.

Based on proximity to the researcher, two schools from each of the states of Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and Rhode Island we selected as initial contacts and placed on a list. The state of Connecticut was eliminated from the study after examination, as no schools met the study requirements in their entirety. The researcher proceeded to contact administration of the identified schools via email communication, one school at a time, to allow for schools to confirm or decline participation before the next school on the list was contacted. Of those invited, three schools declined participation in the study due to the perceived time commitment, two declined without providing a declared reason, and one agreed to participate with the researcher acting as an observer only during an existing program evaluation that was currently underway. As this modification did not meet the

stated study requirements, the researcher declined. Two schools contacted agreed to participate and became the cases utilized in the study.

Data Collection Procedures

Utilizing a qualitative research approach, the researcher visited School A and School B for two days each in the spring of 2015. During the visit, the researcher conducted interviews, focus groups, and field observations. An initial document review of the school's web site was completed prior to each visit to provide a working understanding of the school, including its curricula and organizational structure. The information obtained in the initial document review helped shape the questions used during the interview and focus group protocols to provide targeted data gathering related to the research questions. The initial document review also provided focus topics for observation.

During the onsite visit to School A, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with three members of the school leadership team and four teachers, various observations of classroom activities, a student focus group, and a previously unplanned focus group likened to a board of education. During the visit the researcher was informed that the school's website was in the process of being redesigned and therefore a decision was made by the researcher to revisit the document review after the new site was officially launched.

During the onsite visit to School B, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the head of school and three teachers, observations of a morning meeting and multiple classroom activities, conducting a student focus group, and participating in a walk-through observation protocol with a curriculum improvement team. A more thorough document review was conducted after the conclusion of the site visit.

Document Review

Reviewing documents and artifacts presented publically helped the researcher understand the philosophy the individual school attempted to communicate to the public.

One of the great advantages in using documentary material is its stability. Unlike interviewing and observation, the presence of the investigator does not alter what is being studied. Documentary data are “objective” sources of data compared to other forms. Such data have also been called “unobtrusive.” (Merriam, 2009, p. 155)

The document review was conducted in two stages, with the first completed prior to the onsite visit and the second after the conclusion of the visit when data analysis was underway.

The initial analysis included reviewing the school websites to identify topics used to structure specific questions and selections for observation at each participant site. For example, when the researcher identified a particular program or unique attribute of the school, questions were drafted to include in the interview or focus group, and/or a field observation scheduled for inclusion. This process helped to make the onsite data collection more targeted.

The second phase of the document review process involved a more thorough review of the school website and further analysis of documents located on state Department of Education sites related to school accountability report cards. The researcher methodically created a site map of each school site, after which a catalogue of images used on the parent pages was collected for analysis. The researcher focused on curating information from the site related specifically to the research questions, including curriculum, organization, and references to student success and graduates. Notes were kept on what material was posted that was not directly produced by the school. The detailed protocol utilized to conduct the document review for each school can be reviewed in Appendix A.

Interviews

Interviews are used in qualitative research to collect data not easily obtained through observation, such as feelings or the way participants interpret the world around them (Merriam, 2009, p. 88). For this study, interviews were conducted with school administration and teachers using a semi-structured format with open-ended questions related to themes that allowed for probing, exploratory follow-up questions. “Interviewing is the best technique to use when conducting intensive case studies of a few selected individuals” (Merriam, 2009, p. 88). For this reason, interviews were a primary mode of data collection for this study.

Purposeful sampling of key participants identified (e.g., teachers involved in a particular program offered at the school identified through the document review process) was used to ensure focused data collection with those individuals who could provide the most relevant information at each school site. Administrator interviews focused on how school leadership supported teaching staff in implementing a curriculum that incorporated experiential learning and how student success was defined within each school. The researcher used teacher interviews to collect information on how pedagogy and philosophy translated into the daily workings of classroom instruction and assessment. The researcher utilized a different interview protocol for administrators and teachers but followed a similar thematic approach focusing on curriculum that incorporates experiential learning, assessment, and the definition of student success. Interview questions can be reviewed in Appendix B. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

Focus Groups

“Unlike a series of one-to-one interviews, in a focus group, participants get to hear each other’s responses and to make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other people have to say” (Patton, 2002, p. 386). For this reason, focus groups tend to be more socially focused. For this study, focus groups were conducted with a small group of purposefully sampled current students utilizing a semi-structured format with open-ended questions related to themes that allowed for probing, exploratory follow-up questions to gauge student feelings about the role of experiential learning in their education. As students selected to attend these charter schools through choice, data were also sought regarding why these particular schools were chosen. Focus group questions (see Appendix C) were determined after conducting the document analysis to guide questions to the specific school population. An unscheduled opportunity to conduct a focus group with School A’s governing body was presented, so the researcher adapted the leadership interview questions presented in Appendix A to a focus group protocol and was able to collect valuable data that provided great insight into the founding of the school. All focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in preparation for data analysis.

Field Observations

The use of observation in this study was a critical component of data collection as “observational data represent a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a secondhand account of the world obtained in an interview” (Merriam, 2009, p. 117). Observations were conducted within the schools with field notes containing thick descriptions used to account for as much observer data as possible. The observation protocol was driven by data collected in the document review process and through emergent topics

discovered during the onsite visit. Observation sessions were kept short, bound by a single class or experiential activity, to minimize observer fatigue and educational interruptions. Information was video or audio recorded, when possible, to allow further analysis. As multi-case studies can be challenging to manage, the researcher followed the suggestion from Bogden and Biklen (2007) to conduct fieldwork one case study at a time. The first case study laid the foundational process for the subsequent cases.

Data Analyses

As this research design was a multi-case study, the analysis was, by nature, emergent. Organization of the materials in a case study model is paramount to successful analysis (Merriam, 2009) and therefore the data collected were compiled, curated, and organized chronologically or topically. Because this study involved multiple bounded cases, the researcher utilized the two-stage approach recommended by Merriam (2009) for both within-case analysis and cross-case analysis.

For the within-case analysis, each case is first treated as a comprehensive case in and of itself. Data are gathered so the researcher can learn as much about the contextual variables as possible that might have a bearing on the case. Once the analysis of each case is completed, cross-case analysis begins. A qualitative, inductive, multi-case study seeks to build abstractions across cases. (Merriam, 2009, p. 204)

Beginning with School A, the strategy of coding as outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2007) was utilized. The researcher analyzed transcriptions of the interviews, focus groups and observations using open coding which were subsequently categorized into axial codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Using this deductive process, axial codes were then collapsed into secondary codes. The process was then continued with School B and using cross-case

analysis, ultimately used to determine themes present in the data across both schools. This analytic process is described in depth in Chapter Four.

During the research study, reflexivity – the “process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the ‘human as instrument’” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 183) was addressed through the researcher maintaining a reflexive journal, both in writing and through recorded audio notes. Throughout the process of data analysis, this journal was used to help the researcher work through struggles of interpretation of data and in organizing thoughts. This reflexivity also helped address the issue of dependability of the data for trustworthiness.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to document the methodology of the research study that was conducted. A biography of the researcher was included to disclose any potential bias and to provide a connection to the subject matter of the study. This chapter provided specific examples of ways in which the researcher maintained trustworthiness as defined by Lincoln and Guba (2006) and Krefting (1991), including (a) credibility/true-value, (b) transferability/applicability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability/neutrality. The data collected in this study, as well as the identities of the subjects, were protected through adherence to the Institutional Review Board approval process, obtaining consent forms, anonymity, and physical security of the data obtained. A detailed description of the research design, including (a) sampling procedure, (b) data collection procedures, and (c) data analysis were reported in this chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Chapter Four will include the analysis of findings from the research study, beginning with a detailed description of the participant school sites as a means to provide context to the discussion. Descriptions of the individual participants follow, grouped by type (school leaders, teachers, and students). Finally, the themes that emerged from the analysis are discussed.

Research Design

The research questions addressed in this study include:

1. What best practices can be identified from non-urban charter schools that incorporate experiential learning curricula?
2. How do non-urban charter schools, that incorporate experiential learning curricula, measure success?
3. What organizational structures (e.g., schedules, teacher professional development, teacher recruitment, length of school year, funding) have non-urban charter schools, that incorporate experiential learning curricula, utilized?

This study utilized a multi-case study design, with analysis completed for each individual site using an inductive process. Each focus group and interview was transcribed. The transcriptions were analyzed line by line to produce open codes that were grouped into emerging categories. Using a constant comparative approach, a codebook emerged that contained the final collapsed five themes for the study, which will be discussed in this chapter.

Description of School Sites and Participants

Chapter Three contained a description of the sampling procedures used to identify the two participant schools in this study. The following section contains a more detailed descriptive analysis of the two settings.

School A

The first school selected in the study was a charter school located on a 16-acre parcel in rural New Jersey. The school was founded in 2004 and opened with 76 children in grades kindergarten through eighth. At the time of the researcher's onsite visit in April 2015, 125 students were enrolled from a catchment area that included all of New Jersey, with priority for students in five surrounding districts. The total public school enrollment in New Jersey was 1.37 million with 41,620 students, or 3.03%, in charter schools (State of New Jersey Department of Education, n.d.).

The township in which School A lies had a population of 5,819, with a mean income of \$83,953. A review of demographics indicated 92.3% of those over the age of 25 years had earned a high school diploma or equivalent, with 29.4% having earned a Bachelor's Degree or higher. The racial make-up indicated 72.6% identify as White, 19.7% Hispanic, 9.7% African American, 0.6% American Indian, 0.1% Pacific Islander, and the remaining 2.1% as multi-racial (United States Census Bureau, n.d.).

Using data extracted from the 2014-15 New Jersey School Performance Report (State of New Jersey Department of Education, n.d.), a demographic profile of the school indicated that 23% of the student body had been identified with some form of disability (the highest of all schools in its identified peer group), with 0% considered Economically Disadvantaged, and 0% English language learners. The student body was racially comprised of 94.4% White,

2.4% African American, 1.6% Asian and 1.6% Hispanic students, indicating that the population of the school was not as diverse, based on racial/ethnic status, as the general population of the township in which it resides.

As shown in Table 2, School A’s 2014-15 Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) standardized test scores in grades three through six for English Language Arts indicate better than average state results, however Math scores did not fare as well. The New Jersey Assessment for Science Knowledge (NJASK) indicated a majority of students in grade four were proficient, with the vast majority scoring in the Advanced Proficient range (Rice, 2015).

Table 2

School A Standardized Test Scores as Reported by the New Jersey School Performance Report for 2014-15

Grade	n	PARCC English Language Arts % Met/Exceeded Expectations		PARCC Mathematics % Met/Exceeded Expectations		NJASK Science %	
		School A	State	School A	State	Advanced Proficient	Proficient
3	14	71	44	43	46		
4	12	67	52	33	42	67	25
5	14	79	53	33	42		
6	12	75	50	*	42		
7	13	46	53	46	38		
8	*	*	53	*	24	*	*

* Indicates scores not available

Chronic absenteeism, defined as a student identified as missing 10% of school days, was reported for School A at 13.93%. This was higher than the statewide average of 10% (Advocates for the Children of New York). School A had an annual per pupil expenditure of \$14,400, less than the statewide average of \$19,652 (State of New Jersey Department of Education, n.d.).

School A Participants

The researcher conducted a site visit to School A that take place over the course of two days. While there, data were collected from 12 adults through focus groups and interviews, and nine students through focus groups described in Table 3.

Table 3

School A Participant Identifiers

Pseudonym	Leadership		
	Team	Teacher	Student
Robert			X
Debby			X
Jeffrey			X
Joseph			X
Matthew			X
Alisha			X
Nicole			X
Meghan			X
Katie			X
Wendy	X		
Mandy	X		
Linda ^a	X	X	
Stanley		X	
Brian		X	
Eve		X	
Mark	X		
Nick	X		
Todd	X		
Melissa	X		
Lori	X		
Matt	X		
Total by Role	9	4	9

^aLinda was a Teacher as well as a member of the Leadership Team

School A - Leadership Team

Nine of the participants included in this study were members of the leadership team at School A. Three were full time employees of the school, while the remaining six were volunteer members of the school's governing body. To ensure anonymity due to the small size of the school, the descriptions that follow utilize pseudonyms and purposefully do not disclose any information that could potentially identify the individual.

Wendy. Wendy was a founding member of School A and served as its curriculum coordinator. She was also the parent of both a graduate and a currently enrolled student at the school. Her role encompassed not only development of curriculum, but also planned and organized staff professional development and mentoring.

Mandy. Mandy was a founding member of School A and served as the administrative coordinator of the school. She was the parent of children who graduated from the school. Her primary responsibilities included all business-oriented work at the school, including reporting to the Department of Education and facilities management.

Linda. Linda was a founding member of School A and joined the leadership team after five years of teaching in the school. She was the parent of children who graduated from the school. She described her position as a head teacher who works very closely with Wendy on curriculum initiatives. She described her strength as the ability to see how interconnected things are and of being a systems thinker.

Mark. Mark was a founding member of the school board of School A and worked in the business sector. He was the parent of children that had graduated from the school.

Nick. Nick was a founding member of the school board in School A and worked in the video production field. He was the parent of children that had graduated from the school.

He worked on the marketing subcommittee and was in the process of leading the redesign of the school website as a means to aid in recruitment.

Todd. Todd was a member of the school board of School A and worked as a science teacher in a neighboring traditional public school. He was the parent of children that had graduated from the school.

Melissa. Melissa was a member of the school board of School A and worked as a professional photographer. She was a parent of students enrolled in the school at the time of the study.

Lori. Lori was a member of the school board of School A and held the role of facilitator for the meeting that was attended by the researcher. She was the parent of children who graduated from the school. She was actively involved in the local farming community.

Matt. Matt was the newest member of the school board of School A and worked in a corporate job. He was the parent of students enrolled in the school at the time of the study.

School A - Teachers

Four of the participants included in this study were members of the teaching staff at School A, with one of the four also a member of the leadership team. To ensure anonymity due to the small size of the school, the descriptions that follow utilize pseudonyms and purposefully do not disclose any information that could potentially identify the individual.

Stanley. Stanley was one of the original teachers of School A and had been teaching at the school for 11 years. His experience in education was solely based on his experience at this school. His background was in growing food, which provided him with the connection to the agricultural component of the mission.

Brian. Brian worked in a facility for emotionally disturbed students prior to teaching at School A. The residential treatment program used the Outward Bound educational model “that places equal emphasis on development of the character and the intellect” through expeditionary learning (Outward Bound. n.d.). He background also included training in Project Adventure, a model of education that focuses on the core values of relationships, integrity, and progress, taught through adventure and experiential learning (Project Adventure. n.d.). He found his previous teaching experience to be beneficial and in alignment with the mission at School A.

Eve. Eve began her teaching experience at a school largely populated by migrant worker’s children, so encountered the issue of highly transient students. She reflected on how that experience taught her to live in the moment and to find out what was most important for her students to learn right then, as she might not have them for long. School A was not her first experience in a charter school, and her background also included summers teaching at camps, which provided her with experience teaching children in the natural world.

School A - Students

Nine of the participants included in this study were students at School A, all of which were in the middle grades of 6-8. To ensure anonymity due to the small size of the school, the descriptions that follow utilize pseudonyms and purposefully do not disclose any information that could potentially identify the individual.

Robert. Robert was an eighth grader at School A. He had attended the school since Kindergarten and therefore had no experience in any other school. Upon graduating from School A, he planned to attend a local technical high school where he hoped to study environmental science.

Debby. Debby was an eighth grader at School A. She had attended the school since Kindergarten and therefore had no experience in any other school. Upon graduating from School A, she planned to attend a local public high school.

Jeffrey. Jeffrey was an eighth grader at School A. He had attended the school since Kindergarten and therefore had no experience in any other school. Upon graduating from School A, he planned to attend the local regional public high school.

Joseph. Joseph was a seventh grader at School A. He had attended the school since Kindergarten and therefore had no experience in any other school.

Matthew. Matthew was a seventh grader at School A. He had attended the school since Kindergarten and therefore had no experience in any other school.

Alisha. Alisha was a seventh grader at School A. She had attended a traditional public school until transferring to School A three years prior. She entered the school with her two younger brothers when her family moved into the area from another county of the same state. She described her family as being extremely close inside and outside of school, so the decision was made for all the siblings to attend the same school.

Nicole. Nicole was a sixth grader at School A. She had attended the school since Kindergarten and therefore had no experience in any other school.

Meghan. Meghan was a sixth grader at School A. She had attended the school since Kindergarten and therefore had no experience in any other school.

Katie. Katie was a sixth grader at School A. She had attended the school since first grade.

School B

The second school in the study was a charter school founded in 2010 in rural Rhode Island. Initially opening with 84 students, at the time of the study it had a total school population of 162 in grades nine through twelve. Founded on the mission of environmentalism, it was recognized in 2014 by the US Department of Education as a National Green Ribbon School, and in 2015 it was named a credentialed Expeditionary Learning (EL) school. EL schools and their foundational principles will be discussed later in this chapter.

The township in which School B lies had a population of 6,134, with a mean income of \$80,987. A review of demographics indicated 96.8% of those over the age of 25 years had earned a high school diploma or equivalent, with 34.7% having earned a Bachelor's Degree or higher. The racial make-up indicated 96% identify as White, 2.1% Hispanic, 0.8% African American, 0.3% American Indian, 0% Pacific Islander, and the remaining 1% as multi-racial (United States Census Bureau, n.d.).

Using data extracted from the 2015-16 InfoWorks! Rhode Island Education Data Reporting web site, a demographic profile of the school indicates 13% of the student body qualified for special education services, with 36% eligible for subsidized lunch, and 0% receiving ESL/bilingual services. The student body was racially comprised of 70% White, 25% Hispanic, 3% African American, 1% Native American, 0% Asian and 1% Multiracial students, making it more diverse, based on racial/ethnic status, than the township in which it resides (InfoWorks! Rhode Island Education Data Reporting, n.d.).

As shown in Table 4, School B's standardized test scores indicate Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) English Language Arts scores to

be on par with the statewide average, but were significantly lower in both Algebra I and Geometry, while their New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) scores compare favorably in grade eleven Math, Reading, and Science.

Table 4

School B Standardized Test Scores as Reported by the InfoWorks! Rhode Island Education Data Reporting 2015-16.

	School B	State
	% Met/Exceeded Expectations	
PARCC Assessments		
ELA/Literacy Grade 9	29	33
ELA/Literacy Grade 10	31	31
Algebra I	2	28
Geometry	6	19
	% Proficient	
NECAP		
Grade 11 Math	44	35
Grade 11 Reading	87	81
Grade 11 Writing	61	66
Grade 11 Science	38	26

Chronic absenteeism, defined as a student identified as missing 10% of school days, was reported at 9%, compared to a statewide average of 26%. School B had an annual per pupil expenditure of \$19,716, more than the statewide average of \$15,923 (InfoWorks! Rhode Island Education Data Reporting, n.d.).

School B Participants

The researcher conducted a site visit to School B that took place over the course of two days. While there, data were collected from five adults through focus groups and interviews, and six students through focus groups described in Table 5.

Table 5

School B Participant Identifiers

Pseudonym	Leadership Team	Teacher	Student
Tim			X
Nancy			X
Kim			X
David			X
Jack			X
Breanne			X
Aaron	X		
Leo ^a	X	X	
Veronica		X	
Patricia		X	
Victor		X	
Total by Role	2	4	6

^aLeo was a Teacher as well as a member of the Leadership Team

School B - Leadership Team

Two of the participants included in this study were members of the leadership team at School B. Both were full time employees of the school. One of the two served as the Head of School, while the other was a teacher who also served in a coaching role. To ensure anonymity due to the small size of the school, the descriptions that follow utilize pseudonyms and purposefully do not disclose any information that could potentially identify the individual.

Aaron. Aaron was completing his first year as head of School B at the time of the researcher's site visit. He had 16 years of experience in other schools before joining School B and indicated the mission and philosophy of the school was what attracted him.

Leo. Leo was a founding member of School B and was previously a science teacher at a similar school in another state. He relocated across the country specifically to accept this position. His role at School B was to be a part time teacher and also serve as the liaison between the Expeditionary Learning (EL) School Designer and the teaching staff. In this role, he was responsible for the day-to-day implementation of the collaborative projects the school completes with the EL organization, as well as the professional development of the school staff in its implementation.

School B - Teachers

Three of the participants included in this study were members of the teaching staff at School B, with one of the four also a member of the leadership team. To ensure anonymity due to the small size of the school, the descriptions that follow utilize pseudonyms and purposefully do not disclose any information that could potentially identify the individual.

Veronica. Veronica had been involved in EL schools since 2008, but joined School B in 2011 when she relocated with her husband from another state. She began her career as a conservation biologist before transitioning to teaching.

Patricia. Patricia was a teacher who had been at School B for four years, with four previous years in the field of education. Prior to being at School B, she had taught abroad and had substitute teaching experience in traditional schools in the state. This was the first teaching position she held that utilized experiential education as its foundation.

Victor. Victor was a teacher who had been at School B for five years, but with a total of 12 years in education. He had been at School B almost since the founding and had prior experience working in a school that utilized experiential education. He characterized himself as an environmentalist, which drew to the mission of the school.

School B - Students

Six of the students in the study were students at School B, all of which were in the high school grades of 9-12. To ensure anonymity due to the small size of the school, the descriptions that follow utilize pseudonyms and purposefully do not disclose any information that could potentially identify the individual.

Tim. Tim was an eleventh grade student at School B who had attended the school for three years. He characterized himself as very shy in middle school and credited School B with helping him become comfortable with presenting and speaking to others. He had a personal connection to another student at the school that encouraged him to attend orientation while in middle school. He also had an older sibling who had a negative experience in the local traditional public high school. Both experiences factored into his decision to attend School B.

Nancy. Nancy was an eleventh grade student at School B who had attended the school for three years. She was an active member of the student government organization and helped lead the morning meetings at the school. She spoke of the diversity of the student body and how individuality was something that was appreciated.

Kim. Kim was a tenth grade student at School B who attended the school for two years. Prior to School B, her educational experience consisted of a Waldorf school from Pre-Kindergarten through eighth grade. The Waldorf Education model is premised on a

philosophy of experiential, academically rich, and integrated curriculum that is independent and inclusive (https://waldorfeducation.org/waldorf_education). She remarked that her favorite teacher at Waldorf had two children who attended School B and felt the school environment was similar. It was through that personal connection that she came to apply and ultimately attend. Her Waldorf School also had a strong environmental focus and was small in size, so she felt there was a natural progression for her into School B.

David. David was an eleventh grade student at School B who had attended the school since tenth grade. After spending one year in the traditional public high school, his mother saw his grades declining and felt he needed a change. He described himself as very shy in middle school, something that School B helped him overcome, but he found the wilderness aspects of the school initially very challenging, having grown up in an urban setting.

Jack. Jack was an eleventh grade student at School B who had attended the school for three years. He had attended a local middle school that was very large in size, with over 1,200 students. He described School B in terms of safety, indicating that there was “no bullying” and that it was “a very safe area” in which he had seen no fighting or significant issues. This was clearly important to him in the way in which he spoke about it.

Breanne. Breanne was an eleventh grader at School B who had transferred into the school at the start of the year. She described her experience in the traditional high school as extremely negative and as “constant stress.” She reported feeling successful and proud of her accomplishments and participation at School B in the short time that she had been a student, saying “I have grown so much since I came to this school.”

Theme Identification and Findings

After professional transcription was conducted of all interview, focus groups and observation recordings from the first case, each transcript was read and reread while listening to the recording to correct any possible mistakes in the transcription. This also allowed the researcher to add notes regarding emphasis and inflection of the voice patterns not able to be determined from the written transcription alone. Once all material had been reviewed, a grounded theory approach to data analysis was conducted to establish themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Merriam, 2009, Saldaña, 2016).

Grounded theory methodology operates on the concept of discovery of theory based on emerging data. This process of analysis began in this study through open axial coding by reading the transcripts of each case, making notes, and identifying key phrases that provided meaning to the research questions being investigated. The data were initially examined in each case separately, and then across the two cases to produce a single list of codes. Using the method of constant comparison, the codes were ultimately narrowed to 289 open axial codes that were defined in a codebook.

The final 289 open axial codes were then printed onto notecards and hand manipulated by the researcher through an inductive process to find similarities among them. Using an iterative process of comparison and refinement, similar codes were combined and ultimately 39 initial categories emerged from the process. During this phase of data analysis, five open axial codes were removed from the study as extraneous to the research questions. As Merriam stated, “When categories and their properties are reduced and refined and then linked together, the analysis is moving toward the development of a model or theory to explain the data’s meaning” (Merriam, 2009, p. 192).

The researcher continued data analysis by closely examining the 39 initial categories that had emerged, always through the lens of the research questions, and using constant comparison to combine codes. This process was continued until 16 category clusters remained. As further verification the codes were reviewed in context by returning to the source material to ensure their meaning was correctly represented in this iterative and comparative process. At the conclusion of this process, the category clusters in this study ultimately told the story of five emerging themes: (a) mission, (b) flexibility, (c) beliefs toward success, (d) staffing, and (e) student perception of school culture. It is these final five themes that are presented in this chapter.

The final five themes listed in Table 6 will be discussed in detail in the following section.

Table 6

Theme Definitions

Theme	Definition
Mission	The focus on foundational principles as the central focus of all decision making within the school
Flexibility	The ability of teachers to be flexible in their curriculum, assessment, grouping and time
Beliefs Toward Success	The teacher, student, and administrator view of assessment being multifaceted and not focused singly on standardized test scores
Staffing	The importance of hiring, inducting and retaining staff members as a key component of success in this school model
Student Perception of School Culture	Specific practices within the school designed to cultivate a sense of community and student ownership of learning

Theme One: Mission. The theme of mission refers to the focus on foundational principles as the central focus of all decision making within the school. This theme was

evident in participant interviews including members of the school administration, teachers, and students and provided insight into all aspects of the school including curriculum and organizational practices. The theme of mission emerged from the three codes of beliefs about learning, committed leadership, and collaboration as an expectation.

Theme Two: Flexibility. The theme of flexibility refers to the ability of teachers to be flexible in their curriculum, assessment, grouping, and time. Administrator interviews related trust in allowing teachers to make professional day-to-day decisions about the best methods for implementing instruction, while providing overarching high-level learning goals for all. Responses gathered from teacher interviews indicated freedom for teachers to design and adjust curricular programs based on the needs of individual students. The theme of flexibility emerged from the three codes of time, curriculum, and individualized learning.

Theme Three: Beliefs Toward Success. The theme of beliefs toward success refers to the teacher, student, and school administrator view of assessment being multifaceted. This theme resonated through all interviews and focus groups while discussing how student success is determined. The theme of beliefs toward success emerged from the three codes of character, multiple measures, and self-reflection.

Theme Four: Staffing. The theme of staffing refers to the importance of hiring, inducting and retaining staff members as a key component of success in this school model. Interviews with school administrators and teachers revealed data that indicate the challenges of teaching in this type of school require specific attributes and support to hire and retain successful staff members. The theme of staffing emerged from the three codes of recruitment, support, and challenges.

Theme Five: Student Perception of School Culture. The theme of student perception of school culture refers to specific practices within the school designed to cultivate a sense of community and student ownership of learning. This theme was evident throughout the student focus group responses and identified by students as an important criteria for success in the school. This theme emerged from the four codes of organizational structure supports community, small size, relationships, and valuing individuals.

Discussion of Themes

This section contains an in depth discussion of the five themes that emerged from the data collected throughout the study. Each theme will be introduced and discussed with supporting evidence presented from the data including direct quotes from interviews and focus groups, field notes, observations, interpretations of data by the researcher, and documents available publically from the schools in the study. The codes that supported each theme will be discussed and each section will conclude with a summary that reflects the research questions through the findings of the data.

Theme One: Mission

The theme of mission refers to the focus on an institutional mission, or foundational principles, as the central focus of decision-making within the school. This theme was evident in participant interviews including school administrators, teachers, and students and provided insight into curricular and organizational practices of both School A and B. Both schools were founded on a specific set of philosophical principles, referred to collectively by the researcher as the school mission. This mission was referred to continuously, throughout not only the interviews, but through signage and marketing materials produced and displayed by

the schools. The theme of mission emerged from the three codes of beliefs about learning, committed leadership, and collaboration as an expectation.

Beliefs about learning. The code, beliefs about learning, supported the theme of mission in this study. Both School A and School B were founded on central mission ideas that were at the center of their beliefs about teaching and learning. These beliefs were reflected in the mission and in the day-to-day practices of each school. These beliefs were shared between school administrators and teachers within the schools and were embedded in pedagogical practices.

School A was founded around the philosophical works of Thomas Berry, Brian Thomas Swimme, and The Center for the Story of the Universe (The Story of the Universe. n.d.). Knowing the school's history with this work was important to understanding their beliefs toward learning. According to the Center's mission statement, the core of this philosophy is the need to "redirect the current self-destructive trajectory of society into one whose actions can realize a vibrant community that transcends individual, human and geopolitical boundaries" (The Story of the Universe. n.d.). The founders of the school used this as the basis of the creation of their curricular model as well as their organizational structures. Mandy described that when designing the school, the founders started with the basic question "What is school?" and spent many hours grappling with how this mission would come to life. Mandy described influences of Montessori and Waldorf, among other pedagogical ideas used to design the school that now existed. She stated, "The fundamental view of children in an educational experience was all on the table." Out of this grappling, the structure of the school's curriculum came to be, and the idea of grappling with problems became a cornerstone of its philosophy. Wendy shared that the belief that self-directed and lifelong

learning was a primary goal of education had led to the experiential model the school created. The founders felt that learning happened by doing, and that doing made connections between the learner and the natural world.

A central tenet of the universe story was this interconnectedness of all things. Linda described how this was expressed in the curriculum design, with elements such as the focus on interdisciplinary learning units.

It's not just teaching the standards, we're teaching how they're connected to other things and how they're influenced by other things ... It's teaching kids that everything they do, everything they see, everything they learn, all their senses ... it's not separate.

It is connected in some way or another.

The school's founders worked with a local agricultural organization that was "deeply embedded in looking at the economic structures, the governance structure, the education structures that were underlying the current human story we were operating under." The founders believed that changing the paradigm required starting with young children and re-connecting them to the natural world around them; a belief that directly led to the environmental focus of the school. As Mandy stated, "We are of the world, not apart from it. The imperative was how do you create a situation for children where they feel that deeply?" In addition to encouraging children to feel passionately about their connection to the natural world was the belief that there should be "no bad news before fourth grade." This led to early childhood curriculum that was focused around "awe and the wonder of the natural world" as opposed to the environmental advocacy expressed through the upper grade levels. The curriculum goals were for children to develop first with a love and admiration of the

natural world and the connectedness of all living things, and then to progress to a point in which they would develop a passion for protecting it.

Other important beliefs about learning that were embedded into School A's mission was the feeling that students did not need to be entertained as part of their schooling. Linda described school assemblies, for example, as being "low key" and relatively quiet. These events usually involved student presentations or singing and were purposely kept calm. "We really feel that children need time to observe things" and to develop listening skills. The ability to maintain eye contact in conversation and to listen to differing perspectives was recognized as an important aspect of communication that needed to be explicitly taught and developed. This was further exemplified through utilizing experiential learning as a way to be actively involved in learning and observing about the natural world. Even the youngest of students spent time during the school day in nature with the purpose of quietly observing and making connections. The school wide Forest Friday initiative was designed for this purpose. Linda spoke about her Kindergarten class and how each Friday they would go outside, and often to the same place on the school grounds. "They see the changes, they see what's happening [in nature]. They notice that all the leaves are missing now. Their powers of observation grow as they are outside." The teachers spend time on this process, never rushing the observation. Linda explained this process.

To get to where we are going for Forest Friday's, sometimes it actually takes us an hour to go from the building on the end, there, to right down below this building. It's not even a four-minute walk, if you are just going as an adult, but it takes us sometimes an hour, because we stop for every piece of scat. We try to figure out,

How big is that scat? How does it relate to ours? How does it relate to a mouse? Or, something you might have at home.

The development of these quiet, observational skills reflected the mission of students developing connections with the natural world and of the living things within it, including other humans.

The teachers of School A were keenly aware of these foundational beliefs about learning and how they should be nurtured in the classroom. Eve described the use of questioning with her classes, and how teachers guided students to understanding through completely interdisciplinary units that she referred to as a “balance curriculum.” Students did not even recognize separate subjects, such as Social Studies, because they did not use that terminology during the school day. Brian spoke of the role of the teacher as “trying to provide a forum for those experiences ... and then learning to happen.” The teachers believed they were responsible for setting the conditions, and letting the learning come from the students themselves. “I do feel that by giving the construct and the chance to reflect, or talk about, or engage, that the important pieces come up to the surface and then we get there.” These experiences, such as through Forest Fridays, provided the organizational structures under which these conditions took place.

The students at School A understood the philosophy and the importance placed on being self-reflecting and engaged learners. Meghan shared “[The teachers] teach us how to teach ourselves. They tell us that our education continues throughout our lives, through college and as we get older. If we understand how to teach ourselves, it's going to be easier for us to understand new concepts.” Each student in the focus group was able to communicate their personal learning style and how it impacted their strengths and

weaknesses as learners. They continuously referenced the support they felt as learners, with teachers who continuously helped them on their learning journey. The researcher took note of the strong communication skills of the students and their ease with speaking to an adult stranger, including the ability to maintain eye contact. It was also noted that the students demonstrated strong listening skills with their peers, and were exceedingly polite in their interactions with each other. They naturally answered questions in a cyclical manner, ensuring each student had an equal opportunity to speak. There were no instances of student's interrupting the statements of another, and more a sense of collaboratively building responses through statements such as, "To piggyback off of." The researcher made note of these behaviors as something not normally seen with a group of middle school children.

School A's beliefs about learning being self-directed and reflective, with students being good listeners and observers to learn through exploration and experience, were reflections of the school's mission and vision. The respect of the natural world and interconnectedness in all things was present in all aspects of the curricular and organizational structures. The shared awareness and commitment of leadership, teachers and students to stay true to these beliefs were exemplified throughout all interviews.

School B was founded as part of the Expeditionary Learning (EL) school network, which according to their web site, was "born out of a collaboration between The Harvard Graduate School of Education and Outward Bound USA" in 1991. The EL educational model was comprised of three dimensions of student achievement: mastery of content knowledge and skills, character, and high quality student work. The EL education model held 10 principles, listed in Table 7 from their web site, which focused on teamwork, courage, and compassion.

Table 7

Ten Principles of Expeditionary Learning (EL) Education

Principle	Definition
The Primacy of Self-Discovery	Learning happens best with emotion, challenge, and the requisite support. People discover their abilities, values, passions, and responsibilities in situations that offer adventure and the unexpected. In EL Education schools, students undertake tasks that require perseverance, fitness, craftsmanship, imagination, self-discipline, and significant achievement. A teacher’s primary task is to help students overcome their fears and discover they can do more than they think they can.
The Having of Wonderful Ideas	Teaching in EL Education schools fosters curiosity about the world by creating learning situations that provide something important to think about, time to experiment, and time to make sense of what is observed.
The Responsibility for Learning	Learning is both a personal process of discovery and a social activity. Everyone learns both individually and as part of a group. Every aspect of an EL Education school encourages both children and adults to become increasingly responsible for directing their own personal and collective learning.
Empathy and Caring	Learning is fostered best in communities where students’ and teachers’ ideas are respected and where there is mutual trust. Learning groups are small in EL Education schools, with a caring adult looking after the progress and acting as an advocate for each child. Older students mentor younger ones, and students feel physically and emotionally safe.
Success and Failure	All students need to be successful if they are to build the confidence and capacity to take risks and meet increasingly difficult challenges. But it is also important for students to learn from their failures, to persevere when things are hard, and to learn to turn disabilities into opportunities.
Collaboration and Competition	Individual development and group development are integrated so that the value of friendship, trust, and group action is clear. Students are encouraged to compete, not against each other, but with their own personal best and with rigorous standards of excellence.

(Continued)

Ten Principles of Expeditionary Learning (EL) Education

Principle	Definition
Diversity and Inclusion	Both diversity and inclusion increase the richness of ideas, creative power, problem-solving ability, and respect for others. In EL Education schools, students investigate and value their different histories and talents as well as those of other communities and cultures. Schools and learning groups are heterogeneous.
Solitude and Reflection	Students and teachers need time alone to explore their own thoughts, make their own connections, and create their own ideas. They also need to exchange their reflections with other students and with adults.
Service and Compassion	We are crew, not passengers. Students and teachers are strengthened by acts of consequential service to others, and one of an EL Education school's primary functions is to prepare students with the attitudes and skills to learn from and be of service.

These three dimensions and 10 principles grounded the mission of School B and guided its beliefs about learning. The focus on meaningful learning that allowed students to apply their knowledge and skills to create complex works was evident in the types of activities students in the school participated in. Aaron explained how this belief related to the structure of the learning activities.

As an EL school, we have an experiential learning philosophy. Students are engaged in learning in more meaningful ways. It's not a traditional, seated in rows, classroom instruction where teachers are just giving information. It's the giving of information, the application of information, student discovery and learning and use of that information.

Aaron further explained how the learning activities were interdisciplinary and designed by grade level to incorporate the content area standards. "I think it allows students to sort of capture the full essence of learning, and being engaged in that way in the course of their day

or their semester just makes it more meaningful.” He felt students were able to retain the learning from these units because the process was more of a “constant engagement” throughout the semester.

Beyond the focus on strong content knowledge and application through experiential learning was the focus on developing character as a belief about learning. Developing the mindset to be successful was exemplified through the graduation requirement that all students would have a college acceptance letter. As Aaron explained, “I don't tell them that they're all expected to go to college. I tell them that you're expected to receive this letter, because it only adds to your bank of choices that you can make with you and your family that's correct for you.” Because of this requirement, students whose families may never have experienced college had mentors within the school community to help guide them through the application process. The process of developing a post-secondary plan required students to think beyond their high school years and to develop character traits that promoted success in the real world, such as strong communication skills, work ethic, and perseverance. The acceptance letter was a tangible result of that character building process and a symbol of what options a student may have, whether it was to a four-year university, a community college, or a trade school.

This belief in character was also exemplified by the school’s grading system and its focus on habits of work in addition to content knowledge and the requirement of student-led conferences. Teachers and students emphasized in their interviews the importance placed on the habits of work grades and that they were in some ways more important to long term growth than the content grade. During conferences, students were expected to review their

academic standing as well as their habits of work and lead the discussion on their goals for improvement.

The teachers at School B shared the beliefs that education is best when interdisciplinary, experiential learning was at the focus. This was done while encouraging and modeling the equally important aspect of character. Brenda reflected that the EL learning at School B was “based upon active pedagogy and the idea that learning is engaging, it's compelling. It's taking real world issues and applying them in the classroom.” She saw the learning units as moving beyond the walls of the classroom to tackle real-world issues that impacted the community. Students in her class were exposed to case studies with issues that they could have a personal connection to, which she felt was important for building “intrigue” for a topic. These case studies were interdisciplinary in nature, involving collaboration between teachers to plan and execute. “We are working together to create an experience for students that is something that they are going to see every different content area in. That way the whole expedition topic is that much more meaningful to them.” Leo spoke to the day-to-day flow of these interdisciplinary expeditions and how they were designed for students to make an emotional connection to the topic to get a sense of why it mattered. He added that there was always an element of community connection built in, where students would go out and visit local experts, conduct interviews, or do service work that could be turned into an authentic culminating event to share.

The ability to be engaged was referenced as a primary measure of success by the teachers who reflected their belief that engagement and caring about a topic directly leads to learning more meaningfully and deeply. Leo described how, in his English course, the reading and writing within the expeditions was often informational. When students pushed

themselves to access higher level reading material because they were so interested in the topic, and when their writing went beyond just reporting and moved into advocacy and action, that was how he knew they were truly engaged and practicing higher level skills. Patricia echoed these feelings when describing the positive impact of having experiential learning that allowed for connections to the community to be made so students would have a greater sense of connection to the larger world.

The student interviews indicated they were acutely aware of the school's beliefs about learning being self-directed, reflective, interdisciplinary and experiential. Nancy stated "every single class is connected to each other" which made connecting to the content easier for her. As an example, she described a recent expedition with a theme of War on Identity in which students created war memorials for a local veterans group and lobbied at the state capital for them to be built. Breanne stated how this experience allowed her to "step into history" and make connections important to her, such as challenges students with mental health issues faced. "There's always a connection to everything we do," which made content important and relevant. Breanne also spoke to the design of the curriculum being student directed, where teachers do not *give* students material as in her old school, but instead, students were required to *do* things that taught them the content. For example, rather than her science teachers providing reading and worksheets about decomposition, students in her class built anaerobic digesters to not only learn about the process, but to design better ways to handle waste. In this way, students were given the ability to create something that the community could use to make the environment better. Kim added that the culminating activity for this particular Nature and Society expedition was to conduct a waste solutions

summit at a local middle school to share the projects they created, including the anaerobic digesters, with the community.

The students also had a keen sense of the importance placed on character at School B. Jack spoke to the emphasis his teachers placed on the habits of work grade and he specifically talked about one teacher who told him when he first came to the school that she would rather see him try his best and work hard, even if he did not immediately master the content. This was how teachers developed determination and perseverance in students, something that was built into the 10 principles of EL. Nancy shared that the use of shout outs at the Friday morning meetings was another way student character was recognized at the school. These shout outs allowed students and staff members to publically acknowledge something positive about another member of the community. Kim valued this aspect of the school, saying “I feel like learning to me has always been more than academic” and recognizing that School B’s emphasis on character was important to her.

The interviews of school administrators, teachers, and students collectively supported the beliefs about learning that School B exemplified. The principles of interdisciplinary, experiential curriculum with a student-directed focus clearly reflected the EL principles, which comprised the foundational mission of the school.

Both School A and School B held strong beliefs about learning that were grounded in the mission of the school and were clearly understood and articulated by school administrators, teachers, and students. These principles were exemplified through the curriculum and organizational structures present in each school, including grading practices and rituals. Content knowledge was considered important in both schools, but emphasis was placed on character and the ability to be self-directed and reflective learners capable of

seeing the interconnectedness of the world. These beliefs were essential to maintaining the mission of the schools.

Committed leadership. The code labeled committed leadership supported the theme of mission in this study. Administrators and teaching staff in both schools continuously referred to the role that leadership held in regards to holding the commitment to the mission of the school. In School A, Mark used the analogy of a flock of geese when describing this concept. Amidst the day-to-day struggles of running the school and complying with all of the logistical requirements of federal and state regulations, the role of the leadership team was to continually provide focus to the mission. Just as with a flock of geese flying, there was always one positioned in the front, keeping the route steady; then, when the lead goose became tired, another took their place, but always kept the group on track. Mark described the application of the analogy. “That's always been the case here is that someone's always watched out for that piece or sensed when something might be slipping.” This analogy described the role of the leadership team at School A in regards to the focus of the mission.

In the beginning, School A struggled with finding its way through the myriad of challenges associated with launching a charter school, including securing funding and establishing a permanent site for the school. Linda described the commitment of the founders to the mission of the school even during the most difficult of times. A majority of the original founders had children enrolled in the school during those turbulent initial years, and although some did leave, the majority stuck to the principles they were trying to establish; with the thought being “The mission is so important that ... my children will be okay. It's not ideal, but they'll be okay.” That commitment carried with them in their approach to the continued business of running the school. Mark described the role of the

leadership team in this process as keeping the staff “feeling comfortable and productive and not letting [the minutia of the business of the school] encroach too much ... so that the work of the school keeps happening regardless of what gets rocky around us.” This ability by leaders to bear the brunt of the stress during difficult times supported the concept of committed leadership to the mission.

This commitment was not always easy and took a tremendous amount of work from each member of the leadership team to keep the doors of the school open. Nick discussed the reality that part of what they were responsible for was marketing the school and its mission to ensure that the seats were filled to keep them financially afloat.

I'm also on the finance committee and that's where the wheels meet the road. Our staff would like to make more money. We'd like to pay them more. To do that, we've got to fill in the seats. If we fill in the seats, we've got to do a good job every day with what we're doing. We've got to stick to the mission and we have to communicate that clearly and trying to get that message to the people who are going to respond to it.... It takes a lot of work. Sometimes it's a challenge.

To this end, it was not unusual early on for the leadership team to meet long into the early hours of the morning when required to reach consensus on important decisions, a tenet of the school's mission. This was never in question by the leadership team and was another example of their commitment to the mission of the school.

This commitment by the leadership team was recognized and acknowledged by the teachers in School A. Bryan described the whole community of the school as “holding the mission strong” and admitted that it would be very easy to slowly move away from the mission over time. He felt the leadership team held the mission strong as “a checkpoint” for

the staff, which in turn, then held it for the students. In this regard, the leadership was responsible for holding the mission sacred to the entire organization. One challenge in particular that was referenced by both leadership and teachers were families who enrolled children into the school who were not necessarily committed to the mission or philosophy. The teachers felt it was the leadership that provided the structure and the support to ensure that the mission continued even with those families who might have pushed back or been less than supportive of mission-based activities. Stanley built upon this concept when he described the importance of having people in charge that can take care of “all the obstacles ... so that the real focus can go on working with the kids.”

This commitment of leadership to hold the mission strong was not referenced specifically by the student focus group, but was implicitly reflected through their experiences with living the mission. The teachers referenced that they were able to focus on the shared foundational principles of the school because of the leadership team’s support and commitment and therefore it was evident to the researcher that the students were the ultimate beneficiaries of these acts, even if they were not overtly aware of it in discussion.

School B had a more traditional leadership structure than School A, however, the commitment of the administration to mission principles was equally as evident. The leadership team was defined as the head of school, business manager (who was also director of operations), dean of students, and guidance counselor. Aaron did speak to the role of principal that had existed in prior years but was cut due to budget concerns, and the impact that it had on the shift in responsibilities to other leadership team members. Organizationally speaking, he expressed the desire to ultimately make changes in the team to move the instructional leaders into director positions as a means to be more fiscally responsible and

streamline the team. The two instructional leaders worked in classrooms to help support teachers in developing EL curriculum units and other core pedagogical skills. This was designed to ensure leadership kept the focus of the school clearly on the mission and the foundational principles associated with EL.

Aaron also referenced the role of the EL school designer, who was part of the contract with the organization. The school designer had been with School B for six years, and was onsite as a coach to assist with curriculum development using the EL framework a set number of times per year, including on the day the researcher visited the school. Aaron described her role as follows.

As an EL school designer, she can connect us with other schools who are doing the same work so that we can sort of co-plan. She can reach out to her network of schools and talk about texts and resources that might be available or best fit for what we're working on. She works with teachers as well in coaching and instruction. She helps deliver professional development here, so we can learn EL protocols for instruction.

The presence of the school designer was an example of the commitment by leadership to ensure the mission of the school was continuously focused.

It is important to note that School B had just undergone a change in leadership a few months prior to the researcher's site visit. Aaron had replaced the founding school leader and someone described by staff members as "outstanding." As Vic explained, she was a "charismatic" leader who had a history of starting charter schools across the country. She would "get them up, get them running, and then she would move on." He felt she left the school in good standing, but as all changes go, Aaron was coming with a new perspective

and was making some changes to the school that the staff was adjusting to. Some staff felt the EL mission was solidly in place at the school, but that the theme might be moving from an environmental focus to one of social justice under Aaron's direction. They spoke of the need for flexibility in working through changes like this as leaders set the direction and tone of the mission. Aaron, as school leader, was not changing the central focus of the mission, but instead altering elements of the supporting theme through which it was lived. This was also an example of the impact that a committed leader had on the school's mission.

As with School A, the interviews with the student group did not produce direct evidence of the impact that school leadership had on the mission, however their comments on the culture of the school made it very clear to the researcher that it was embedded in all aspects of their day-to-day activities. Although unaware of how the leadership team worked to make this happen, the students described a school culture that was clearly living the mission.

Administrators and teaching staff in both School A and School B continuously referred to the role that school leadership held in regards to holding the commitment to the mission of the school. As the "flock of geese" analogy demonstrated, operating a charter school built upon a strong foundational mission required constant attention to maintain the focus on its underlying principles. Having committed leadership helped the staff and students focus on the pathway to teaching and learning knowing that the mission would be held steadfast even during the midst of challenges. Without this constant vigilance, the day-to-day tests and minutia of operating a school could potentially allow the mission to be subsumed. This study highlighted commitment of school leadership as an integral part of

maintaining the mission, and therefore the essence of the identities, of both school A and School B.

Collaboration as an expectation. The code, collaboration as an expectation, supported the theme of mission in this study. Collaboration referred to the expectation and value placed on leader/leader, teacher/teacher, and leader/teacher collaboration within the school curriculum and operations. Not only were collaborative practices perceived as positive and a best practice, but the organizational structure of the schools embedded time and accountability for its use.

The founding members of School A incorporated collaboration into the essence of their organizational structure and utilized a shared leadership model as evidence of its importance that they termed circle governance. In this model, all decisions made from the highest levels down to the classroom were made with collaboration in mind. Any member was able to bring a topic to the group for discussion, and all voices were heard in the discussion before a decision would be made. The leadership team spoke to how this model developed and stressed that it took time for people to learn to work within it. Todd described ongoing seminars that staff members participated in that helped them to develop the skills necessary to effectively operate with this collaborative model, but admitted that it was a process to learn. Melissa concurred, and stated, “There is a certain letting go as part of this process. There is no ego. You can't have an ego because you're not the one making the decision. You can have an opinion and feel strongly about it, but your opinion is one of many others to make the decision.” Mark agreed, and described how when this type of collaboration and decision-making is first brought into an organization, there can be resistance.

It's really uncomfortable for people. Just to have a bunch of people be able to sit and look at each other, that's uncomfortable for some people to be able to actually know that everyone here can look at me at the same time. It's a little frightening for some people, but it's interesting.

He described the school leadership at School A of having a “depth of emotional relationship” that was deeper than most, which made this level of collaboration more natural. Wendy described the “high level of participation [circle] expects, as well as a high level of personal responsibility.” Members were invested in the process and the outcome, making use of circle one example of how collaboration was an expectation for members and supported the mission.

Linda spoke to the expectation around teacher/teacher and teacher/leader collaboration with curriculum in School A. The school did not use textbooks for instruction, so the teaching staff spent a great deal of time writing materials to support the curriculum. The organizational structure of the school contained four teams of teachers, each focused on a specific developmental age group; Kindergarten and grade one, grades two and three, grades four and five, and grades six through eight. Each team had three to five teachers who purposefully and fluidly worked with all the students on the team. Weekly collaboration time was built into the schedule to allow these teachers to plan units of instruction and assessment together, including a 45-minute lunch session and an early release day each week. It was expected that teachers actively participate in these sessions and not passively sit back.

The organizational structure of School A also included the use of circle governance for decision-making, not just at the leadership level. Teachers were involved at a very high degree and the expectation of participation in these sessions was understood clearly. Wendy

described the importance of this collaboration in that it made staff feel a part of the process, and less that things were imposed upon them. This process was used for all aspects of curriculum building and school decision-making. During all-school meetings, anyone could bring any topic to the table for discussion, which Wendy felt developed creativity and flexibility among the staff. “What we want is to have freedom within form. We want to have a structure that keeps the school and the integrity of the mission, but we also want people to come and be as creative as possible.” The expectation of active participation of all members of staff in decision-making was an example of how collaboration as an expectation supported the mission of the school.

One aspect of the curriculum at School A that exemplified collaboration was the use of Key Learning Experiences (KLEs) that all teachers and students participated in throughout the school year. The KLEs were collaborative experiences designed by the leadership and teachers together around four topic areas described in Table 8. Each of these themes was revisited through the curriculum at each team level and provided consistency for students as they moved through the grade levels. Linda stressed that the depth of experiences required a great deal of collaboration among the teachers to work out the logistics of how these KLEs were accomplished. “It's this very three-dimensional way of thinking and not everybody has a way of initially coming to that and getting it, so we need a lot of collaboration time just to discuss what are we doing, who is doing it, and how.”

Table 8

Key Learning Experience Themes

Theme	Definition
Nourishing, Sustenance, and fulfillment	Centered around agriculture, cooking, and food preservation; nourishing the body as well as the earth
Practice	All members of the school were contributing members of the community and had a voice
Designing	Looked at the beauty and function of the natural world and how humans could learn from it
Exploring	Participation in expeditions, primarily outdoors

The design of the KLEs, as well as the team structure of School A, made it very clear that collaboration was an expectation for all staff members, from leadership team to instructional support, and was a reflection of the mission of the school.

The organizational structure of School B stressed the expectation of collaboration among the staff. Aaron described how each teacher was expected to remain after school for one hour each day after students left. Mondays were set aside for faculty and crew meetings. Wednesdays were early dismissal days for students to allow structured collaboration and professional development. The other days were free to be used for teachers to meet to work on interdisciplinary projects or with students as needed. Aaron did remark that on Fridays the school looked like a “ghost town” and that teachers were rarely on site for the fully mandated time that day. At the time of the visit, he was not pressing the issue as he justified that “I do know that they're working really hard.” It is important to mention that being the new leader of the school, Aaron was working through issues that put his leadership style somewhat at odds with the existing workings of the school, something that both he and staff

members reflected would take time to resolve. He was working on the schedule and addressing the best way to counter what he termed the “cultural conflict” of teachers who felt they were being asked to work longer hours, collaborate on a much higher level, and plan expeditions, all while being paid a “typical salary.” This was a common concern with charter schools as he explained, but his personal belief that the existing schedule provided too much teacher time at the expense of face-to-face teaching time with students was something that he anticipated would be an issue to be resolved in future years. This did not change his feeling that collaboration was an expectation that supported the mission of the school, but that conflict was one that he needed to address.

School B utilized collaboration as the basis of its expeditions, a cornerstone of its mission. As Aaron explained, these expeditions were interdisciplinary in nature and required teachers to plan both aspects of curriculum and logistics. Research was a central element of these expeditions, which “takes the weight off the English teacher” as the work is now completed across disciplines. For example, students preparing a presentation on a waste summit would need to spend time on researching the problem and any recommended solution as part of the process in their science classes, while students designing a war memorial to be proposed to the town council would do the same in social studies. As Aaron explained, the use of expeditions allowed students to participate in meaningful, authentic, interdisciplinary research projects across all four years of high school, but planning these projects required a commitment to staff collaboration to manage. Patricia described how the teaching staff often divided up the logistical tasks involved with expeditions. She, for example, took responsibility for planning the fieldwork component of the project recently completed on the history of whaling, “a senior expedition [that was a] sort of launch pad into sustainable

studies.” One piece of the expedition had students travel to a local town with a history in the whaling industry while they read the novel *Moby Dick*. Patricia wrote the fieldwork guide that accompanied them, which included writing experiences that connected them back to the text. This was one way she saw experiential learning come alive in the English curriculum.

In this study, collaboration referred to the expectation and value placed on leader/leader, teacher/teacher, and leader/teacher collaboration within the school curriculum and operations to support its foundational mission. Not only were collaborative practices perceived as positive and a best practice, but the organizational structure of the schools embedded time and accountability for its use.

Theme One Conclusion

The theme of mission in this study emerged through the three codes beliefs about learning, committed leadership, and collaboration as an expectation. Both School A and School B were founded on a specific set of philosophical principles, referred to collectively by the researcher as the school “mission.” This mission was referred to continuously throughout not only the interviews, but through signage and marketing materials produced and displayed by the schools. This continual reiteration of the mission through visible and concrete ways related to Research Question Three regarding organizational structures that support the school model. This code indicates that schools with a strong mission focus should take overt steps to visualize the tenets of these foundational principles as a reminder to school students, staff, and visitors regarding their purpose.

The theme of mission in this study showed both schools held strong beliefs about learning that were exemplified through the curriculum and organizational structures present in each school, including grading practices and rituals. Content knowledge was considered

important in both schools, but emphasis was placed on character and the ability to be self-directed and reflective learners capable of seeing the interconnectedness of the world. These beliefs were essential elements of the mission of the schools. The code *beliefs about learning* related to Research Question One and the best practices utilized in a school with experiential learning through these findings. The use of interdisciplinary units that employ specific strategies of self-directed learning were described as a best practice at the participant schools, which reflects Dewey and Kolb's model of experiential learning. The use of grading practices such as rubrics and character traits relate to Research Question Two and how the schools defined student success. Elements of assessment were identified that are more holistic in nature and less focused on singular numeric or alphanumeric representations of student achievement, such as standardized test scores. The use of these grading practices as described also relate to Research Question Three and organizational structures that support the school model. Grading principles are a reflection of the organization, and having a school wide approach to looking at student success through a holistic approach is something that requires structures in place at the school level. Teacher professional development also falls under this topic in that teachers in these schools required training to provide learning opportunities and assessments that support these foundational beliefs about learning.

Operating a charter school built upon these strong foundational principals required constant attention to maintain the focus on its underlying principles. Having committed school leadership helped the staff and students focus on the pathway to teaching and learning knowing that the mission would be held steadfast even during the midst of challenges. Having a committed leader related to Research Question One in that a best practice for curricular success is to ensure the school leader has a strong understanding of the pedagogy

that underlies it and can offer support to teachers in its delivery. This also related to research Question Three by reflecting the importance the leader of the school has on staffing and professional development. Without this committed leader at the helm, schools risk losing their purpose as the minutia of the day-to-day encroaches.

Lastly, collaboration was found to be an essential element of the missions of both School A and School B. This included leader/leader, teacher/teacher, and leader/teacher collaboration within the school curriculum and operations. Although the leadership structure of the two schools differed, the value they placed on working together to develop authentic learning opportunities were clear, and the organizational structures of the schools allowed for its focus, therefore showing collaboration as a process was a commitment to support the school mission. This reflected Research Question Three in that each of the schools had specific organizational structures in place to facilitate and encourage collaboration, not just among the staff, but also between staff and leadership. This included professional development days before and after the school year, faculty meetings, and shared collaboration weekly among teachers for curriculum building. Research Question One was addressed through collaboration as a best practice when designing and implementing interdisciplinary units of instruction. In these ways, mission as a theme reflected the questions addressed in this research study.

Theme Two: Flexibility

The theme of flexibility refers to the ability of teachers to be flexible in their organization of time, methods of instruction, and assessment. Leadership interviews of both School A and School B related an element of trust in allowing teachers to make professional day-to-day decisions about the best methods for implementing instruction, while providing

overarching high-level learning goals for all. Responses gathered from teacher interviews indicated that leadership allowed for a level of freedom for teachers to design and adjust curricular programs based on the needs of individual students, leading to more personalized outcomes. Student focus groups spoke to opportunities each individual had to explore topics in depth that interested them. The theme of flexibility emerged from the three codes of time, curriculum, and individualized learning.

Time. The code, time, supported the theme of flexibility in this study. In many public schools, teachers follow a prescriptive curriculum map, which indicates specific topics to cover in the curriculum and the timeline associated with each. Coupled with organizational structures such as a time-bound school schedule, teachers rarely have the freedom to spend extra time on topics or pursue areas of interest to them or their students. School A and School B approach time from a different perspective and teachers expressed more flexibility in how they covered material, even though both utilize the Common Core State Standards as the basis of their instruction.

School A had as one of its organizational principles a very open schedule. Other than one period during the day in which the entire school studied mathematics, the teaching staff designated the remainder of the day's activities. Linda described the constraints on the schedule only in that certain shared resources, such as special education pullout instruction or shared teaching staff, may dictate what time certain teams need to have certain classes, but that beyond that, the team has the flexibility of time in how they structure their schedule. This gives teachers the ability to slow down and allow students time to observe, or spend extra time outside for a lesson, without feeling the pressure to move to the next class. Linda

described that even those classes that do have the constraints of pullout instruction for students do not feel limited in the remainder of the day.

It puts a little more of a structure on it. But, doesn't mean they can go outside for language arts or do something else. They have math and language arts, and that only leaves the rest of their day as key learning experiences. They can divide that up as a team, any way they want. Different teams do different things.

Linda referred to these as “block constraints” meaning that the scheduling of shared support staff was done within a block of time during the day, but that within that block teams still had flexibility. As she described it, one team had made the decision not to include any pullout instruction, and instead had a special education teacher in the room at all times to allow for support within the classroom setting. For that reason, that particular team had no constraints to their daily schedule.

The leadership at School A encouraged this freedom and flexibility among the teaching staff to use a schedule that works best for them and the students in their charge. The school used standards as the basis for curriculum, but the leadership team acknowledged the inability for anyone to cover the full breadth of the standards with success. As Wendy explained, “Somebody did a study one time saying if you spend five minutes on every standard K-12, you would be teaching people until they were 25. It's not possible. What really is essentially most important? For us, our mission is primary.” By keeping the focus of the school on the mission and developing interdisciplinary units of instruction that incorporate standards, the leaders trusted the teaching staff to use their creativity and good judgment to fill in the day-to-day instruction. “We trust that teachers are professionals who can take general concepts for a grade level and do amazing things with it.”

School B utilized a block schedule for instruction, typical of that seen in many high schools in America, but the teaching staff understood the need for flexibility to accommodate fieldwork for expeditions and special activities such as intensives. During intensives, which happened for one week in the winter and one in the spring, all classroom instruction ceases and the teachers who run the intensives have complete freedom for how those projects are structured during the day. Jack, a student at School B, described intensives as special immersive projects where “all week long, all day, you focus on one thing that you sign up for ... from hiking the Appalachian trail, which I did last year, to winning the green ribbon award.” Vic described teacher attitudes when students were asked to miss a class to support another class’s project by saying, “Most people don't push back too hard. I don't think that would work in a traditional school.” The culture is one of flexibility and accommodation to support the overall mission of the school.

Aaron stated that the ability to be creative in the scheduling design was one of the benefits of being a charter school. This was partially due to the waiver on having teacher unions, which in many schools limits the flexibility of a schedule, and also because a charter school is created with a particular mission and design to which teachers apply to join. It was to be expected then that teachers would not apply to work in a school if they were not supportive of the flexibility of time. Being a high school, however, certain state requirements for seat time were still considered a constraint, but overall the flexibility and freedom afforded to time was notable in School B. Aaron described the schedule as a “modified block” but that teachers had a great deal of flexibility in how that block time was utilized. “They could come together and they could pair the two periods together, and they

could be delivering part of their expedition in full humanities.” This ability for fluidity of time within the structure of the block allowed for flexibility of time for teachers.

Both School A and School B incorporated some aspect of organizationally structuring their schedules to allow teachers the freedom to be fluid with their instructional time. Teachers in both schools found this flexibility allowed them the ability to adjust the time spent on specific lessons to more accurately address the needs of the students. This could mean slowing down and allowing time for observation, as with Linda’s Kindergarten students, or adjusting time for fieldwork as with Vic’s science classes. In both schools, time was considered fluid and something that could be accommodated for deeper learning.

Curriculum. The code, curriculum, supported the theme of flexibility in this study. Both School A and School B were clearly utilizing the Common Core State Standards within the framework of their curriculum, but both schools acknowledged the need for teachers to create experiential units of instruction that met the needs of the students in front of them. Their focus on interdisciplinary teaching also allowed and encouraged the input of teachers and their individual strengths to help guide the lessons.

The teachers in School A continuously referred to having autonomy in developing the lessons and projects that students completed while in their classrooms. Generally this happened through team, interdisciplinary planning, and was supported by Wendy, who was responsible for curriculum and teacher professional development. Linda described her perspective on flexibility with curriculum.

I get a great deal of autonomy, so [leadership will] say, "What are your learning targets?" And if they agree with the learning targets, than I get to move forward. The learning targets are pretty wide open. We do align them with the Common Core, so

they have to be aligned to something ... And we try to do a scope and sequence over four years, so that we're not doing the same things over and over again.

She also referred to the fact that leadership trusted her to enact the plan she created, providing her with the autonomy to put it into action. Wendy reinforced this statement by saying, “We trust that teachers are professionals who can take general concepts for a grade level and do amazing things with it.”

Wendy expressed the sentiment that at School A, the shared commitment to beliefs about learning and keeping the mission central to all decision making, allowed the leadership team to trust in the creativity of their teaching staff. She added that there is always the need to ensure teachers have appropriate support to assist them in the process as needed, but that allowing them to have autonomy produced better teaching and learning. When she worked with teachers to develop curriculum, she asked them to think about themselves and what they could personally bring to the project. “I ask people to think of the mission in the lens and the key learning experiences and their own passions first. Design something for that and it's easy to attach standards.”

Teachers in School B spoke of the flexibility afforded to them while developing curricular units and the ability to explore projects of personal interest. Patricia described an interdisciplinary project that her colleague developed around using GIS mapping. This particular teacher had a strong interest in social justice, therefore to meet the standards for data collection and analysis, he developed a project where students collected and analyzed data regarding where people of color were pulled over in the state. Students used geo-spatial mapping to represent the information and to look for patterns. “The ultimate step is to display it in the community, so it has some sort of a purpose.” Another project around the

theme of War and Identity had students design a model for a war memorial for the local veterans cemetery. This interdisciplinary project was completely designed by the teaching staff around standards, such as symbolism, and was noted to be of high interest to the students.

Aaron spoke to the intensives as an example of how teachers can express individuality and creativity within the curriculum at School B. Twice a year teachers submit a proposal for a one-week in-depth study of any topic that they were passionate about. This was considered an enrichment program and completely teacher driven. Examples of topics he spoke to including portrait photography, the history of rock-and-roll, trail system building, and winter biodiversity. Students received academic credit for completion of these intensives, and as long as they were proficient in their other coursework, they were able to choose which they would participate in.

Individualized learning. The code, individualized learning, supported the theme of flexibility in this study. School leaders, teachers and students in both schools spoke to elements embedded in the school that supported the ability to meet all students as individual learners exactly where they needed to be. This could be accomplished, for example, through choice in individual learning activities or through selection of specific enrichment programs.

School A personnel emphasized the importance of seeing students as individuals within the learning program with the overarching goal of developing skills in self-direction that would encourage learning for life, as opposed to simply learning the current content. Wendy spoke to the founding members of the school and their belief that this was a critical component of any educational design the school would create. “That idea of self directed learning and just lifelong learning, being really able to continually be inspired and

continually learn absolutely is foundational to my belief about what type of educational experience we as a school would offer to the children here.” Because of this focus on self-direction, the curriculum was flexible enough to allow for individual students to explore in ways that would evoke curiosity about the world around them; something they referred to as “awe and wonder.” Part of the school week was devoted to students working on individually chosen projects as a means of delving deeply into a topic that was of personal interest to them. As part of the belief that students were “capable” and, with the desire to encourage exploration and learning, students were exposed very early on to learning styles and knowing specifically how their brains worked best. The structure of multi-age grouping for instruction also allowed for very individualized instruction as students were permitted to fluidly move between classrooms when they felt they were ready. These overarching organizational structures put in place by the leadership team and teaching staff exemplified the flexibility of curriculum to support individual learning within the school.

Teachers described School A as being focused on individual learners and fostering their connections to the earth through the school mission. Eve described one such activity whose purpose was to awaken individual thoughts while connecting them to the natural world as well as historical figures. “We had an extended day where we stayed after school until 7:00 p.m. on a new moon so it was really dark so that we could look up into the sky and have their imaginations open up just like all the astronomers did back then.” She went on to explain that teaching in this type of environment could be challenging to people she termed “planners” because “I’m not really sure what’s going to happen depending on the kids I have. We’ll get there but it’s probably not going to be how I planned!” The fluid nature of the classroom was purposeful to allow teachers the freedom to explore those areas that interested

the students. Stanley added, “We sometimes have topics that emerge and then we encourage kids to follow those topics and research and bring those topics into what is being presented. It is kind of like a branching off of the subject and they are kind of studying it on their own, and bringing it back. Sometimes those problems are what takes the whole class in a certain direction.” As a teacher with a special education background, Eve did speak to the necessity for some students to have more scaffolds and supports as they developed individual motivation and connection to curriculum, but one strategy she had used was to give a struggling student three choices from which to pick, as opposed to allowing them to completely design their own projects.

At School B, Aaron spoke of the importance of school culture in developing students who could define success for themselves as opposed to having an external definition, “because success is different for every child, or every individual coming from whatever background or experience they've ever had in their lifetime.” He described the culture of School B as seeing standards as the “what” that students will leave the school knowing, but that the school’s purpose was to provide experiences through the curriculum that would allow students to develop authentic learning as individuals, therefore needing flexibility.

At the end of a student's experience [at School B], they would have met all of those standards, we would have assessed all of those standards, but we'd have done it through exploration of the natural world, or expeditionary projects with students presenting these really awesome final products of work to various groups of people. We're engaging industry experts. We're using case studies in addition to the fieldwork that we're doing. Our kids are out in the world of learning. We're not confined to the four walls of a classroom or the four walls of a school building.

The EL principles spoke to the importance of student responsibility in learning, stating, “Learning is both a personal process of discovery and a social activity.”

The opportunity for student self-directed learning was built into key experiences at School B, including the Grade 10 Passage Presentation and the senior project, both of which require students to individualize and defend their educational experience to an outside panel. Students select topics for exploration and design the experience, including the milestones that will demonstrate points in time for assessment. They conduct the research, journal about the process, and reflect on their strengths and areas of growth. These were powerful experiences that were completely self-determined by the students, with the idea that engagement with the topic would encourage a commitment to deep learning.

Both School A and School B designed specific structures within the school curriculum that allowed for individuality of experiences. The use of experiential, project-based learning was one way in which this manifested itself within the curriculum. This belief that learning should be individual and self-directed was evident in both school’s mission and supported their beliefs about learning.

Theme Two Conclusion

The theme of flexibility in this study emerged through the codes of time, curriculum, and individualized learning. Both School A and School B expressed the importance of crafting a school experience that valued the individual and that required investment by the student in their own learning. The missions of both schools were explicit in focusing on the need for students to chart their own path and to develop skills in how to learn, not just in learning content delivered to them. The experiences designed by the teachers in both schools

therefore centered on asking deep questions and letting students explore, allowing them time to delve deep and grapple with tough topics.

Flexibility with time, curriculum, and individualized learning all related to Research Question One and the best practices for incorporating experiential learning. Teachers in this model of learning needed to be able to craft experiences that were personally relevant to the students in front of them, so a standard curriculum map was not conducive to allowing the learning to unfold. The findings reflected the importance of having standards, but allowing the curriculum to be molded by the individual students as a means to gain engagement, something critically important to experiential learning. This would allow students to explore areas of personal interest and to grow as individual learners.

Flexibility with time, curriculum, and individualized learning all related to Research Question Two in regard to the definition of student success in the participant schools. The criteria for student success that emerged from this study were focused on personal growth and attributes such as the ability to be self-directed, to define a learning path and persevere through it, and to form meaning from the outcome. These types of outcomes were possible because teachers were able to take the time to get to know their students and learn what they were passionate about and had the ability to craft learning experiences that reflected those interests.

Flexibility with time, curriculum, and individualized learning all related to Research Question Three in regard to organizational structures. Flexible schedules were one example of how flexibility within the organization helped teachers and students work without time undue restrictions. Teachers were afforded flexible use of professional learning opportunities to assess personal growth needs and mentoring to achieve the goals of the mission.

In these ways, flexibility as a theme reflected the questions addressed in this research study.

Theme Three: Beliefs Toward Success

The theme of beliefs toward success refers to the leadership, teacher, and student views of the definition of student success being multifaceted. A strong message that resonated throughout all of the groups was that any one data point should not measure success, and that standardized assessment was the least effective in determining overall life success. The data showed that determining individual student success encompassed aspects of character development, multiple opportunities for demonstration of knowledge and skills learned, and the ability to self-reflect on strengths, weaknesses, and planning for growth. The theme of beliefs toward success emerged from the three codes of character, multiple measures, and self-reflection.

Character. The code, character, supported the theme of beliefs toward success in this study. School administrators, teachers and students all spoke to the important role that student character played in overall success in life, and how school culture was focused on its continual development.

When asked how success at School A would be defined, Mandy immediately migrated to elements of student character. She described how graduates from the school would be considered a success if they came to know themselves as people with a solid understanding of their strengths, weaknesses, interests, and relationships. Knowing themselves in this manner would allow them to go out into world and find what they needed to be successful in life, speak confidently to adults, and ask for help when needed. She also spoke to other character attributes that defined success, including a strong work ethic, ability

to persevere, and stick to goals even when readjustment needed to be made. Mandy continued, “It's those life long skills of self-care, self-awareness, relationship with other people, being able to be mindful and kind, respectful, have a wide awareness. Those things to me are...the best measures of success in our students.”

The teachers in School A also felt the inner character and soft skills of students were the critical component of success. Stanley spoke to students wanting to be in school, wanting to be involved in projects, and applying what they learned to the outside world. Bryan felt self-motivation and the ability to hold themselves accountable, especially with long-term goals that require time management, were important character traits. Loving learning for learning sake, loving to read, identifying areas for improvement, and working toward them were other character traits Bryan felt were important. Eve referenced confidence and the ability to believe that they can achieve a goal, which she felt were practiced on a daily basis through the assignment of independent projects.

Students in School A also viewed aspects of character as the most important indicator of success. Robert felt he was successful when he could recite things he enjoyed learning about, such as the periodic table. He also felt that when he reached a point when he no longer had questions about a topic he had achieved success. Jeffrey shared that success was an internal measure. “I think that success is based on where you think you should be, compared to where you were.” Nicole spoke to the concept of wonder, and how she knew she was successful when she understood a topic and “wondered” more about it. Matthew did mention feeling successful in regard to tests, but his reflection was not on the grade, but on the process of learning. “I think I don't really feel accomplished about the score or not, usually. I feel more accomplished if I understand the thing correctly.”

School B also placed a strong emphasis on the role of character in student success. In fact, Aaron spoke to the five domains of the EL framework, one of which happened to be character. Success in general was something that he felt should be defined by each individual student, as it was very specific to them, but the development of certain universal skills such as communication, the ability to advocate for themselves, to be creative and to collaborate, all revolved around character.

The students in School B felt strongly about the role of character in their vision of success. Jack spoke to how the teachers provided two grades on assignments; one focused on the achievement of the learning goals, while the other was measure of character, called the Habits of Mind (HOW) grade. He spoke of the experience he had with one of the first teachers he had when he entered the school and how she told him that she cared most about the HOW grade, which measured participation, timeliness, putting himself “out there,” and demonstrating determination. He reflected on her advice that if his academic score was high, but his HOW score low, there was something wrong.

Both School A and School B overtly placed value on the soft skills associated with character as part of their belief about assessment and its ultimate reflection on student success. Leadership, teachers, and students reflected continuously on the personal aspect of success, and how confidence, communication, persistence, and knowing how to learn were ultimately how they would define it.

Multiple measures. The code, multiple measures, supported the theme of beliefs toward success in this study. Leadership, teachers, and students all spoke to the need for defining success using many different data points, including content mastery through a

portfolio of work, which might include some assessment data, but also through independent hands-on projects and achieving self-defined goals.

Mark spoke to the issue in modern society of any attempt to make a single definition of success that applies to all students. The mission of School A focused on everyone finding their place in the universe, and trying to use a single measure to define success in all people would naturally lead to missing areas of failure that are far more important to the individual. “I think just the fact if you can appreciate that someone might have a different definition of success for themselves, I think that's very helpful.” Nick echoed this concern through the fault of defining personal success through the metrics and eyes of another, and that students should instead be internally determining for themselves what success will look like in their lives. Nick added students at School A are encouraged from a very young age to understand that “responsibility not just for the learning is theirs, but the responsibility for that decision [and definition of success] and setting that goal in a very self-conscious way.”

Wendy agreed strongly, but spoke to the conundrum that this brought when the state was looking for something very different as a definition of student success. The school certainly wanted students to be literate and good at math, but standardized assessment was not the most important element. The grading structure of the school exemplified this focus. The school did not use any traditional grades or percentages; but instead offered truly narrative feedback “because the research show that that helps the learner to keep learning as opposed to just work for the grade and then move on.” Rubrics had been redesigned from offering multiple columns with different levels of achievement to only having a single column with the expectation of success to encourage students to move toward mastery. This grading model was considered a best practice for developing students holistically as opposed

to in silos, but was a challenge when trying to fit into the box of state reporting requirements, which tended to look at more standardized assessments as a means to measure school performance.

In addition, charter schools in the state where School A resides had a single performance framework, which measured the success of charter schools directly in relation to their local school districts. Due to its location, School A was compared to a very successful public school district, whereas the majority of other charter schools were located in districts where the public schools were performing at a much lower level. Therefore, due to many factors, this state framework inherently measured School A as less successful than its public and charter school counterparts in the state, which the leadership team found frustrating. Linda added, “One of the most successful schools in the county is the one they compare us to.” The leadership team hoped that in time, the state would begin to expand the definition of success to allow for a more narrative and holistic approach, but at the time of this study that was not the case.

Bryan’s two children attended School A from K through Grade 8 and he reflected on how thankful he was that they had their foundational experiences at the school before attending a more traditional high school. He attributed their questioning of the emphasis on grades in high school as the only measure of success, and felt that they had a healthy way of looking at the world beyond grades. The teaching staff in general felt that the overall narrative approach to providing feedback and assessing students was a far more appropriate means of grading that reflected their mission.

The students in School A responded that multiple measures factored in to how successful they felt they were in school. Robert looked to the value of knowing factual

information and being able to recite it or apply it to a problem. Jeffrey spoke to the ability to problem solve to aim for a specific improvement on a rubric and achieve it. Matthew enjoyed reviewing tests with his teacher or other students, but said that he did not usually feel accomplished about any single grade received, but on his ability to understand specific content and feel confident about applying it or discussing it with others. Jeffrey felt the narrative report cards allowed the teachers to discuss strengths, weaknesses, and areas of growth as opposed to simply providing a single letter or numeric grade. He reflected that this provided him with a deeper understanding of what he needed to do moving forward. It was interesting to note that none of the students in School A referenced the state standardized test scores as a measure of their success as students.

Being that School B was a high school, the concern about grading and its translation to transcripts and college acceptance was something that was a critical component of its operation. The school utilized an assessment system that was a combination of proficiency and standards-based and communicated both academic achievement and habits of mind. Each course used Assessments for Learning (AfLs) for small, formative checks to determine mastery of daily learning targets, while Assessments of Learning (AoLs) were either traditional or project based summative assessments used to demonstrate mastery of a final learning target. Grades were proficiency based and reported on a 1.0 - 4.0 scale. The HOW learning targets were scored on the same proficiency scale but focused on skills related to self-discipline and a culture of achievement. Proficiency scores were converted to letter grades for purposes of GPA and transcripts for college.

Aaron described that students did take the state standardized test for English and Math in grades 9 and 10 as well as a science assessment in grade 11. The school did not

spend time practicing for the exams, but Aaron did communicate to students “it's an opportunity for you to demonstrate your learning. It's an opportunity for you to compare yourselves to students from around the country.” The school did provide exposure to the testing system by having students login and navigate the online program so that the test day was not the first time they saw it, but did not devote time to preparing for the test itself. Aaron reflected on why this was not necessary. “If you're teaching the standards in education and content, and you're doing it in a way that's meaningful to students so that they can retain the knowledge of which they're learning, then you're already preparing them for these assessments, naturally.”

Graduation requirements for School B included a senior project with a presentation at the conclusion of grade 12. Projects connected to the mission of the school included building a greenhouse out of recycled soda bottles, or training a service dog, were examples of these projects. Students completed a research project in their English classes, but the bulk of the project work was completed in their advisory program, referred to as “crew.” Aaron did describe his desire to transition to a senior portfolio instead that would require students to gather representative elements obtained during their four years at School B that demonstrate the state educational standards.

[A]s a school who has so many opportunities for students to demonstrate learning in much more meaningful ways, if we were able to track that and create a visual representation of that learning, and students can report out about how they've grown over four years in a school like this, that would be more meaningful to me, and to all of these community members who come in to hear it.

The entire structure of grading and assessment at School B placed emphasis on the importance of multiple measures when determining student achievement.

Leo spoke to the importance of communication and all of the discrete skills it required to be successful in the 21st Century world. The projects assigned by the teachers at School B were comprised of important informational reading and writing components that stressed high levels of literacy. He felt “those skills, to be able to access information and to think critically about issues, and where they stand on those issues and understand the complexity of both the social and environmental justice issues that we tackle” were critical to success. Students were required to tackle a tough issue and not just write an essay about it, but also plan a lesson on how to teach others through venues like the Waste Solutions Summit. This could include visual representations such as posters, presentations, and lessons for elementary school students. The aspect of teaching others what they learned was a multi-faceted approach to assessing understanding.

Leadership, teachers, and students in both School A and School B described multiple measures as an indication of student success, and referred to the need to finding disparate data points to obtain a clear picture of student learning. It is important to note, that in this particular study, standardized testing was rarely mentioned as a meaningful component of that data set. Rather, the schools both looked at authentic learning, through experiential projects that incorporated multiple, variable, measurable outcomes from which to determine student growth.

Self-reflection. The code, self-reflection, supported the theme of beliefs toward success in this study. School administrators, teachers, and students placed a strong emphasis on the ability of students to become self-directed and reflective learners, who would have the

skills to continue to learn long past their years of formal schooling were completed. This was practiced in both schools through various classroom activities, as well as more formal opportunities such as student led conferences.

School A placed a strong emphasis on the value of student self-reflection as part of continual growth, not only for personal learning, but to be an effective contributor to the greater society. The structure of School A embedded self-reflection into the day-to-day learning environment for all students as a way to promote continual growth, something that was a foundational belief for the school. Mandy stated, “They're really self-reflecting all the time about working towards success because you never are ultimately successful. You're working towards things. It's not some one point.” Nick concurred and stated that one thing he saw in the graduates of School A that had a larger impact was “an understanding and an embracing of the idea that the responsibility for making their own decisions and setting their path is something that they need to do,” but that ultimately, there is “a responsibility to be able to explain and rationalize and justify and verbalize your decision and your goal, not just in terms of your own reward, but the responsibility to the planet.” This statement tied back to the mission of School A in regards to developing future citizens who could care deeply about the larger planet and its inhabitants and make decisions reflecting that value. This was fostered in all aspects of the school culture, including independent projects that allowed students to not only choose the design of their learning, but to justify it.

Self-reflection was built into the academics at School A through activities including journaling or conferencing with teachers about their learning. Eve spoke to the use of journaling as a way to describe her use of self-reflection in the process of learning. Each student maintained a journal related to the key learning experiences and the process they took

in moving through them. “We're keeping notes in the journal and then when we write reflections we'll go back into the journal and look at what they did.” The student life conferences, which are required by all students from the earliest age, exemplify this belief. Mandy described how this concept was embedded in the process.

I think it's interesting with the fundamental assumptions here that express themselves in student life conferences where a parent is not coming in to meet with the teacher about you, while you stay home and they're going to talk about you. Then, your parents are going to come home and go, "Yay," or "Well, I don't know," but rather the student is presenting their work to their family and saying, "This is what I've been working on and this is how I think I'm doing and these are the things I need more support in.

This ability to continually self-reflect was coupled with the ability to listen to others as a means to collect perspectives and make better decisions. Nick spoke to how students at School A learned to value other people’s opinion, not to supplant their own thinking, but as a means to assist in evaluating situations and coming to conclusions. “They actually know how to balance this off with their friends, with the people in their group that they're close with. That's how they shape their opinions or their decisions.” This ability to listen without bias and synthesize multiple perspectives before making critical decisions was practiced in classroom activities and modeled by school personnel in the way they interacted with each other and teachers.

The interviews at School B also found self-reflection to be a highly valued aspect of learning and assessment process. Leadership, teachers, and students all spoke to one particular assessment that took place during the sophomore year, the 10th Grade Passage

Presentation, which incorporated a high level of self-reflection. As students transitioned from under- to upper-classman, they were required to successfully present a portfolio of their journey of learning through the first two years of the school. Students had to articulate their mastery of academic standards by sharing exemplary work from a variety of classes and extra curricular accomplishments. Nancy explained that students spent months preparing for the passage presentation, and that it was delivered to a panel of people that included parents and community members. She reflected on how this process helped her gain confidence in presentation skills that would be needed for her senior project down the road. Jack added, “That's a check in on what you've learned, who you've become and who you want to become.” As seniors, the students will repeat this process of self-reflection through completing a senior project that was connected to the mission and philosophy of the school and would document the process of their learning throughout the year.

Both School A and School B incorporated student self-reflection into the assessment process. Students from the youngest age participated in student led conferences in which they described their learning, including goals for future work. Activities such as journaling were utilized in both schools to help students target and practice continual self-reflection, with larger, more formal opportunities built into the graduation requirements.

Theme Three Conclusion

The theme of beliefs toward success in this study emerged through the codes character, multiple measures, and self-reflection. These findings directly related to Research Question Two and the definition of student success. Both School A and School B expressed the belief that assessment of student success was multifaceted by nature, with standardized assessment being the least effective in determining overall life success. The data showed that

determining individual student success encompassed aspects of character development, multiple opportunities for demonstration of knowledge and skills learned, and the ability to self-reflect on strengths, weaknesses, and planning for growth. These elements taken together also reflect Research Question One in regards to best practices in developing curriculum. For example, encouraging the explicit instruction and practices of self-reflection practices as a component of the learning process. The nature of experiential learning provides ample opportunity for students to observe and reflect upon their learning as a best practice.

Recognizing that external pressures for high stakes testing and grade-centric learning were the norm in public schools, this study suggests that schools who value multiple assessment as measures would have to work as diligently as School A and School B to purposefully design them. In regards to Research Question Three it also implies that schools need to provide organizational structures, such as school-wide grading practices, that incorporate and communicate multiple and varied measures.

In these ways, beliefs toward success as a theme reflected the questions addressed in this research study.

Theme Four: Staffing

The theme of staffing refers to the importance of hiring, inducting, and retaining staff members as a key component of success in this school model. Interviews with school administration and teachers revealed data that indicated the challenges of teaching in this model differ than those of traditional public schools, including higher demands on the time and energy of staff members, and a specialized skill set. Overcoming these challenges required a more thoughtful approach to hiring staff members and in ensuring they had the

appropriate support necessary to be successful, not just at the time of hiring. The theme of staffing emerged from the three codes of recruitment, support, and challenges.

Recruitment. The code, recruitment, supported the theme of staffing in this study. These two charter schools operated in states that allowed them to operate outside of some staffing requirements held by traditional public schools, including the freedom to operate without collective bargaining agreements, or teacher's unions, and the ability to have longer work days and years. Although, in theory, this allowed the schools to operate with more flexibility, the leadership and teacher interviews indicated that this brought its own level of difficulty to the hiring process, but that over time the schools had developed specific ways to mitigate these issues.

School A's leadership team spoke to how the search for candidates had evolved over time. Wendy reflected that the recruitment process had been refined and focused based on the school's experiences.

Over the years our hiring committee has really learned. We've identified fewer and fewer places that really provide us with candidates who have what we're looking for.

Now I think we probably have two or three that are in alignment with our mission and that we actually get candidates from.

She went on to explain that a complication to the process involved the state Department of Education requiring teachers in charter schools to hold a valid state teaching certificate, which limited the potential candidates willing to apply who may have had the appropriate background but resided and/or were licensed in a different state.

The single most important consideration the school had found to be evident in successful recruitment was finding candidates whose personal lives matched the mission of

the school, due to the fact that the mission impacted everything from the curriculum to the extended time individuals were expected to commit to their job responsibilities. Experience had shown that the most successful hires had been individuals whose previous experience included either teaching in an experiential education type environment, or some other alternative educational background that meshed with the mission of the school. Mandy explained this phenomenon when she described candidates they had hired that came from camps or other associated occupations.

The feedback that we get is those people want to be in relationships with children but they want to form a deeper, long term relationship, so they are very excited to have found a "school" that will allow them to go outdoors with children, to go on expeditions, to have these alternative models expressed in the classroom.

The school had found that individuals who were looking for these types of meaningful relationships would stay long term and not leave when the work of the mission became more difficult or demanding, so they focused on looking for those types of candidates. Stanley was an example of this phenomenon when he spoke about his background in agriculture and its subsequent draw to the school.

[I have a] background in growing food. To be able to teach kids how to grow food was part of it. I was already kind of in line with that. Before I got here, I worked at XX where I was an historical interpreter. It just really helped out that I had some of that background knowledge. That kind of connected me to the mission aspects [of the school].

Eve shared that it was her camp background that lent itself to connecting with School A.

I've spent my summers at camp. I've been up in the Catskill Mountains since I was five, and I run the camp. Watching kids be themselves in nature in the woods, learning, like they are themselves. I thought, there's got to be a school out there. This personal connection and background was considered a positive component to candidates hired for School A.

School B had addressed the issue of recruitment in part by joining the formal *Expeditionary Learning* (EL) network, which included a job-posting site for locating teachers already familiar with the teaching model. Aaron found this network crucial to supporting him as he entered his first year of teacher recruitment. He offered that although they would be posting any positions openly, all would include a clear description of what their job expectations would be. For those teachers applying who did not have the EL training in their background, the hiring process would also be lengthier, including a series of interviews with school staff, one with the EL instructional guide, teaching a model lesson, and a culminating interview with Aaron prior to finalizing. Teachers who were hired from an EL school background could fast track portions of this process.

Leo described one of the biggest challenges in recruitment and retention of teachers was the sacrifice they made in their personal lives to make the learning model successful. “So when you get these amazing things happening it's because you kind of pushed it to the max.” He explained that once the expedition or other learning experience was completed and successful, the teachers then had to take the last step to document the logistics and curriculum, which was one of School B’s biggest struggles.

[You complete this fantastic unit] then you are going to stop and take the extra time, the double extra time, and stop and document it effectively. That is one of the

biggest challenges. It just takes so much time to do everything that we are doing as a small staff.

Being capable of devoting the time and energy to building student experiences using the EL model was exhausting, but it also required high skills in collaboration. Leo described this as another challenge School B faced.

To collaborate, you have to have collaborative skills. At the same time, you see teachers, they want to collaborate too much, if there is a lack of efficiency within teaming, within teams of teachers that can be really frustrating. Because you won't get what you need to get done. But you also can't lose the joy of collaborating and finding meaning in the projects, you have to find the joy and the meaning and the passion, but you also have to be efficient.

Part of his role within the school was to coordinate teacher professional development, which required him to model efficiency in the collaboration process. There were times, he reflected, that this caused him stress by having to provide the structures to encourage collaborative thinking, but also continuously refocus when things went astray. "It's not always easy to have conversations... That's why it's important to make sure we have protocols and time limits."

The EL protocols were also a very specific skillset that teachers were required to learn to be successful at School B. Although the effort was made to find teachers already familiar with the EL model, or from some other alternative education setting, it was not always possible. Vic described the challenge for those teachers coming into this teaching model without previous experience and how the time needed to be put in to learn how to teach within it.

All this EL stuff takes time; it took me 2 years. I mean, lucky for me, I came from this alternate setting, and I also came from this SpEd background, so a lot of the stuff seemed familiar to me, but if I didn't come from that, and I was just a first year teacher coming out of college, there would be a whole new set of things to learn, and those EL protocols, there's like 100 of them ... You might learn 2 or 3 of them every year, so your bag of tricks takes a while to grow.

Knowing that this level of professional learning was required, coupled with a significant sacrifice of personal time, impacted recruitment for School B.

Both schools in this study found recruitment of qualified candidates to be an ongoing challenge, but taking the time to find the right candidate was a more positive outcome in the long term.

Support. The code, support, reinforced the theme of staffing in this study.

Leadership team members in both participant schools spoke to the critical importance of formal professional development and teacher support not only in the early stages of their teaching experience in the school, but as an ongoing commitment. The data collected in this study clearly identified the critical importance that ongoing support played in the success of recruiting and retaining staff in these schools, especially when teachers had conditions that could be considered more complex than in traditional public schools.

As Mandy described, in School A, staff began and ended the year with a full week of professional development without students in attendance. Half of each day was spent meeting as a faculty with work focused on the overarching mission of the school, with the second half of the day working with their teams or individually in their classrooms to achieve specific tasks and goals.

“Club” times were built into the school schedule, in which teachers worked with team members once a week for a 45-minute scheduled lunch meeting. Throughout the year, students were dismissed at 1:00 p.m. on Wednesdays to allow for additional, on-going professional support. This was regularly structured, with the first Wednesday of the month being an hour-long faculty meeting, followed by “club” time. The second week was a formal professional development session based on needs determined by Wendy and the staff. The third week was devoted to “club” time, while the last week began with “club” and moved to something termed “open space.” Open space was a time set aside for anyone to bring a topic to the group and the staff would organize themselves into groups to address those topics. This ongoing, formal professional development was seen as a critical best practice to ensure support and retention of the teachers at School A.

In addition to regular professional development, all classroom teachers at School A were assigned mentors, whether in an official capacity as required by the state for certification purposes, or more unofficially through the teams they worked with. Support staff also received unofficial mentoring by virtue of being in multiple classrooms and seeing different skills and strategies in play.

School leadership and teachers in School A indicated that a concerted effort was made to continue the growth of individual teachers, even in the midst of tight budgets. In School A, Lisa shared that beyond the planned professional development for things such as Teacher’s College to support Readers and Writers Workshop, teachers were active in finding opportunities for self-development in areas that were important to them. “I found training for fifty bucks down at [a local organization]. Next Tuesday, two of us are going to this thing

called, 'Stories from the Land,' which is all about writing in the outdoors." School A's leadership was supportive of these efforts and rarely denied supporting their attendance.

I feel like if I find this great training, and I bring it, and it's mission based and I have money in my budget, or they can get me a sub, they will send me. I have never had a problem, I think that most people would agree that if they bring something that is related, they'll make it happen.

The teachers valued this feeling of having school administration support their personal growth.

Teachers at School A reflected that personal growth opportunities were not always directly related to the content, but rather related to them as individuals or in personal interests. Stanley spoke of an opportunity that he had recently requested time to attend that the school administration supported.

That has nothing to do with things that are going on here, but has everything to do with me and all that informs on how I can be a better person and how I have the curriculum unfold, and how I have the lessons unfold, and how I interact with the kids. It's the inner training that I do that informs my work, here. That's the secret.

In addition, Stanley spoke to the value of the community itself in helping to promote teacher growth. Building a staff of committed educators willing to come together to support each other for the purpose of a common mission was identified as a best practice related to staffing. "Your staff is really amazing, and you have really good role models. People that are really smart and want to do cool things. The people that hired them understand that you have to have a really good community of educators."

Aaron echoed the importance of providing ongoing professional development and support for teachers at School B. Teachers who were new hires started the school year a few days before the rest of the staff and attended an “EL 101” that covered what the expectations of basic practices were for all classrooms working within this school model. They joined the entire staff for five days of professional development before students returned, with the primary goal of having them integrate into the culture of the school and feel prepared for its expectations.

In addition to the formal professional development at the start of the year, School B also employed two teacher leaders whose role it was to spend time with teachers in their classrooms as instructional coaches. One focused primarily on curriculum and ensuring alignment with the EL protocols, while the second looked primarily through the lens of classroom management. Aaron indicated that although School B did not assign mentors to new teachers at the time of the visitation because the school was so small, he felt it would be something to consider in the school’s future.

Both schools reflected on the amount of time and energy that was expended supporting each and every member of their staff in this model, and how it now impacted their thoughts regarding the hiring of new members. Linda explained:

Because of all the effort that goes in and what people have to learn and the effort that goes in from the whole staff to mentor a person into that role, we also have decided that we need to be very careful about discerning whether that person is going to have the capacity to [succeed]... because it does take so much energy. You don't want to find out four years later that we really should have hired someone else in between.

Professional development was considered a precious commodity by the schools, and targeting it as an ongoing priority was considered a best practice.

Challenges. The code, challenges, supported the theme of staffing in this study. These challenges could be from outside forces, such as certification requirements from the state Department of Education, or from internal factors related to the requirements of teaching in this model. Leadership teams and teachers in both schools stressed understanding the personnel and addressing them as of critical importance to success within this school model. Linda described how meeting the requirements of her state's teacher certification had been a serious challenge in hiring candidates.

[T]here are so many amazing candidates that come here and either are unable to get the teaching certification or come with parts of it but not other parts. Because we have to say, "You're this great candidate but if you can't provide this teaching certification we can't legally hire you."

Salaries were also a challenge according to Linda. "As a public charter school just trying to scrape by we can't pay our teachers higher than other districts around. In fact we're trying to catch up to the districts around." Certification requirements and salaries factored in as a staffing challenge because finding candidates who had the background that they knew was necessary for teaching in this model often required recruiting outside the immediate area. So relocation across the country or even across the state with a limited salary to offer was a challenge for School A.

Another challenge that was expressed was the need for candidates to have a specific mindset to be successful in this school model. Eve spoke to the mindset charter school teachers in general must have to fit well into the daily mode, which can be exhausting. "I

think you have to want to be in a charter school. I think when I'm here; I'm rethinking education every day. I think if you don't want to do that, at least at this school, this isn't a choice for you.”

Teachers have to be comfortable with working longer hours, and in the case of School A, working outside most of the year. Stanley spoke of the mindset of being a continual learner to be successful in this school model.

You have to want to learn about yourself. You have to want to learn about things in general in the world. You want to have to be a well-rounded person, so that you can continue learning while you are here, and growing.

Finding teachers who have the mindset to teach in these conditions was a challenge for School A.

School B also spoke to the challenges involved with staffing. Teachers in this, as other charter schools, were often asked to work longer days with greater responsibilities for less than equivalent pay. The expectation that teachers would lead expeditions and assist with student-led conferences went above and beyond what most schools required, so Aaron felt addressing the concerns upfront with any potential candidate was important. Victor also discussed how the student makeup of charter schools led to additional challenges for teachers.

[W]e get kids that don't fit in traditional settings, so their parents are looking for something different. We get kids from the inner city that are fleeing poor schools, so there's a challenge with the fact that not everyone's coming in with the uniform skill set, and then on top of that, we probably have far more kids on the spectrum than a normal school would have, so I think that's a challenge.

The added workload and conditions took their toll on teachers at School B, leading to attrition, which is another challenge for existing staff like Victor. “We had bad teacher turnover, so in this particular expedition ... and it's only been 6 years ... there's been 6 different science teachers leading it. So when you have teacher turnover ... every year it's like starting over.”

Participation in expeditions in School B was a large part of the expectation for teachers, and as Patricia explained, the skills required went well beyond teaching content. Although the administrative team assisted in finding the financial support for expeditions, the logistics of coordinating the trip was largely shouldered by the teachers themselves, which required them to act as “mini accountants” and to coordinate things such as buses and paperwork. In general, teaching in School B required the teachers to wear many more hats with less support.

There's way more curriculum preparation, we don't use textbooks, we basically make everything ourselves.... We don't have the reading room. We don't have the resource room. We don't have the reading specialist. We have three special educators for our school of 180 students. There's just more of the other duties that are sort of put on us.

As the head of school, Aaron was acutely aware of the challenges of additional teacher expectations on his staff. Any single additional expectation could be absorbed, but the cumulative effect of student led conferences, expeditions, crew time every day, added duties, all under the structure of longer days simply caused teachers to fatigue. Even though they, in theory, knew what they were getting into, the reality was overwhelming. “That mindset sort of impacts faculty morale at different points of the year.” These were the times that were the most challenging for leadership and teachers alike at School B.

Theme Four Conclusion

The theme of staffing in this study emerged through the codes of recruitment, support, and challenges. Both School A and School B expressed that time spent on recruiting the best fit for candidates, followed by strong, purposeful professional support helped to secure and retain the best possible teaching staff. This finding is related to Research Question Three as organizational structures should be in place to help support new teachers through mentoring and professional development. Both schools in this study held new teacher orientation before school started that not only addressed the basic functions of teaching in the building, but also provided indoctrination to the mission principles. Ongoing and purposeful professional development was built into the school calendar to allow for continued support and culture building. It was acknowledged by the leadership team and teachers in this study that teaching in a charter school that incorporates experiential learning can be stressful and require a great deal of sacrifice of personal time, so setting up organizational structures that support teachers from the start is a best practice in helping to retain them.

The theme of staffing in this study related to Research Question One in that a best practice that emerged was trying to find teachers to hire who had a personal belief in the experiential curriculum model of instruction and who related to the mission of the school. By finding teachers whose personal lives reflected the principles of the school, the likelihood of retaining them when times were difficult were increased.

In these ways, staffing as a theme reflected the questions addressed in this research study.

Theme Five: Student Perception of School Culture

The theme of student perception of school culture refers to specific practices within the school designed to cultivate a sense of community and student ownership of learning. This theme was evident throughout the student focus group responses and was expressed as a major criterion for student success in the school. The theme was also present in both leadership team and teacher interviews across both schools, leading to the conclusion that the practices were purposeful and designed to develop more familial relationships between and among students, staff, and administration. This theme emerged from the four codes of organizational structure supports community, small size, relationships, and valuing individuals. Each of these codes will be discussed in depth in the following sections.

Organizational structure supports community. The code, organizational structure supports community, reinforced the theme of student perception of school culture. The schools in this study developed specific organizational practices that were designed to promote direct student engagement in the school community. One such practice included the use of traditions or rituals within the school day that regularly focused on commitment to community. Three examples of these practices included morning meetings, the use of collaborative group processes, and student led conferences.

At School B, all six students in the focus group spoke to the use of morning meetings as an important tradition that grounded their day. Jack described the routine allowed for a common start to the school day for students who often come from disparate backgrounds.

[Y]ou come into school at 7:45. ... Everybody sits down and they have something planned every day of every week. They've been doing it the whole life of the school.

... Right when you start the day, you're already connected with how the day's going to go.

The tradition of morning meeting was not something newcomers to the school were accustomed to and it could be uncomfortable at first. David indicated that although morning meetings were something that he actively participated in and valued, his initial reaction was deep discomfort. “[I]t’ll always be my first memory of this school ... it’s uncomfortable, especially coming from the city because you don’t really see stuff like that happening.”

Nancy was a member of the student government organization that coordinated the morning meetings on Wednesday and Fridays. She described a favorite attribute of the meetings they referred to as “shout outs,” which was a form of public recognition not only of students but also of staff that facilitated shared community recognition. Jack agreed that the shout outs positively affected student community because “you feel you’ve been recognized and you’re appreciated for your work.”

During the onsite visit to School B, the researcher was able to observe a morning meeting. The entire school community, including students and staff, entered into a large meeting room at the center of the school and spent 10 minutes together to start the day. During this meeting, the student council presented a summary of the current presidential election, including an updated count on the electoral votes each candidate currently held. As results were announced, the crowd was responsive with clapping and shows of support. A teacher then presented information about the upcoming hike-a-thon fundraiser for the school, as well as various other school wide announcements, made by audience members who simply stood to speak to the community. There were a number of students who stood to announce projects and meetings they were working on. The Pledge of Allegiance followed, after which

students quickly dispersed to their first period class. The researcher noted that it was apparent that this was an important attribute of the school and that the community was clearly participative in the process.

School A utilized a collaborative group practice known as The Circle Way to help encourage and promote community within the school and for its overall governance (Circle Way, n.d.). Developed by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea of the group PeerSpirit, the model of circle had very specific protocols to help people talk about things that are important. While onsite, the researcher observed the use of circle in action many times, but in particular with a group of middle school students during what was termed a Gratitude Circle. The school had built a permanent circle location at the center of the complex where the meeting took place. It was a formal location that through design and location emanated its importance to the school culture. After a brief introduction by the circle facilitator, each student shared something that they were grateful for with the group. Students were articulate and readily participated in the process. Responses ranged from thankfulness for: family and friends, food and a home to live in, the earth, good health, the ability to play sports, to more modern and kid centric topics such as Star Trek and Star Wars, LeBron James, and technology. Circle was clearly something the students were very comfortable participating in and it was a very natural part of the communication process.

School A emphasized the use of The Circle Way on their web site as part of their Handbook and provided links to resources for visitors. Circle was referred to by both the leadership team and trustee circle as a practice that was embedded in all aspects of the school, leading to students who were active listeners and able to engage in community decision-making.

Student led conferences were formally used in both schools as a means for students to demonstrate ownership of learning and self-reflection. Aaron described how the process was completed.

At our student led conferences, our parents come in with the crew [advisory] leader, it's not even the content teacher, and the student presents their learning. They talk about their academic successes and challenges, and they also talk about their habits of work, what's working well and what's not working well. They review their own academic standing and they say, "This is why I believe I have a lack of proficiency, mid proficiency, or high level proficiency."

The students indicated they felt the ability to reflect in these types of conferences as an indicator of success. Jack responded:

[Y]ou don't look at that number on your paper and be like, all right cool. You got to process it. Why did you get it? What did you do successfully to get it? If you did not, what can you do next time? Your successes and your failures.

Students at School A were also responsible for leading conferences with their parents, something the leadership team is very proud of. Mandy related that these conferences allowed the students to continually self-reflect on their learning and communicate to others their strength, weakness, and goals for improvement. "It's always about them and being able to debrief the experience and discernment about their work."

Organizational structures that supported a sense of community emerged in both cases as a critical component of the student perception of school culture.

Small size. The code, small size, supported the theme of student perception of school culture. Data collected during the student focus groups referenced the opinion of students

that the small size of the school was a positive attribute. In particular, students spoke to the ability of teachers to understand the needs of students to a greater degree and for students to be more involved in the school community and develop strong personal relationships as a direct result of small size.

Students from both schools continually referenced learning styles in the focus group discussion and expressed that not only had time been spent helping them to identify their own learning style, but to understand how different people learn as a means to develop stronger group interactions. Students felt that because the classes were smaller at their school, the teachers had the ability to develop lessons around the specific learning styles in their class makeup. Alisha spoke to how the small size of School A allowed her teachers to personalize the instruction based on their individual learning styles and contrasts that with her experience in her old school.

We have a lot of different types of learners. Some people are visual learners or they learn from hearing. Since our classes are so small, we have a different variety. Since we're such a small group, the teachers can teach us how we need to be taught to understand what we're doing.... When I was in regular public school, ... we had 40 kids in a class. The teacher had to just teach what the curriculum was. She couldn't really teach us how we needed to be taught. Our personal needs weren't really met.

Students at School B, such as Jack, related a similar perception of the small size of the school being a positive attribute.

You come here and you got 160 kids right now [compared to 1600 at the local high school]. Your classes are much more personalized. Your teacher obviously knows your name but they know much more than just your name. They know your learning

styles. They adapt to your learning styles and they create their lessons based off of every student's individual learning styles and techniques.... That is a very big part of this school.

The researcher was struck by the embedded knowledge that all of the students relayed regarding learning styles and the impact that understanding them played on their day-to-day school experiences. The researcher made a point of going around the table in each focus group and asking each student about their individual learning style and they are were clearly articulate in its understanding. They also unanimously believed that the time teachers spent to understand each of them as learners was possible due to the small size of the school and their classes.

Another positive point stated for small size was the ability for students to become more involved in their school and not be lost in a large school population. Nancy articulated this concept when she discussed her participation in school expeditions.

I came here and it was probably the best thing that could have happened to me. I got to go to Ecuador and the Galapagos on a scholarship from the school, which was definitely amazing and I could only have done that because the size of the school is so small.

Other students built on this concept when describing that the small size of the school allowed students to be exposed to experiences that larger schools could not offer. Breanne described how her experiences thus far had transformed her overall outlook about her future into a far more positive and goal-centric picture. "I've never had as many goals as I've had here.... I want to travel.... I want to be in student government. I'm excited." She summed up her feelings by simply stating, "I don't like big public schools."

The researcher found that the negative perception of larger schools was evident through both focus groups, even though eight of the nine students at School A had never been enrolled in a school other than their own. They had started the school in Kindergarten and had only heard about the experiences of being in a larger school from peers or siblings who went on to a traditional public high school. Alisha was the only student in the group who had experienced a portion of her schooling in a traditional public school and her perception was clearly negative. The students in School B had all spent time in a traditional public middle school prior to attending the school, most of them quite large in size.

Small size emerged in both cases as an important component of the student perception of school culture.

Relationships. The code, relationships, supported the theme of student perception of school culture. Throughout the focus groups in both schools, students referred to the relationships they had with their peers and teachers as being familial in nature. In the administrator and teacher interviews this code emerged as an intentional outcome of structures put in place to develop bonds that go beyond the classroom walls. One of the structures used in both schools were small groups joined from the start of the students' entrance to the school and continued throughout their enrollment period. These groups participated in activities such as expeditionary camping trips to encourage the foundations of relationship building.

The structure of teacher-student relationships in both schools centered around specifically designed close-knit groupings, identified as "teams" in School A and "crew" in School B, that regularly participated in activities designed to encourage group bonding. Crew and team could be compared in some ways to advisory-type programs in traditional

public schools, but extended beyond the typical programs seen commonly. This relationship building was intentional and built into the daily structure of both schools. In School A, grades were grouped together into teams with multiple teachers working across the ages with as many students as possible. At School B, all students were part of a crew, and the relationship with the teacher naturally evolved into a mentorship over time that went beyond simply academics.

The structure of crew in School B was central to the organization, and began with orientation through a wilderness expedition the first week of school. Students came together as freshman and spent a week camping and working together to experience the outdoors. For many of these students, the experience of heading into the woods with peers and adults they did not know was a scary initiation. David described this experience as a transformational one not only in terms of being outdoors, but with the relationships he made with the community.

[W]e came from the city so I had never been out in the woods like that. ... At the time, I didn't know anybody. ... At the end of wilderness, it was a completely different vibe.... We all got into a campfire and even if you don't know anybody, eventually you're bound to talk to somebody because conversations are just going to end up connecting.

All of the students in the focus group spoke of this experience and how, upon returning, there was a natural camaraderie that occurred through the common experience that carried into the school year. After this initial orientation in which students spent time camping, cooking, and growing together as a group, crews then met every day for 45 minutes as part of the school schedule. During milestone events, such as student led conferences, it is the crew leader who

attended with the family, not the content area teachers. It is also during the crew period in which students completed their senior projects, the culminating experience for students in the school. The allotment of that amount of time and emphasis to this component of the school culture was an indication of the importance they placed upon it.

School A structured the grade levels in a way that fostered a similar group connection that they referred to as teams. Wendy explained that these groups were multi-age in nature and had shared teaching staff, which purposefully encouraged guides to connect with multiple students, which allowed for a community feeling that crossed age levels. School A also utilized the idea of wilderness expeditions, or outdoor camping experiences, with their teams to foster group bonding. The experiences began in Kindergarten, when families were invited for sleepovers in tents on the school grounds with their families and teammates. They continued to evolve through the years until as eighth graders they completed a four-day, three-night hiking expedition on the Appalachian Trail. The curriculum in grade eight focused on this culminating experience being student-driven, with students working to map the route the expedition would take, planning the equipment and materials that would be needed, and even planning for the meals by deciding what should be planted in the school gardens in grade seven and harvesting, drying, and storing the food in advance of their trip. The guides helped mentor the teams through these projects, but allowed the students to take the lead and work together to make it their own.

In addition to the deliberate configuration of teams and crew, both School A and School B put a strong focus on relationships as the core of the school design. Students and teacher focus groups both spoke to this element of school culture. In School A, teachers are referred to as “guides” and when asked about the relationship students have them, Emily

discussed the co-learning aspect of the relationship and how guides are models of learning as a lifetime effort.

The guides are mentors for us, because we're all students, actually. Our guides are learning as we're learning. They're learning more about us, and they're learning how we learn best.

Another student, Nicole, went even further and described the relationship between teacher and student as a friendship. “They're really helping us forward, and it feels like that they're really our friends.”

Teachers in School A understood and valued this different type of relationship. Eve contrasted her experience in previous schools with her time at School A and the value placed on cultivating relationships through practices such as careful listening.

In my other school I was always there and ready and dressed up and I just thought that was the way a teacher teaches. I didn't know that opening up or being honest about my experiences or what I've done would actually make a difference or change the way that kids listen. When I listen to them and then they listen to me, the listening part just automatically makes this whole different connection that is a lot different.

School administration in School A was very proactive in placing importance on this relationship building, and it was referred to throughout the focus group. Wendy described the culture as “trying to really embed a lot of intimacy and familial type of atmosphere and relationship with the guides and the students so there's long time relationships that are developed.” She attributed the small size of the school as being a critical element in that

“everybody knows pretty much everyone by name, students and guides” so they were able to get to know each other as people, not just in passing.

In School B, students in the focus group referred to the respect they felt for the dedication of the teachers to helping them be the best they could be, not just as students, but also as people. Breanne spoke about her teachers being available at any time of the day to help her, even on the weekends. This accessibility encouraged a culture of closeness that is atypical at a traditional public school and was referred to by all constituents who participated in the focus groups and interviews as a proactive attribute of their school.

Strong relationships emerged in both cases as a critical component of the student perception of school culture.

Valuing individuals. The code, valuing individuals, supported the theme of student perception of school culture. Students in the focus groups expressed strong positive feelings toward the value the schools placed on the development of each student as an individual, not just in the academic realm. Both schools put a strong emphasis on the cultivation of personal and social growth of their students, including character development. Beyond individual growth, there was a strong emphasis of the role of social responsibility and becoming active citizens in their community. Lastly, the use of proficiency-based grading, including narrative feedback and self-reflection were used to provide students with specific areas of strengths and weakness as opposed to the standard letter or percentage grade typically offered in traditional public schools. These practices placed individual growth as the central component to academic success as opposed to a singular competitive grade scale.

Both schools in the study placed the development of personal character as a critical component of student growth. School A embedded practices such as the gratitude circle as a

means for students to stop and look deeply at their world to see and acknowledge things for which they should be thankful. Students in the gratitude circle that I observed were articulate and open with their peers about the things in their lives that they were grateful for. They exhibited the ability to carefully listen to their peers as they shared.

As part of student character building, there was an intentional focus on slowing down in what the founders considered to be a very fast-paced outside world. The use of circle as an instructional practice was used to model and develop this skill, as explained by leadership team member, Mandy. “It intentionally slows everything down so the decisions can be made more thoughtfully. I think it just takes longer to hear and absorb what you're talking about in circle.”

This thoughtful slowing down was evident as we participated in the student focus group. The participants naturally fell into a pattern of circle in their responses to my questions. Each child participated in turn, and responses were given in the clockwise order circle followed. Each student listened carefully to other responses, and their answers were peppered with phrases, such as “piggybacking on what XX said...” or “I agree with XX...” that indicated active listening. They held eye contact and were comfortable speaking with the researcher, an unfamiliar adult.

The researcher reflected during the student focus group back to what Nick mentioned from the Trustee Circle about how the founders measure success. He identified the role circle played in helping students learn to listen and carefully make decisions based on thoughtful consideration of valued opinions. “I think one of the remarkable things about [our students] is that they value other people's opinion. That's one of the great things about this model and works ...[throughout] their lives.” Linda also shared, “We have students who

have incredible listening skills. I think that they can make eye contact when they're speaking to adults, which it's not absent from other schools and situations, but it's not the norm either and here, I think it's more the norm.” These personal character traits were cultivated and valued by the school culture and considered to be an important measure of student success.

School B emphasized the development of the character of students beyond academics in a formal way through the use of Habits of Work (HOW) assessments. In addition to assessing students on the mastery of academic content, every student was also encouraged to develop life skills related to persistence, time management and participation in their learning. Jack described how teachers at School B emphasized the role of HOW over academic grades.

I remember when I came in Ms. [X] telling us that the most important thing, the thing she cares about the most, is that HOW grade, that character. How you get your work in on time. You participate all the time. You put yourself out there. She still says that if you're looking grade-wise and you have a low HOW grade and a great academic grade, sometimes it's still wrong, your character. She would rather see you try your best and see you push and push and even if you didn't get something, ... that determination was there.

Aaron described how this personal character development culminated with the graduation requirement that all students must receive a college acceptance letter. “It can be CCRI to Brown University, whatever it might be, but you're expected to have this letter because you have the right to make choices that will bring you to wherever you see success, however you define that.” This cultural belief in the power of student self-determination through hard work was evident through student, teacher, and administrator responses and was clearly considered a best practice.

Beyond the individual character development, both schools put high emphasis on the importance of teaching social responsibility, and in the maturity of positive interpersonal relationships. In School A, the majority of students in the focus group had not attended any school other than the current K-8 environment, and had been there for the entirety of their educational experience. They had perceptions of traditional public schools based on the experiences of peers and family members who graduated into a public high school or who transferred out of the charter. The perception of the students was that traditional public schools were singularly focused on academic achievement and that competitive element left some students feeling out of place. One alleged outcome of this culture was the development of social groupings that were perceived as negative. Alisha did have experience in another traditional public school prior to transferring into School A and contrasted its social norms and challenges associated with them.

I went to ... what would be called a regular public school before I came here. It's definitely different. The social interactions are different, because in a regular public school, kids have cliques, which seem really stereotypical, but it's true. They have cliques since Kindergarten and they stay really tight. They sometimes have the tendency to push people away, unlike here with my experience where everybody's very welcoming and wants to be your friend.

The founding members of the school rooted this focus on the value of every individual into the culture and mission of the school, through a continual emphasis on social responsibility. The message of the school was that everyone has value, but also responsibility, and therefore each participant in a community must learn to practice active listening and thoughtful practice before forming opinions and making decisions. Nick, a member of the leadership

team and a parent of three children that attended traditional public schools prior to School A, stated “I think when you come out of here ... there's this other layer of personal and social responsibility that hopefully our children maybe do that much more consciously than others might.” The focus on helping children develop a deep love of learning and their own place in the world was a purposed aspect of the school from its inception and heavily influenced this culture.

Although most students in the focus group were too young to have cognitively participated in the school selection process, they were keenly aware of why their parents had selected to apply for admittance. Robert explained “I think my parents really chose to send me here because ... [t]hey wanted for me to be my own person and not just follow what everybody else is doing. I think the reason I am here is to become who I am.” Alisha echoed this feeling when she stated, “I want to be my own person. I think being here helps you be the person that you're supposed to be.”

Students in School B were older and all had experience in traditional public schools prior to attending this secondary level charter school, either through middle school or transferring from another high school. These students expressed having felt frustration in previous schools for feeling they were being judged for whom they were as people and the difficult social constraints of trying to fit in. This judgment was not just from peers but also from the teaching staff who they perceived as making determinations about them based on stereotypes. Breanne discussed the challenge as being made to feel inadequate.

At my old school, it just felt like I was being set up for failure. I felt like I was being predetermined what I was going to be and where I was going to be when I graduated or if I was going to graduate before I even had the chance to say so. I felt like they

were looking at me, looking at where I lived, looking at what my family was like and they were just putting me where they wanted. Even the teachers, I felt like they were like that.

Breanne described her experience when transferring into School B as transformational, not just academically, where she went from failing English her freshman year to holding a 3.8 (out of a 4 point scale) in English, but in developing herself as an accepted and active participant in the community.

My old school, I was nothing. I didn't do sports. I didn't do anything. We don't have sports here but now I'm in student government. I walked in here and I was like, I can do this. This is an open school where community.... We're all the same. We're all on this alternative spectrum. No one's better.

Her passion when describing this change came through clearly as she discussed the ability to self-determine the person she was going to be, as opposed to the feeling she had that her story was being written by others who judged her based on her outward conditions.

I was a blank page. I got to write my own story and that's why I love this, because everything I believe in, everything I stand for is celebrated here. If you stand for something, no one's going to put you down. They celebrate it.

This positive attitude regarding her current school was in direct opposition to the perception and experience she described from her traditional public school, where she felt she was relegated to the back of the classroom and judged to be a poor student. “That's the case in a lot of public schools. They will pick and choose the kids that they want to pay attention to. I hear it from all the other kids that transfer.”

Other members of the focus group echoed Breanne's passion about the importance of being seen and valued as a person in the school. Jack described how school leaders and teachers in School B look beyond grades to see students and the development of their individual character as a critical measure of success.

I think you have to strive from the teachers and administration to care not so much about your grade and that number that's put on you but who you are as a person, how that connects to one another and how that connects to the school as a community.

Kim added, "I've never felt as included anywhere as I have here." The researcher found this statement interesting as she had not come from a traditional public school but instead had spent her elementary and middle school years at a Waldorf school that she described as "very similar" to School B, with a K-8 school enrollment of approximately 160. Her decision to attend School B was due to a personal connection she found when her favorite middle school teacher's daughter graduated and spoke highly of her experiences while enrolled. Kim wanted a small school environment that placed a heavy emphasis on the whole child and the environment, allowing individuals to grow and evolve beyond simply academics, leading to the accepting nature of the community.

I feel like learning to me has always been more than academic. ... I feel this school understands that ... learning is not only academic.... You need to build your own character, to build who you are, and I think that's what really avoids all the clashing of teenagers... because we're all so focused on building up who we are and supporting each other and we're being taught how to be young citizens.

The interconnectedness of developing strong character with social responsibility was a purposeful component of both schools in the study and seen as a best practice.

Student growth in both schools was measured and reported using a proficiency-based model that utilized narrative feedback with both self-reflection and teacher input through rubrics. Neither school utilized a traditional grading system with singular letter or percentage grades and grade scales to determine success. Jeffery described the positive nature of narrative grading. “I can actually get a deeper understanding of what I need to do instead of just, you got a D on that. Why? I don't know.” Although there were tests and quizzes associated with curriculum such as Connected Math, the majority of assignments in School A utilize a rubric model that encourages students to look at mastery of content and skills, as opposed to simply getting the answer right. At the end of the year, each student received a completely narrative report, which went into depth on what areas the student had shown growth and where he or she might still need to work. Joseph described a positive feeling toward these reports. “I like reading that and seeing what the teacher thought I was particularly good at. That makes me feel successful in the specific area.”

School B used a grading system based on a rubric score of 1-4. Breanne described the system as being beyond base knowledge on a topic.

It grades based on your understanding and how you took that information ...and how you utilized it in what you were doing. It's not based on I got this right. It's I understand this. I know how to use this. I interpreted this. That's what really important about our grading system.

Students in the group also focused on the role of formative versus summative assessments in proficiency grading. Formative assessments, referred to as Assessments For Learning (AFL) were measures of how students understood topics presented and were used by teachers to inform instruction. A more summative measure was the Assessment Of Learning (AOL),

which was the demonstration of proficiency at the conclusion of a unit of study. Both levels of measurement utilized the rubric format with narrative feedback provided to further define strengths and areas for further growth. Students, teachers and administrators all indicated a positive perception of the value of proficiency-based grading and professed it to be a best practice in measuring success.

Valuing the importance and development of individuals emerged in both cases as a critical component of the student perception of school culture.

Theme Five Conclusion

The theme of student perception of school culture in this study emerged through the four codes of organizational structure supports community, small size, relationships, and valuing individuals. Organizational structures that supported a sense of community emerged in both cases as a critical component of the student perception of school culture. This code related to Research Question One in that developing practices to promote community within a school clearly emerged in this study as a best practice, as leaders, teachers and students felt it was a critical component of the school's success. The code also related to Research Question Three in that these practices were built into the organizational structure of the school itself, and not considered an added or enrichment type occurrence. To be effective, these practices needed to be embedded within the day-to-day operation of the school.

Small size emerged in both cases as an important component of the student perception of school culture. This code relates to Research Question One in that maintaining a small size emerged in this study as a best practice for a successful charter school. The code also relates to Research Question Three in that a small school size would require a specific organizational structure within the school. In the absence of the ability to stay small, one

suggestion would be to incorporate practices that the students attribute to small size such as embedding the use of learning styles, active personalization of learning, and participation in activities. These types of proactive intentions by the school could potentially make a larger school “feel” smaller to students.

Strong relationships emerged in both cases as a critical component of the student perception of school culture. This code relates to Research Question One in that developing practices to promote community within a school clearly emerged in this study as a best practice, as leaders, teachers and students felt it was a critical component of the school’s success. The code related to Research Question Two as developing interpersonal relationships was considered a measure of student success by both teachers and school leadership. The mission of the schools included the ability to develop these strong personal ethics and connections to the greater world outside the classroom. The code also related to Research Question Three in that structures to support relationship building were built into the organizational structure of the school itself through the organization of staff and student groupings as well as targeted activities. Leadership and staff believed that to be effective, these practices needed to be embedded within the day-to-day operation of the school and a strong emphasis was placed on making that a reality.

Valuing the importance and development of individuals emerged in both cases as a critical component of the student perception of school culture. This code relates to Research Question One in that developing practices to promote community within a school clearly emerged in this study as a best practice, as leaders, teachers and students felt it was a critical component of the school’s success. This code related to Research Question Two as the development of individuals beyond academics was a clear priority and embedded within the

foundational principles of the schools. This included tools such as character building and habits of works but also being aware of social responsibility and the interconnectedness of community. The use of proficiency-based learning emphasized the personalization of learning in both schools. The code also related to Research Question Three with formal organizational structures such as circle practice and habits of work grades in place to emphasize the development of individual growth, social responsibility and proficiency based grading.

In these ways, student perceptions of school culture as a theme reflected the questions addressed in this research study.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Four included a detailed analysis of findings from this research study, beginning with a detailed description of the participant school sites as a means to provide context to the discussion. Descriptions of the individual participants followed, grouped by type (school leadership, teachers, and students). Finally, a thorough discussion of the themes that emerged from the analysis was discussed, concluding with a reflection of how they related to the research questions. Chapter Five will continue this explanation of the research findings and their implications.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Chapter Five provides a summary of the research conducted and a discussion of the findings related to the study. The chapter has been divided into the following sections: (a) summary of the research, (b) review of the findings related to the research questions, (c) discussion of the literature and research findings, (d) evidence of trustworthiness, and (e) implications of the research.

Summary of the Research

The purpose of this research study was to investigate a segment of the charter school population that has been largely disregarded by the majority of educational study to date. This included charter schools located outside the urban setting that utilize experiential learning as a primary curricular design. This study used a multi-case study design, with analysis completed for each individual site using an inductive process. Participant schools for this research study were determined by matching potential schools that met a specific set of criteria within the states of Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island. The requirements for schools in the study included (a) they were situated within a non-urban location, (b) the school had been in operation for a minimum of three years to ensure accessible student data, (c) the school included grade levels that fell within the range of 6-12, and (d) the school utilized an educational model that included some aspect of experiential learning.

Utilizing a qualitative research approach, the researcher visited School A and School B for two days each in the spring of 2015. During the visit, the researcher conducted interviews, focus groups, and observations. An initial document review of the school's web site was completed prior to each visit to provide a working knowledge of the school,

including its curricula and organizational structure, as presented to the public. The information obtained in the initial document review helped shape the questions used during the interview and focus group protocols to provide targeted data gathering related to the research questions. The initial document review also provided focus topics for observation.

Using a grounded theory methodology, this research analyzed the data collected in an effort to address the following research questions:

1. What best practices can be identified from non-urban, charter schools that incorporate experiential learning curricula?
2. How do non-urban, charter schools that incorporate experiential learning curricula measure success?
3. What organizational structures (e.g., schedules, teacher professional development, teacher recruitment, length of school year, funding) have non-urban, charter schools that incorporate experiential learning curricula utilized?

Review of Findings Related to the Research Questions

This study was conducted using a multi-case design with two schools located in two different states that met the criteria for inclusion in the study. Through focus groups and interviews, school leadership, teachers, and students shared their perspectives on the experience of teaching and learning within their respective charter schools. During the onsite visits to the two schools, the researcher had the opportunity to observe activities conducted and to explore the physical sites over the course of the two days. Observation and field notes utilizing thick descriptions were maintained throughout the visits to provide additional data for the study. After the process of coding was complete, five themes emerged:

1. Mission

2. Flexibility
3. Beliefs Toward Success
4. Staffing
5. Student Perception of School Culture

A summary of the findings of these five themes will be discussed in the following sections.

Theme One: Mission. The theme of mission refers to the focus on some foundational principle as the central focus of all decision making within the school. Both participant schools in this study were founded on very specific missions that were embedded into all aspects of the school design and organization. What emerged from this study was the importance placed upon these principles by school leaders and teachers alike and the overarching manner in which they bound the school to a common focus. The data in this study showed three areas in which the mission was directly supported. Evidence of explicit shared beliefs regarding teaching and learning were expressed by school leaders and teachers that directly reflected the philosophical principles encountered in each schools' mission. Committed leadership played an integral role in maintaining that focus on the mission amid the daily challenge of school operations. Both participant schools had an overt expectation of collaboration among school leaders and teachers, along with structures in place to support it.

Shared beliefs of what constituted best practices in teaching and learning materialized through the data, including the importance of character development, self-direction and reflection, and interdisciplinary learning. Curriculum and assessment in the participant schools reflected those beliefs, as did the basic organizational structures, including the schedule. The concept of grading in both schools incorporated measures of character

development such as perseverance and timeliness in addition to content standards. Students were encouraged, through choice, to pursue projects that held personal meaning to them, thereby developing skills in self-direction of learning. Journaling and student-led conferences developed the practice of continual self-reflection, including goal setting. Curriculum in both schools leveraged interdisciplinary learning design as a method for nurturing student construction of knowledge across subjects, and used experiential learning, often with a connection to the natural world. These interdisciplinary projects had at their core the concept of teaching students to see the interconnectedness of things. All of these shared beliefs about learning were directly reflective and supportive of the mission upon which the schools were founded.

School leaders in both cases were credited with keeping the mission front and center to the organization, with the *flock of geese* analogy used as a means to visualize their role. Operating a charter school rooted in mission principles required constant vigilance by school leaders amid the day-to-day challenges imposed by outside entities, such as state boards of education, as well as more local influences such as community members and parents. The leadership teams in both schools were credited with ensuring that teachers were protected from that minutia and allowed to focus on the shared beliefs about learning and the work they did directly with students. In the absence of such committed leaders, the data suggested the mission could crumble against the challenges of running a charter school.

Active collaboration emerged as one method utilized in both cases to support the foundational principles of the schools. Collaboration was an expected process and was exemplified through leader/leader, teacher/leader, and teacher/teacher models. Not only were collaborative practices overtly perceived as positive best practice in education, but the

organizational structure of the schools embedded both time and accountability for its use. The curricular model of both schools, which utilized experiential, interdisciplinary methods, required teachers to work together, as well as with leaders, to plan, implement, and assess teaching and learning together. Many of the larger projects described in this study, whether it be the Appalachian Trail hike or the War Memorial project, also involved community collaboration. Professional collaboration went beyond just curriculum development, to include new teacher induction and ongoing study in mission-related topics, as well as the decision-making process for all school topics. Collaboration in this regard was seen as something that required active input from all participants, and structures such as faculty meetings, were designed to encourage it. The belief that collaboration fostered creativity and shared purpose was reflective and supported of the mission of both schools.

In summary, a school with a strong foundational mission emerged as a best practice for non-urban charter schools utilizing experiential learning curricula. Having a mission focus required organizational structures and community beliefs to maintain it. School leaders and teachers who shared a common belief about teaching and learning helped to align the educational practices with the mission principles. Amid the day-to-day challenges of running a charter school, having committed leaders that could hold the mission sacred and as the continual focus of the school helped teachers to stay aimed on the work they conducted with the students. Lastly, this model of experiential learning in a school with a strong mission required active and meaningful collaboration between leadership and teachers to maintain its focus. Founding a school on a strong set of principles, collectively referred to as its mission, was a finding that emerged from the data collected in this study.

Theme Two: Flexibility. The theme of flexibility refers to the ability of teachers to have freedom in their organization of time, curriculum, and individualized learning. The schools in the study both had high learning goals in place for all students, but there was an element of trust among the leadership that once a shared curricular framework was in place, allowing teachers the freedom to operate within that framework fostered creativity and engagement from the staff.

Flexibility occurred in the realm of time by allowing teachers to structure the day-to-day activities within their classrooms and not adhering to a rigid schedule outside of a basic framework. In the larger curricular realm, if teachers felt they needed to spend more or less time on a specific learning target, they were free to do so without fear of retribution by administration. The logistics of operating a school required some level of schedule and curriculum, but in comparison to traditional public schools, both cases allowed for tremendous flexibility for time within the structure.

Both schools in the study followed the Common Core State Standards within the framework of their curriculum; however, teachers utilized these standards creatively to develop experiential units of instruction that met the needs of the students in front of them. Both schools allowed for flexibility in selecting topics and methods of instruction that fostered teacher creativity and connection to the material. Teachers were encouraged to follow their own passions and to develop curriculum around topics they were personally connected to or interested in, as this would model that passion for students. Teachers expressed this as an overall positive aspect of working in this model of charter school, but also cautioned that it required certain personal sacrifices, especially for teachers new to the model, as it could be time consuming to create curriculum in this manner.

Individualized learning was an outcome of flexibility of both teaching and learning in the participant schools in this study. The design of experiential learning within these schools incorporated a great deal of self-directed choice, either in the topic selected for study, the process used, or the form the final demonstration of learning encompassed. In addition, enrichment was embedded into both schools as a means for students to explore content that was personally of interest to them. This took the form of individualized projects or participation in enrichment classes in which students were encouraged to explore new learning with a great deal of flexibility and freedom. These opportunities were designed with the specific purpose of encouraging self-directed learning, goal setting, and reflection coupled with personal engagement with topics of interest as a means to foster lifelong learning skills.

In summary, providing some measure of teacher flexibility emerged as a best practice for non-urban charter schools utilizing experiential learning curricula. This flexibility could be in the form of time, curriculum, or individualized learning. Having a rigid schedule or curriculum map had the perception of stifling both teacher creativity and personal connection to the material in this study. The ability to choose the specific topics and manner in which curricular standards were taught was encouraged and perceived as creating a more rich and diverse learning environment. Teacher flexibility with both time and curriculum directly led to the opportunity for more student-centered, individualized learning to occur, with the hope that higher student engagement would be an outcome. Flexibility of time, curriculum, and individualized learning emerged from the data in this study as a best practice and required attention to organizational structures, such as schedules and curriculum documents, as well as school culture to support.

Theme Three: Beliefs Toward Student Success. The theme of beliefs toward student success refers to leadership, teachers, and students having a shared definition of success as being multifaceted and focused on growth. Although content mastery was certainly something that carried value in defining student success, other aspects of student personal development were considered of more importance. With the overarching mission to foster lifelong learners and problem solvers capable of operating in the real world, there was a strong propensity to put emphasis on character development. Neither school in the study utilized traditional letter or numerical grading, and both incorporated assessment methods that provided encouragement of soft skills such as participation, timeliness, perseverance, and determination. Students reflected that these qualities were often valued more than the actual content knowledge and that teachers often praised positive character traits as what they were most interested in seeing from their students. Students perceived character as being something that would make them better, well-rounded people who were valued members of the larger community.

A common finding from all participants was the need for multiple measures when looking at student success. The data in this study reflected the belief that standardized test data was the least effective in measuring long-term student success. It was one data point that should not be used to measure teacher effectiveness nor rate a school. Multiple measures of assessment were naturally built into experiential learning projects, which often contained varied elements of work and milestones across multiple modalities. A project may include research, writing, data analysis and some method of performance, requiring communication skills. These elements together would provide a much better picture of student understanding of material and transferable skills. This belief did create a conundrum for both schools, as

standardized testing was the method in which their performance was judged at the state level. Accountability required them to spend some aspect of time preparing for, and administering, these exams. That said, the data indicated that the schools did not allow this to alter their mission that learning was multifaceted and not able to be summarized by a single test score.

Self-reflection was a cornerstone measure of student success in both schools. The ability for students to critically examine their performance on a task, make recommendations, and set goals for improvement, then to craft a plan for its execution, were at the heart of the mission of both schools. This was considered the most important skill for lifelong learning and growth. The skill of self-reflection was not assumed to be natural by teachers, but was instead carefully taught and practiced continuously both through small journaling type activities and more formal student-led conferences. Students at a very young age were taught how to critically examine their strengths and areas for improvement, set measurable goals, identify where they might need support, and communicate this to others. This was seen as a means to develop adults who felt a sense of responsibility for analyzing the world around them, reflecting on their role within it, and taking responsibility for any decision not just in terms of themselves, but for the greater good of their community. This tied in closely to the environmental advocacy focus of both schools but could be applied beyond that topic.

In summary, having a common belief about student success emerged as a best practice for non-urban charter schools utilizing experiential learning curricula. Success was envisioned beyond traditional student achievement data, such as grades or assessment scores, to include personal character traits and soft skills. Collecting multiple pieces of evidence to measure student success through portfolios or interdisciplinary projects containing varied tasks, demonstrated growth over time in student learning. This was perceived as a stronger

means for interpreting student academic achievement. The use of self-reflection, coupled with evidence from multiple points of data, emerged as a best practice for developing life-long learners who could direct and take responsibility for their own learning journey.

Theme Four: Staffing. The theme of staffing refers to the importance of hiring, inducting, and retaining staff members as a key component of success in this school model. Data from the interviews with school leaders and teachers indicated that working in a non-urban charter school utilizing an experiential learning curriculum placed higher demands on teaching staff than a traditional public school. Due to the specialized skills necessary to teach in this model and work within the mission, there was an expectation that new teachers would require an investment in induction and training by the school and its existing staff. It was therefore an important task to recruit teacher candidates that were a good match for the school model.

At the time of this study, charter schools had more flexibility in terms of staffing, including the freedom to operate without collective bargaining, or teacher's unions, and to have longer school days and years. The theory was that this would provide charter schools more flexibility, however, data collected indicated that these actually brought a new level of difficulty to the recruitment process. The two participant schools shared that they had developed their own strategies for addressing some these challenges. The recruitment of teachers had become more of a focused process, with specific agencies and web sites being their primary source for potential new hires. Being honest upfront with the job responsibilities and expectations was an important strategy used to weed out teacher candidates who may be unwilling to accept the demands. Ultimately, the single most important consideration the schools had found to be evident in successful recruitment was

finding candidates whose personal lives matched the mission of the school, due to the fact that the mission impacted everything from the curriculum to the extended time individuals were expected to commit to their job responsibilities. History had shown that teachers who lived the mission were much more likely to be comfortable and confident at the schools, and to feel passionate about the cause, which would make the larger demands easier to accept.

Once hired, the data indicated the critical element of support through formal and informal professional development and mentoring was necessary to ensure new hires not only were successful with the professional responsibilities, but also were integrated into the culture and mission of the school. Both participant schools incorporated a formalized schedule of professional development including weekly and monthly time to meet with colleagues on curriculum. Specific, ongoing time was also built into the school year for mission work, focused on the foundational beliefs of the school. These studies kept the work of the mission front and center to the staff and allowed for continued collaboration on meeting its goals. Having time for teachers to work together without students before the start of the school year as well as after its conclusion was also used to kick-start the new school year and wrap up the old. Supporting the personal growth of every teacher was seen as a priority, even with tight funding. Teacher interviews indicated they felt supported by leadership and felt comfortable and encouraged to attend workshops and other experiences that would grow them as individuals. These practices of continued support helped ensure staff were continuously working as a community toward common beliefs and goals, while also inducting and supporting new teachers.

Being honest about the challenges involved with staffing was a finding of the data. These challenges came from both external and internal factors but mitigating them was an

ongoing priority. External pressures from state agencies included rigid certification requirements and salary limitations, which impacted the candidate pool for new hires when trying to recruit. Internal challenges included the expectations and responsibilities involved in teaching in this school model, including higher demands on teacher time for less than equivalent pay. The skills for working in these schools often went beyond teaching content, as they were expected to coordinate logistics and accounting of required field work, something often handled by secretarial staff in traditional public schools. The single most important mitigating strategy that emerged from the data was to recruit teachers whose personal lives indicated a strong commitment to the mission principles of the school to fulfill personal satisfaction toward the job and help alleviate some of the pressures of teaching in the model. Even with the correct mindset, leadership had to be cognizant of the toll teachers paid and provide outlets for pressure when possible to avoid teacher turnover.

In summary, focusing on the issue of staffing emerged as a best practice for non-urban charter schools utilizing experiential learning curricula. The expectations for teachers in terms of time and energy to work in these schools was high in comparison to their traditional public school counterparts and needed to be addressed in the hiring process. Establishing practices for hiring and inducting new teachers emerged as an important matter to be addressed by school leadership. Providing ongoing support through professional and personal development, as well as through mentoring, was perceived as a way to maintain and grow the capacity and resolve of the teaching staff. Lastly, being honest about the challenges a school of this type faced was perceived as an important aspect of managing and organizing a successful operation.

Theme Five: Student Perception of School Culture. The theme of student perception of school culture refers to specific practices within the school designed to cultivate a sense of community and student ownership of learning. Developing community emerged from the data as an integral part of supporting the foundational principles of the schools. Student interviews indicated that this feeling of being part of a greater community purpose, with personal responsibility as a member, was a factor in their personal success. This connection helped students develop skills that they felt ultimately would make them more active citizens in their adult lives.

One element that emerged from the data to support student perception of school culture was the incorporation of specific practices within the organizational structure of the school that were designed to promote direct student engagement in the school community. Students were not permitted to hide, and the use of scheduled activities and traditions were in place to develop community skills. Traditions such as morning meetings, the use of specific collaborative group practices focused on topics such as gratitude, and student led conferences all provided structures through which students developed skills based on active citizenship in the school community. Students began the school with an immersive experience, usually outdoors, that was designed to build a community culture before the school year even began. This set the tone for the students and helped develop bonds with each other and the teachers outside of the normal classroom environment. Part of the community focus in these schools was the understanding of each student's personal responsibility, and the role of individual within the larger group. To accomplish this goal, skills in self-reflection were overtly taught and practiced as a means to identify individual strengths and areas of growth, to set goals and plans to meet them, and to communicate that plan. All of these practices were built into the

structure of the school day and year, thereby making them an integral part of the school experience.

Data collected from this study indicated that there was a direct relationship between small size and student perception of a positive school culture. Students associated small schools with a more personalized education due to the fact that teachers would be capable of getting to know their students better, thereby providing targeted learning opportunities. The ability to focus on things such as learning styles when creating lessons and providing each student with experiences that met them where they most needed it was perceived as a direct result of small size. Students also saw small size as a means for more available opportunities for involvement as there was less competition for seats. Those who had experience in traditional public schools found this to be a complete contrast.

Perhaps partly due to the small size of these schools, another finding from the data in this study was that relationships students developed with teachers and peers were more familial in nature than in traditional public schools. Relationship building was consciously a focus by leadership and teachers, with organizational structures in place to ensure nurturing their developments. The use of long term grouping of small groups of students with faculty members, through advisory style programs, was one means to accomplish this. The role of the advisory teacher through specific practices was elevated to be one of mentor, confidante, and guide as the students worked through both academic and character building aspects of their educational experience. Orientation activities tended to focus on cultivating these familial relationships not just with teachers, but also between students in their groups, developing into a natural camaraderie that would last through their years in the school. Students in these schools reported almost no issues with cliques or bullying, and a high

degree of confidence with presenting and communicating with peers. There was also a feeling that school should reflect life in regards to grouping by age, with grouping being a factor of readiness and mastery, not a numerical age.

Data from this study indicated that the students perceived these school personnel as having an interest in developing every student in the community as an individual. Their success was considered beyond a set of academic standards to include character development, personal and social skills, and a self-defined success. Students felt encouraged to explore the meaning of success to them personally and how it would be reflected in their future adult lives. An intentional focus on slowing down, searching for meaning, and gratitude emerged as overt practices the schools utilized to foster this character development. Students also reflected continuously on strengths and areas of growth as they assessed their own character. Specific actions by school staff to hold high expectations, such as the requirement to have a college acceptance letter, were used to benchmark that all students would achieve these high levels of personal success, regardless of what their ultimate decision might be in terms of long term plans. This focus on the individual helped develop confident citizens who felt they had not only value, but also a responsibility, to the greater school community.

In summary, building a strong community culture emerged as a best practice for non-urban charter schools utilizing experiential learning curricula. Providing organizational structures into the daily operations of the school elevated the importance of school community through practices such as school-wide morning meetings and gratitude circles. Students perceived small size to be an important factor in community building. This led to the conclusion that designing schools to either be small, or to incorporate elements of smallness, helps students to feel more connected to their school community. The researcher

found that fostering strong relationships between teachers and students, and between peers of students, such as through organized groups or immersive experiences, leads to positive perceptions of belongingness and connection by students. Lastly, maintaining the expectation that all students matter and that their individual success matters to the collective community emerged from this study as a best practice that should be thoughtfully embedded into school expectations and communicated clearly and purposefully to students regularly.

Research Question One

Research Question One was used to explore what emerged from the data in relation to best practices that non-urban charter schools utilizing an experiential learning model use. A focused mission, interdisciplinary learning, collaboration, and flexibility emerged from this study as four best practices, discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

The participant schools in this study were founded on a specific set of philosophical principles, referred to collectively by the researcher as the school “mission.” The mission provided a focal point through which all school decisions were based, but it also provided a buoy when seemingly overwhelming challenges faced the school, and a common shared belief for staff to rally around. The curriculum and organizational practices were derived from these beliefs and helped solidify the community culture of the school. Having a strong mission in and of itself was not enough; instead, school leaders needed to be vigilant in ensuring it was also at the forefront of any discussion or decision that was on the table. Providing opportunities to have on-going mission studies allowed staff to continuously revisit and focus on the greater principles and the “why” behind their day-to-day teaching and learning. Founding a school with a clear mission and continuously nurturing its value to the organization emerged as a best practice in the data.

Because the foundation of the schools in this study were built on immersive learning experiences, teaching students how the world and the individuals within it were interconnected was a critical component of the educational program. This was accomplished through an interdisciplinary approach to curriculum that focused on student engagement in real-world, authentic projects. These experiences were designed around the interests of the students, and often incorporated multiple components to address content level skills in many areas, as well as soft skills such as perseverance, communication, and use of technology. Both schools had an environmental theme, and utilized an interdisciplinary curriculum modeled the complexities and interrelationships the students would encounter in the natural world. The use of meaningful, authentic, interdisciplinary curriculum emerged as a best practice for instruction from this study.

Collaboration was seen as an integral component of individual and group growth at the schools in this study. Skills of collaboration were practiced and modeled from everyone within the organization, from the highest leadership down to the youngest of students. The ability to communicate wants and needs while working through a complex project helped hone those skills, and it was never seen as an option for participants to shun getting involved. For the teaching staff, the expectation for collaboration was overt, and time was built into the school schedule for it to be practiced. The interdisciplinary nature of the curriculum required teaching staff to work together to craft meaningful experiences and share in the delivery of associated content. Teachers unable or unwilling to collaborate would not be successful in this school model and would quickly feel the pressure to move on. Student experiences modeled this expectation, with even the students enrolled in the earliest grade levels learning how to work together to more efficiently and effectively solve problems. Collaboration, with

its associated skill set of communication, emerged as a best practice for non-urban charter school utilizing an experiential education model.

Experiential learning requires students to explore, observe, and to make connections. To accommodate that type of meaningful, often individualized, learning requires teachers to have some measure of flexibility. This could mean modifying the specific project parameters, to the grouping of students, or the time that the unit might require. This ability for teachers to design and implement curriculum flexibly emerged as a best practice in this study. Teachers in these schools were given learning targets but were afforded the freedom to design and implement specific lessons and projects as they saw fit, taking into account the specific needs of the children in their classroom. This differed from most traditional public schools that operate with a specific curriculum map that stipulated time, scope and sequence in a very prescriptive manner to ensure all classrooms had the identical experience. The projects completed in these schools were very specific to the students in the class at that moment, and often incorporated elements determined by the students themselves, encouraging student ownership of the learning.

In summary, Research Question One was used to explore findings from the data in relation to best practices that non-urban charter schools utilizing an experiential learning model use. Founding a school with a strong set of principles, or mission, provided a focus and shared beliefs that gave the organization and those within its community purpose and direction. Not only having a mission, but also ensuring that it stayed at the core of operations and decision-making was an essential component of it as a best practice. A curriculum that focused on interdisciplinary learning would make the learning experiences in this model of school authentic and relevant to the long-term success of students. Interdisciplinary learning

was perceived in this study to require students to demonstrate transferrable, life-long skills that would be difficult to mimic in isolation, and encouraged the mindset of seeing the world through a lens of interconnectedness. Collaboration as a best practice emerged as an expectation for all members of the school community, from leaders to the youngest of students. Collaboration encouraged multiple life skills for students in communication, and was necessary between teachers due to the interdisciplinary nature of the curriculum. Lastly, flexibility emerged as a best practice for encouraging creativity in teaching and for meeting the individual needs of students. Flexibility occurred in the use time, curriculum, and the individualization of learning that occurred in these schools.

Research Question Two

Research Question Two was used to explore what emerged from the data in relation to how non-urban charter schools utilizing an experiential learning model measure student success. Using multiple data points together, character development, and self-reflection emerged from this study as three measures of student success, discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

The use of multiple measures when assessing student academic success emerged from the data as a finding. Interviews and focus groups referenced the importance of utilizing multiple, varied, data points over time as a means to collect a wider picture of student growth. Both participant schools used portfolios as a method for organizing and narrating student progress in specific content areas. As the curriculum was primarily interdisciplinary, the evidence collected in the portfolio often demonstrated transferable skill sets over multiple content areas. Standardized test scores could be included as one point of data in the overall student progress report, but the value of such scores was perceived by all respondents to be

very limited. Because they were representative of only a single moment in time, the perception was that they could be used for only limited appreciation of student learning. This created a challenge for the schools as the state departments of education utilized these standardized test scores as the primary data for accountability in judging the schools. The use of multiple measures to demonstrate student academic success was a practice utilized in both schools in this study.

The development of positive personal attributes, referred to collectively by the researcher as *character*, emerged as an important measure of success in this study. The perception that character would play an important role in the adult life of the students led school leaders and teachers to continuously encourage and mold its development in a positive manner. This started with teaching students responsibility and determining their own definition of what personal success would be to them, followed by self-direction in their learning pathway. Students were also reminded about their role in the world and taught from the youngest age how to be good citizens and to think of themselves as part of a larger organism. Projects were designed for students to be active and engaged in the community and natural world and incorporated elements of character building. The ability to persevere, self-motivate, meet deadlines, and work collaboratively with peers were some of the skills that were incorporated into the definition of character. The grading systems in the schools included elements of character in addition to academic content to encourage development and reflection in that area. Students in the focus groups reflected on the importance of character, and many stated their character grades were of more value to them than their content grades.

The ability to self-reflect on the learning process emerged as a measure of student success in this study. From the earliest age, students were taught to examine and reflect on their learning and character to identify specific strengths and areas of improvement. It was perceived that this ability to know oneself led to students who were better equipped decision makers later in life. By understanding themselves as individuals, students would be able to listen carefully to others and synthesize sometimes-contrasting opinions and information to reflect and make sound, well thought-out decisions and not jump blindly to conclusions. This specific skill was seen a strong measure of student success as future adults in the larger community. This would also lead to the ability of students to forge a learning path for themselves that would direct and meet their needs at a very personal level. This process of self-reflection was practiced in the classroom through specific daily activities, but also in a more formalized way through student-led conferences. Documenting their journey of learning and presenting exemplary work was a hallmark of the experience in the participant schools, and was celebrated as a measure of success for the student attendees.

In summary, Research Question Two was used to explore what emerged from the data in relation to how non-urban charter schools utilizing an experiential learning model measure student success. A key finding from the study was the importance of looking at multiple measures as a reflection of student success, and to reject the notion that a single standardized test score would accurately reflect academic achievement, even with state departments of education seeking to do so. Using portfolios or some other collection of exemplary models of student learning as a means to quantify an individual student's growth over time was a best practice. Beyond strictly academic success was the distinctive role that personal character should play in the ultimate measure of success of students. Participants in

this study continuously referred to character as the true measure of success as it related to the long-term ability of a student to be healthy and happy as an adult, participative community member. Life skills such as managing time, communicating, persevering when things were difficult, and collaborating with others were elements of character that were modeled and encouraged through school activities and projects, and was reflected in grading practices. One element of character was an individual's ability to define what success would look like to them, and to craft a learning journey that would help them to achieve that goal. Lastly, the ability to self-reflect emerged as a critical measure of student success in this study. Whether reflecting on their performance on a single assignment, or crafting what would be presented in a student-led end of year conference, the ability to honestly identify strengths, areas of improvement, and communicate a plan to grow was the highest form of student success that emerged from the study. This skillset was perceived to be the final piece of a well-functioning adult member of the community that would seek to continuously learn through their experiences and grow as a person.

Research Question Three

Research Question Three was used to explore what emerged from the data in relation to organizational structures or practices that non-urban charter schools utilizing an experiential learning model use to support their model of instruction. Focusing on recruitment of teachers, support through professional development and mentoring, and cultivating community emerged from this study as three organizational structures or best practices, discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

It was apparent in this study that one of the biggest challenges to schools that utilize this model of teaching and learning was staffing. Finding and retaining candidates with the

background and willingness to work under conditions that were often more demanding of time and energy than a traditional public school, possibly with a lower salary, was an ongoing struggle. Over time, personnel at both schools had discovered that time spent upfront finding the right candidate ultimately paid off in the end with teachers that tended to stay in their positions for a longer period of time. Having a strong recruiting program became an important best practice for success in school hires. Focusing on specific methods of recruiting and ensuring that potential hires were fully aware of the time commitment and expectations for teachers in this model led to teachers who entered the position with their eyes open. One best practice that emerged for recruiting was seeking, when possible, candidates whose personal lives reflected a belief in the mission of the school. With both schools having a strong environmental focus at their core, seeking teachers whose lifestyle involved spending time in the outdoors and a belief in environmental advocacy led to happier, more involved teachers. Teaching in an experiential model required a certain set of skills that were different than that of a traditional classroom teacher as well, so recruiting teachers who were comfortable with this type of educational model was a better practice than trying to retrain a teacher whose foundation was in didactic classroom delivery. Finding appropriate candidates was the first step, but inducting them into the school culture through mentoring and training often took a large time commitment not only from leadership, but also from the existing staff. To avoid having staff spending excess time on a candidate that in the end would not be retained led to the emphasis on recruitment as an important organizational structure for these schools.

Once quality candidates were hired, a second important organizational structure for success that emerged from this study was providing ongoing and purposefully delivered

support for teachers through professional development and mentoring. This involved setting aside time in the schedule for teachers to work and learn together in an ongoing manner. Both participant schools incorporated an early student dismissal day into their schedule to allow for weekly meetings, structured for different purposes at different times, and additional weeks of school both at the start and end of the school year. These meeting times were a combination of structured mission studies, curriculum work, and professional development, as well as time flexibly organized by teachers to pursue personal or team growth needs. Mentoring was used, either formally or informally, to help new hires acclimate to the school culture and address any concerns that emerged during their induction period. Both schools were described as a safe, professionally supportive environment that surrounded new teachers with support from peers and leaders. This helped ensure that individuals new to the school would be indoctrinated to the mission and day-to-day operations of the school. Teacher interviews indicated that the leadership teams in these schools were very supportive of personal growth of staff, with funding and time provided for teachers to attend workshops and trainings that were of value to them individually. The emphasis on a planned and purposeful focus toward professional development and mentoring was one organizational structure that emerged as a best practice for schools in this study.

Cultivating a sense of community was an important principle of the participant schools in this study, and purposeful structures were in place to cultivate a sense of belonging and active participation among students and staff. Morning meetings and collaborative group practices were examples of these embedded structures that brought the students and staff together in community experiences. Student focus groups indicated that this repeated exposure to community experiences led to a closeness in the student body that was in

contrast to traditional public schools. There was virtually no bullying nor cliques identified as the students felt part of one complete school community, rather than smaller, more distinct groups, such as athletes or student council. This closeness was referred to more than once as *familial* in nature. Smaller communities were established through advisory-type programs that mirrored the closeness of the larger school community. Community building was an integral element embedded into the organizational structures of the participant schools and emerged as a best practice in this study.

In Summary, Research Question Three was used to explore what emerged from the data in relation to organizational structures or practices that non-urban charter schools utilizing an experiential learning model use to support their model of instruction. Teaching in this type of school model required a great deal of time and energy, with sometimes less than equivalent pay, to those in traditional public schools. This made staffing a continual challenge to school leadership. Focusing energy on strategic recruitment strategies emerged as an organizational practice that would ultimately lead to healthier and happier faculty. The greatest success in recruitment was finding teacher candidates whose personal lives connected them to the underlying mission of the school. This connection would help them persevere through sometimes challenging periods of long hours and teacher exhaustion because they personally felt passionate about the underlying principles and lead to better overall retention. A second finding was the need for ongoing, purposeful, professional and personal development coupled with a mentoring program. This should include mission study to keep the faculty community focused on the underlying principles of the organization, as well as individual and group learning based on defined needs. In addition, organizational support for teacher *personal* growth was found to elicit a positive perception from the staff.

Lastly, overt cultivation of school community through organizational structures and practices emerged as a best practice in this study. Schedules and student grouping that accommodated advisory type programs, in conjunction with traditions and rituals, such as morning meetings and gratitude circles, led to a student perception of connectedness to the community.

Discussion of the Literature and Research Findings

The literature review conducted in Chapter Two supports the emerging findings from this research study. The chapter examined research currently available regarding: (a) an historical look at relevant charter school research, (b) theoretical foundations of the study, and (c) related research regarding factors that emerged as best practices - organizational culture, interest development, and institutional mission. This section will examine how the findings from this study related to the literature reviewed.

Charter School Research

As charter schools have become more prevalent in the United States and school funding more scarce, there has been a growing body of research examining the effectiveness of the charter school model on student achievement (Betts & Tang, 2011). The emerging themes related to Research Question Two, which explored the way in which the charter schools in this study defined success, highlighted the nebulous nature of the term *achievement*. The majority of the research currently available on charter schools used standardized test scores as the primary measure of student achievement (Denise, 2014). The theme *beliefs about success* emerged from the interviews and focus groups to demonstrate that this was the least desired way to define student success within these schools by all members (school leaders, teachers, and students). They preferred a more holistic approach that looked at multiple data points and qualitative measures, including soft skills collectively

referred to throughout this study as *character*. School leaders expressed frustration that external entities, such as the state boards of education, chose to look at standardized test scores as the only measure of success, even when the schools themselves did not see this as a primary source for accountability. The use of multiple data points to measure student achievement has implications for school leaders and school governance organizations to investigate ways to work together to adequately hold charter schools accountable while working within their belief system. Participants did not indicate that standardized test data needed to be excluded from accountability measures, but simply that other factors should be included to provide a well-rounded view of student success. The overall national review of charter schools available and examined for this study were often focused on schools located in urban environments that often face different organizational challenges than those in non-urban locales (Chudowsky & Ginsberg, 2012). Charter schools located in urban environments are often borne out of a community's dissatisfaction with local public schools and what could be perceived as their inability to meet the needs of students (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2009). Charter schools that develop in non-urban locales are often attempting to draw students who are looking for an alternative style of learning as opposed to those trying to flee a poor performing local school, which brings a different set of challenges in recruitment. This study, with its focus on charter schools in non-urban areas, provided a look at the dynamics they face in the area of recruitment as well as accountability with state systems narrowly focused on standardized test scores. To continue to build the body of research in this area, more studies on schools of this type are needed.

The vast majority of the schools in the national level studies available to review also involved charter schools that utilize the *No Excuses* instructional approach, credited to

Thernstrom and Thernstrom in their 2003 book, *No Excuses: Closing the racial gap in learning* (Betts & Tang, 2011). This instructional approach is characterized by high academic and behavioral expectations, strict adherence to discipline without regard to extenuating circumstances, a longer academic school day and year, and selectively hired teaching staffs with a focus on teacher training and evaluation, and traditional direct teaching pedagogy with an emphasis on reading and math (Agrist, et al, 2011). Although not all charter schools follow this policy, the vast majority of the research on charter schools pointed to this method as the instructional foundation of the highest performing schools (Agrist, et al, 2011). This study specifically looked at charter schools that use the entirely different instructional approach of experiential learning. The results of this study related to Research Question Two, which was to explore how the charter schools in this study defined success, indicated that school leaders, teachers, and students felt the instructional model yielded outcomes that would be strong indicators of student success, such as confidence, strong communication skills, self-direction, the ability to reflect. Based on these results, it would benefit the educational field to explore additional studies that look to these alternative instructional models and to identify common metrics that can be used to measure student achievement beyond the standardized test score.

Theoretical Foundations of the Study

This study was founded on two primary theoretical foundations: Experiential Learning Theory and Social Learning Theory. Although there were many influences to experiential learning theory, John Dewey (1938) and David Kolb (1984) are references as two theorists, who had the greatest impact on its development. Social Learning Theory was referenced through the work of Albert Bandura (1977) and Lev Vygotsky (1978).

The researcher of this study sought to identify best practices in non-urban charter schools that utilize an experiential learning curriculum. Three of the best practices identified included the use of interdisciplinary learning focused on experiences, collaboration as an expectation, and flexibility. Interdisciplinary learning was perceived in this study to require students to demonstrate transferrable, life-long skills that would be difficult to mimic in isolation, and encouraged the mindset of seeing the world through a lens of interconnectedness within the natural world. This relates to the work of Dewey and his recommendation that learning be an interaction between a person and their environment (Dewey, 1938). These experiences were carefully crafted to include challenging interdependent content, with students making meaning through personal connection to the topic and work conducted. The use of interdisciplinary learning relates to the work of Kolb and his proposition that *learning is holistic and requires adaptation* through divergent and convergent thinking by using complex, interconnected topics for students to grapple with learning (Kolb, 1984).

Collaboration was an expectation for all members of the school community, from leadership to the youngest of students and encouraged multiple life skills for students in communication. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the curriculum, teachers practiced it continuously as they planned meaningful units of instruction. This emerging theme of collaboration reflected the work of Bandura and the use of modeling for learning (Bandura, 1977), as well as Vygotsky and his conclusion that social interaction was the strongest component of learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

Flexibility occurred in the use of time, curriculum, and the individualization of learning that occurred in these schools. This flexibility allowed teachers to give students to

work through the four-stage cycle of learning at a pace that worked for them. This was supported by Dewey's argument that learning experiences needed structure through a framework of content, but students needed freedom within that structure for optimal learning to occur (Dewey, 1938). These best practices directly supports the foundational principles of experiential learning theory and social learning theory.

The researcher explored how non-urban charter schools utilizing an experiential learning model measure student success in Research Question Two. The definition of success that emerged from the data included elements of character, which included skills such as managing time, communicating, persevering when things were difficult, and collaborating with others. This emphasis on the development of the individual as a productive member of society was reflected in the research of Bandura related to social knowledge and modeling (Bandura, 1977). The ability to self-reflect also emerged as a critical measure of student success in this study. Kolb's research indicated a critical aspect of the experiential learning process was the ability to reflect and make connections through experience to form new knowledge (Kolb, 1984). The act of practiced reflection utilized in the schools in this study support the necessary conditions within Kolb's model of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984).

Related Research

Organizational culture emerged from this study as something that was uniquely impactful for the schools in this study. Culture, also referred to as climate, can be defined as the "underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that has built up over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges" (Deal & Peterson, 1998, p. 28). A positive school culture exists when leaders, staff, and students feel

“comfortable, wanted, valued, accepted, and secure in an environment where they can interact with caring people they trust” (Borkar, 2016). Ingersoll (2003) concluded that a positive school climate was a prerequisite to student academic achievement. The theme of student perception of school culture supported the research on the importance of organizational culture through specific practices within the school designed to cultivate a sense of community and student ownership of learning.

Both schools in the study developed specific practices designed to cultivate a sense of school belonging and community that impacted both students and staff. This occurred through purposeful organizational structures such as advisory groupings, rituals (morning meetings), and immersive experiences (orientation camp). The data collected from the student focus groups indicated that the way they “feel” in school and their relationships with their school environment was an important indicator of their engagement. As Bergin’s work on interest development demonstrated, student attention, also known as engagement, was a necessary criteria to achieve learning (Begin, 2016). School leaders and teachers in both School A and School B in this study commented on the close, familial type of relationships that were built within their school communities, which differed from the relationships found in a traditional public school and was purposeful in its practice.

Research in the area of organizational culture by Song, et al (2011) also indicated that supportive learning cultures have a direct positive influence on school innovative climate, job autonomy, and perceived teacher turnover intention. The theme of staffing emerged from this study in relation to Research Question Three in regards to recruitment, support, and challenges. School leaders in both schools spoke to the investment of time and energy to recruit, induct and retain teachers who would be successful in this educational model.

Teaching in these schools required longer days and more personal responsibilities than one would find in a traditional public school. Over time, leaders had found that recruiting teachers who came for the *mission* and the *culture* were more apt to be successful and to stay at the school for a longer period of time, especially when demands were high. Once hired, teachers needed a high level of support through professional development, personal growth, and mentoring. Developing an organizational culture that provided a safe, supportive environment for new hires as well as existing staff helped to alleviate issues with teacher retention and burnout.

Both schools were founded on very strong institutional missions that influenced all aspects of their being, from the curriculum to the organizational structures upon which they were built. For people to connect with the mission at a personal level, they must feel that the organization has a true commitment to it in its practice. “Mission gives purpose to life. It adds meaning to what one does. In its purest form, it is so deeply felt that it explains why one does what one does ... a mission must benefit the world” (Clifton & Nelson, 1992, p. 122). What emerged from this study related to organizational structures was the value of establishing a commitment to live the mission on a daily basis and to use it as the foundation for any decisions that were made. The interviews with school leaders and teachers referenced the importance not only of institutional mission, but also of every individual within the organization supporting and believing in the purpose of it. This related to the work of Woodrow and the importance of the mission going beyond an organization’s mere words to “reach into people’s hearts and souls and motivate them to collaborate toward a cause that provides them with the opportunity to make a difference in the world” (Woodrow, 2006, p. 314). Rituals, such as morning meetings and gratitude circle, were used to reinforce

the mission while bringing individuals together as community, as recommended by the research of Bonewits Feldner (2006). The interconnectedness between mission and culture in these schools was a best practice that touched all aspects of the school including curriculum, scheduling, hiring, and professional support.

The study of interest development is of value to educational researchers because of its relationship to learning. “When people are interested in a topic or thing, they are more likely to orient toward it, pay attention to it, and learn about it” (Bergin, 2016, p. 7). The curriculum of the schools in this study was particularly designed to incorporate a high degree of student engagement and choice through high interest topics that related to Research Question One. Flexibility was provided within the curriculum framework to allow teachers to select topics and experiences in which the students in front of them would connect, with the express purpose of creating engagement. The teachers noted this was purposeful, as they perceived engagement as a critical component to the learning process that is supported by the experiential learning and interest development research presented in Chapter Two. The experiential learning opportunities designed by the teachers in these schools supported Higa and Renninger’s (2006) suggestions to provide opportunities for students to ask “curiosity questions” and to select materials and activities that promote problem solving and the generation of strategy. The evidence of projects that were seen during the site visits indicated great thought was given to their design and implementation in an effort to replicate the best practices of these theories.

The literature review conducted in Chapter Two supported the emerging findings from this research study. The chapter examined research currently available regarding: (a) an historical look at relevant charter school research, (b) theoretical foundations of the study,

and (c) related research regarding factors that emerged as best practices - organizational culture, interest development, and institutional mission. Research Question One was used to look at best practices used by non-urban charter schools that utilized experiential learning models. The use of interdisciplinary projects, a focus on cultivating interest, collaboration, and flexibility all emerged as best practices that were both supported by the research of Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984) and emerged as best practices from this study. Research Question Two was used to look at how the schools in the study defined student success. The expansion to multiple metrics beyond standardized tests, taking a more holistic approach to assessment, and incorporating aspects of character emerged as best practices from this study and would support the research of Angrist, et al (2013), whose research on charter school sought to look beyond standardized test scores to measure effectiveness. Lastly, Research Question Three was used to identify organizational structures used by the schools to support their learning model. Taking specific actions to nurture a positive school climate using rituals (Bonewits Feldner, 2006) and other embedded means, cultivating relationships, and focusing on recruitment of staff with a strong belief in the mission were both supported the research of and emerged as best practices from this study (Song, et al, 2011).

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (2006) have identified four criteria that should be present to establish trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Krefting (1991) also suggests four similar criteria to establish trustworthiness and ensure the quality of the research: truth-value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality. Multiple strategies were implemented during the course of the study to reduce any threats to validity and ensure the trustworthiness of the research.

To establish credibility and truth-value in this study, the researcher spent two days onsite for each participant school. This allowed for adequate engagement with participants and the setting to see recurrent data emerge. The establishment of mutual trust is an important element in ensuring credibility and truth-value, so the researcher spent time explaining the purpose of the study to all participants to ensure their understanding and comfort, and answered any questions requested. Additional time was spent with school leaders in a casual manner, such as while eating dinner and engaging in conversation to develop rapport and comfort. This encouraged a cordial and friendly relationship that supported the truth-value in the formal interviews.

To establish transferability and applicability in this study, the researcher utilized thick descriptions in all observation notes. The researcher also audio recorded reflections after each day of the site visits to record recollections, feelings and perceptions in the moment. The small sample size in this study is a limitation to the transferability of the findings to any larger population, however, the use of systemic methodology along with thick descriptions were utilized to mitigate this limitation.

To establish dependability in a qualitative study, Krefting (1991) recommends including detailed methodology for how the data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted to allow subsequent researchers to replicate the study. This study includes a detailed description of the methodology utilized in Chapters Three and Four in the hopes that researchers could easily replicate the process. Environmental factors are unable to be controlled, however, and could therefore interfere with dependability. Triangulation of sources of data was used to check that findings presented were consistent across the cases. This occurred during the data analysis phase of the study through constant comparison of

codes revealed from sources including school leadership and teacher interviews, student focus groups, and document reviews.

To establish confirmability and neutrality, the researcher maintained reflexive notes after each day of the site visits to provide summaries of the experiences and to capture personal perceptions. Additionally, an external audit was conducted to ensure researcher bias did not impact the findings of the study. An independent researcher conducted the audit with experience in qualitative research.

Recommendations and Implications of the Research Findings

The purpose of this research study was to explore charter schools that are located outside of an urban setting that use an experiential learning model as a foundation. The research questions focused on identifying best practices related to the curricular design, quantifying the definition of success, and identifying key organizational structures and practices that were present. The findings that resulted from this study have been deduced into three primary recommendations for educators and school designers: commitment to mission, building community, and expanding the definition of student success. These will be discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

Commitment to Mission. Having a commitment to set of foundational principles, collectively referred to by the researcher as a school mission, is a recommendation that emerged from this study. A clear and defined mission provides a focus to leadership, teachers, community members, and students regarding the purpose for all decisions made and actions taken. Having a clear focus makes the day-to-day minutia and challenges of operating and teaching within a school less chaotic. This mission must be communicated regularly to ensure it remains clear.

It is not enough to simply define a mission. School leaders must be committed to protecting and nurturing the mission as a central priority and members must share its commitment. This means providing ongoing time for its practice and reflection, such as through mission studies conducted through scheduled, devoted professional development time. Practices that exemplify the mission, such as shared decision-making by faculty members, must be lived in practice. School personnel must define what these practices would look like to their community, then model their use.

New teachers to an organization must be inducted into its mission system and mentored by more experienced teachers. This begins by ensuring the recruiting practices of the school keep the mission in mind when finding qualified candidates. Hiring teachers who do not support the mission will either negatively impact it with the community, or ultimately will not be retained out of frustration.

This commitment to a mission emerged from the study as a best practice and is recommended as an implication for educational leaders of schools of all types, as it has general applicability beyond the charter schools such as described in this study.

Building Community. A second recommendation for educators that emerged from this study was the focus on community building and culture. The schools in this study demonstrated that a clear commitment to build organizational structures and practices that contributed to community building had a positive effect on the school culture. The development of a community contributes to positive feelings by all stakeholders.

Developing specific school traditions, such as morning meetings or gratitude circles, helps a school community come together on a regular basis and practice participation. Using these opportunities to publically share positive news about students or teachers encourage a

collegial and supportive environment. Having students take the lead on planning and overseeing these traditions encourages active participation in the community, mimicking the responsibilities schools wish to develop in future citizenry.

In addition to traditions, schools can use organizational structures to form small groups following an advisory model to develop social skills and relationship building in a smaller setting. This practice ensures that every student engages with at least one adult and a smaller group of peers as they progress through the years in the school, with the hope of forming meaningful, long-term, relationships. The advisory groups are also useful for being the organizational structure through which other school practices are contained. For example, the schools in this study utilized the grouping for student-led conferences, as it was the advisory teacher who assisted in its preparation.

When orientating students to this model of community, using an immersive team building experience emerged from this study as a recommended manner for kick-starting community building. Whether it be a camping trip or some other experience that takes students out of their comfort zone in an effort to have them build trust with peers, this emerged from the student focus groups as one of the most influential ways in which school community was established. Students described a transformation of sorts that occurred with participants as they worked together through these experiences.

Fostering efforts to build community emerged from the study as a best practice and is recommended as an implication for educational leaders of schools of all types, as it has general applicability beyond the charter schools such as described in this study.

Expanding the Definition of Student Success. A third recommendation for educators that emerged from this study was expanding the definition of student success.

Although the schools in this study were primarily accountable to the state boards of education through participation in state standardized testing, they did not consider this data point to be the primary one for measuring student success. Instead, a multiple measures model was utilized that looked beyond academic content standards to personal attributes that were considered important to developing life long learners.

Looking at grading practices is one area of expanding the definition of student success. The traditional alphanumeric system of grading students does little to provide meaningful feedback on strengths and areas for improvement and focuses singly on an overall content area grade; therefore parents and students are unable to discern what should be addressed. The schools in this study utilized a holistic approach to grading that looked at mastery of specific content knowledge and skills, but also at personal attributes including perseverance, ability to meet deadlines, communication, and collaboration skills. Students understood exactly where they needed to improve and what skillsets were strengths based on this feedback. Examining grading practices to ensure they provide meaningful feedback to students and parents is a recommendation that emerged from this study.

Providing students with authentic, project-based experiences that cross multiple disciplines is recommended as a means to expand the definition of success. Crafting projects that incorporate topics of high interest to students, while combining high expectations for their completion, lead to higher levels of student engagement. Providing an authentic audience, such as members of the community, increases the likelihood they see value in its completion. The schools in this study provided opportunities for students to tackle authentic problems that existed in their communities, and provided them with real situations to solve

them. That could mean presenting to a town council, or holding a community summit to share their findings and advocate.

Resisting the urge to utilize a single definition what constitutes success is a recommendation that emerged from this study. Encouraging students to delve into what success means to them personally and not allowing a single definition to be applied to all learners was a best practice. The schools in this study encouraged students to practice the skill of self-reflection regularly, with one goal to reflect on what a successful future would look like to them. Helping to visualize a successful future helped students identify short and long-term goals needed to achieve it, as well as communicating support structures they might need in the process.

Recommendations for Future Research

This section explores recommendations for further research and is developed out of questions that the researcher raised while conducting this study. Limited research has been conducted on non-urban charter schools of any pedagogical model; therefore continued studies that look at the success and best practices of charter schools outside of the urban environment should be continued to ensure a complete picture of charter school accountability is developed. The question of viability for charter schools located in areas where competing local public schools are considered successful should be explored, including looking at the value of alternative education models for individual students who may find traditional public school models challenging. The researcher looked at two participant schools; therefore the findings have limitations due to sample size. Conducting additional studies looking at an increased number of schools could help determine the generalization of the findings.

A suggestion for further research would be to expand the study to include parents to explore their reasons for selecting or not selecting a charter school for their child. Many of the students in School A were very young when they entered the school with the implication being that their parents were the determining factor in enrollment. Conducting a study that added interviews or focus groups with parents could add to the research findings on the factors that determined charter school application. Including parents of students who may have voluntarily un-enrolled from the school for any reason may also add to the knowledge base regarding what needs were perceived as having not been met which necessitated the move.

Extending the research to include graduates of non-urban charter schools that utilize experiential learning would allow a look into the lasting effects of attending schools that use this model of instruction. The study could include questions regarding the transition into a public high school or college after attending a non-traditional school like the ones in this study. Extending the time of the study to examine the perceived impact attending the school had on the graduates five or ten years post-graduation will help explore potential long-term effects. Examining whether the skills that were explicitly designed to be transferable had the desired effect could lead to improved practice.

Lastly, another suggestion for research would be to take some of the best practices identified in this study and attempt to replicate them in a traditional public school setting to examine the impact. An example would be the use of student-led conferences and the pedagogical practices that led to their use: strategically instructing and modeling student self-reflection, portfolio building, and modeling student-led conferences. A second example

would be the use of whole school morning meetings or gratitude circles as a means to promote student community building.

Summary

This qualitative research study was conducted to explore charter schools at the secondary level (grades 6-12) built upon an experiential learning framework and located in a non-urban setting. As the majority of the current body of research on the charter school movement has been focused on the more populous urban environments, this study was valuable to the greater educational establishment with the results being more generalizable and filling in the gaps related to non-urban locales. The research focused on best practices utilized, how these schools defined success, and the organizational structures utilized to support the model. Two schools were selected, residing in two different states, with data collected through interviews, focus groups and observations over the course of a two-day onsite visit per school. An initial document review of the school's web site was used to provide guidance in crafting interview questions and selecting observational opportunities.

Through the process of qualitative analysis, five themes emerged from the data collected: mission, flexibility, beliefs toward success, staffing, and student perception of school culture. A thorough description of these themes was presented and a discussion of their findings in relation to the research questions examined. The resulting implications for research were offered to the educational community, with suggestions for future research to be considered.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research study is presented to provide insight into charter schools located in non-urban environments that are founded on an experiential learning educational

model. With the exponential growth of the charter school movement in the United States (Denise, 2014), research to examine charter school impact is needed. The vast majority of the studies to date have focused on those charter schools located in urban areas, which often exist in competition with traditional public schools that are facing serious challenges.

Families in those situations are often looking to escape their local schools, making attendance in these charter schools desirable. Schools located in non-urban communities tend to exist to offer alternative educational settings, as their local traditional public school counterparts can be generally considered successful.

The researcher specifically looked at charter schools that utilized experiential learning as their educational model. The vast majority of the charter schools studied to date and considered successful have looked at educational models that emphasize discipline, traditional pedagogical practice, longer school days, and selective teacher hiring. This study found that success could be found in alternative, student-centered, interdisciplinary models of schooling as well. The original purpose of charter schools was to be incubators of innovation and to explore alternative models of education, with flexibility and freedom from certain regulation, to provide insight into best practices. The goal was to then replicate the best practices into the larger educational community of public schools. This study found best practices in the participant schools that could potentially be replicated in traditional public schools. The educational community should continue to explore these alternative models of education found in the charter school movement to inform the greater collective of educational research.

REFERENCES

- Abdulkadiroglu, A., Angrist, J., Cohodes, S., Dynarski, S., Fullerton, J., Kane, T., & Pathak, P. (2009). *Informing the debate: Comparing Boston's charter, pilot and traditional schools*. Boston, MA: The Boston Foundation. Retrieved February 9, 2015, from <http://j.mp/mT5gKb>
- Angrist, J., Cohodes, S., Dynarski, S., Pathak, P., & Walters, C. (2013). *Charter schools and the road to college readiness: The effects on college preparation, attendance and choice*. Boston, MA: The Boston Foundation and NewSchools Venture Fund. Retrieved February 9, 2015, from <https://www.tbf.org/~media/TBFOrg/Files/Reports/Charters%20and%20College%20Readiness%202013.pdf>
- Angrist, J., Pathak, P., & Walters, C. (2013). Explaining charter school effectiveness. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 2013, 5(4), 1-27. Retrieved February 9, 2015, from <http://dx.doi/10.1257.app.5.4.1>
- Association for Experiential Education. (2015). *What is experiential education?* Retrieved March 30, 2015, from <http://www.aee.org/what-is-ee>
- Bandura, A. (1971). *Social learning theory*. New York City, NY: General Learning Press.
- Bergin, D. A. (2016). Social influences on interest. *Educational Psychologist*, 51(1), 7-22.
- Betts, J., & Tang, E. (2011). *The effect of charter schools on student achievement: A meta-analysis of the literature*. Seattle, WA: National Charter School Research Project.
- Bogden, R., & Biklen, S. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods*. Boston, MA: Pearson.

- Boix Mansilla, V. (2016). Interdisciplinary learning: A cognitive-epistemological foundation. *Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education*. Retrieved from <http://www.pz.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/X%20Boix%20Mansilla%20Interdisciplinary%20Learning.pdf>
- Bonewits Feldner, S. (2006). Living our mission: A study of university mission building. *Communication Studies*, 57(1), 67-85. doi:10.1080/10510970500483371
- Borkar, V. N. (2016). Positive school climate and positive education: Impact on students well-being. *Indian Journal of Health and Wellbeing*, 7(8) 861-862.
- Chan, C. Y. (2012). Exploring an experiential learning project through Kolb's Learning Theory using a qualitative research method. *European Journal of Engineering Education*, 37(4), 405-415. doi:10.1080/03043797.2012.706596
- Chudeowsky, N., & Ginsburg, A. (2012). *Who attends charter schools and how are those students doing?* Exploratory analysis of NEAP Data prepared by the National Assessment Governing Board. Retrieved February 26, 2015, from <http://www.nagb.org/publications/reports-papers/contextual-data/charter-schools-naep-data-analysis.html>
- Clifton, D., & Nelson, P. (1992). *Soar with your strengths*. New York, NY: Dell Publishing.
- Connell, I., & Galasiński, D. (1998). Academic Mission Statements: An Exercise in Negotiation. *Discourse & Society*, 9(1). 457-479. doi:10.1177/0957926598009004003.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2007). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory (3rd edition)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Cresswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Denise, P. (2014). *Are charter schools working? A review of the evidence*. Retrieved from the Center for Reinventing Public Education web site:
<http://www.crpe.org/publications/meta-analysis-literature-effect-charter-schools-student-achievement>
- Deslauriers, J. L., Rudd, R. D., Westfall-Rudd, D. M., & Splan, R. K. (2016). The critical need for merging educational learning theories with experiential learning programs in animal agriculture: A literature review. *NACTA Journal*, 60(3), 307-312.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York, NY: Collier Books. Retrieved from Internet Archive web site:
https://archive.org/stream/experienceeducat00dewe_0?ref=ol#page/n3/mode/2up
- Hidi, S., & Renninger, K. A. (2006). The Four-Phase Model of Interest Development. *Educational Psychologist*, 41(2), 111-127.
- Ingersoll, R. M. (2003). *Who Controls Teachers' Work? : Power and Accountability in America's Schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jenkins, J. J., & Clarke, T. (2017). Engaged journalism: Using Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) for in-class journaling activities. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 29(1), 154-161.
- Kern, N., & Gebru, W. (2014). *Waiting lists to attend charter schools top 1 million names*. Retrieved from National Alliance for Public Charter Schools web site:
<http://www.publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/NAPCS-2014-Wait-List-Report.pdf>

- Knowledge Is Power Program. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.kipp.org>.
- Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc.
- Kolb, D. (2015). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. (2nd Ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Krapp, A., Hidi, S., & Renninger, K. A. (1992). Interest, learning, and development. In K. A. Renninger, S. Hidi, & A. Krapp (Eds.), *The role of interest in learning and development* (pp. 3-25). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Krefting, L. (1991). Rigor in qualitative research: The assessment of trustworthiness. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 45(1): 214-222. doi: 10.5014/ajot.45.3.214
- Lam, D. (2014). Charter, private, and public schools work together in Boston: teachers, with very different experiences teaching very similar students, tear through artificial boundaries of school politics to ask how they can better serve students. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 95(5), 35-39. doi:10.1177/003172171409500509
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (2006). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Meijs, C., Prinsen, F. R., & de Laat, M. F. (2016). Social learning as approach for teacher professional development; how well does it suit them? *Educational Media International*, 53(2), 85-102. doi:10.1080/09523987.2016.1211333
- Merriam, S. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Mulligan, E. (2013). *The facts on charter schools and children with disabilities*. Retrieved from Center for Parent Information and Resources web site:
http://www.parentcenterhub.org/wp-content/uploads/repo_items/charterschools.pdf
- National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (n.d.). Retrieved from
<http://www.publiccharters.org/>
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/>
- Ncsl.org. (2015). *Charter schools: Overview*. Retrieved March 14, 2015, from
<http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/charter-schools-overview.aspx>
- Nordlof, J. (2014). Vygotsky, scaffolding, and the role of theory in writing center work. *Writing Center Journal*, 34(1), 45-64.
- Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Peterson, K. D., & Deal, T. E. (1998). How leaders influence the culture of schools. *Educational Leadership*, 56(1), 28.
- Project Adventure. (n.d.). *About Project Adventure*. Retrieved from
<http://www.pa.org/about.html>.
- Outward Bound. (n.d.). *Why Outward Bound?* Retrieved from
<https://www.outwardbound.org/>.
- Rhode Island Education. *InfoWorks! Rhode Island Education Data Reporting*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://infoworks.ride.ri.gov/>
- Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. *The State of Rhode Island's Charter Public Schools*. (n.d.). Retrieved from

- <http://www.ride.ri.gov/StudentsFamilies/RIPublicSchools/CharterSchools.aspx#1977599-charter-school-resources-and-lottery>
- Rice, C. (2015, August). *Showing up matters: The state of chronic absenteeism in New Jersey*. Advocates for Children of New Jersey., Newark, NJ. Retrieved from http://acnj.org/downloads/2015_09_08_chronic_absenteeism.pdf
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Seaman, J., & Rheingold, A. (2013). Circle talks as situated experiential learning: Context, identity, and knowledgeability in “Learning From Reflection”. *Journal Of Experiential Education*, 36(2), 155-174. doi:10.1177/1053825913487887
- Seligman, M. P., Ernst, R. M., Gillham, J., Reivich, K., & Linkins, M. (2009). Positive education: Positive psychology and classroom interventions. *Oxford Review Of Education*, 35(3), 293-311. doi:10.1080/03054980902934563
- Skinner, B. F. (1938). *The behavior of organisms: An experimental analysis*. New York: Appleton-Century.
- Song, J. H., Martens, J., McCharen, B., & Ausburn, L. J. (2011). Multi-structural relationships among organizational culture, job autonomy, and CTE teacher turnover intention. *Career & Technical Education Research*, 36(1), 3-26. doi:10.5328/cter36.1.3
- State of New Jersey Department of Education. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.state.nj.us/education/>
- Thernstrom, A., & Thernstrom, S. (2003). *No excuses: Closing the racial gap in learning*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

- The Circle Way. (n.d.). *What is the Circle Way?* Retrieved from <http://www.thecircleway.net/>.
- The Story of the Universe. (n.d.). *About the Story of the Universe*. Retrieved from <https://storyoftheuniverse.org/>
- Trice, H. & Beyer, J. (1993) *The cultures of work organizations*. New York, NY: Pearson.
- United States Census Bureau. (n.d.) . Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1966). Play and its role in the mental development of a child. *Soviet Psychology*, 12(6), 62-76.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (2016). Play and its role in the mental development of a child. *International Research in Early Childhood Education*, 7(2), 3-25.
- Woodrow, J. (2006). Institutional mission: The soul of Christian higher education. *Christian Higher Education*, 5(1)313-327. doi: 10.1080/15363750600860778

Appendix A: Document Review Protocol

Sample Document Review Protocol

1. Create a site map of the school's web site.
2. What information is featured on the home page?
3. What information is included about the educational philosophy of the school?
4. What information is included about graduates from the school?
5. Catalogue the photos used on the parent pages. What is featured?
6. Is there a message from the principal/head of school? What are the main talking points?
7. What publications are included on the site that are not produced by the school?
8. Is the curriculum for the school published?
9. Does the site include a definition of how success is defined? How is success defined?

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Sample Interview Questions

Administrators:

1. Describe the educational philosophy of this school.
2. How do you support teachers in the implementation of this philosophy?
3. What role does experiential learning play in your school?
4. How does your school define success?
5. What measures are used to determine student achievement?
6. How is your school different than the traditional public school(s) your students would otherwise attend?

Teachers:

1. Describe the educational philosophy of this school.
2. How do you support this philosophy in your classroom?
3. What role does experiential learning play in your curriculum? What does it look like?
4. Do students in your class have an opportunity to work with others in a collaborative manner? What is your role during these times?
5. How do you know when your students are successful?

Appendix C: Protocol for Student Focus Group

Protocol for Student Focus Group

Introductory Remarks:

Thank you for being here today and for allowing this focus group discussion to take place. This focus group is part of a larger data collection process that I am using to help study charter schools like yours to learn more about them.

This initial discussion should take approximately 30 minutes and will be directed toward you as students. I may also follow up with each of you on an individual basis for more specific information. Therefore, the questions that we will address today are related to the school environment and how learning here is structured. Each of you has a unique perspective on your school; therefore, please note that I am not necessarily looking for you all to agree, but to hear all points of view.

The session will be recorded for analysis and I would like to begin with having everyone introduce themselves and the area that they are representing today.

Introductions will take place.

I am going to ask a series of questions. Anyone may start the discussion but I ask that you stay on topic due to time constraints. I will be here primarily to listen, but will jump in if necessary to lead you in another direction or to bring you back on topic should you stray. We will devote approximately 8 minutes to each question but will adjust as needed.

Are there any questions?

If none, the researcher will display the background and problem statement portion of the scenario on the screen. She will read the problem to the group and then pose the following questions.

1. How would you describe the learning environment at your school?
2. How is this school different than the public school you attended prior?
3. How do you know that you are successfully learning in your day-to-day experience?
4. What role do your teachers play in your learning process?

Researcher will allow students to respond to each question and will add probing questions when needed to elicit elaboration.

Are there any additional comments that you'd like to mention that you didn't think that we covered?

Closing Remarks

Thank you for your time today!

Appendix D: Administrative Consent Document



*Department of Education and Educational Psychology
181 White Street
Danbury, CT 06810*

May 15, 2015

[Insert Name]
[Insert Title]
[Insert School/District]
[Insert Address]
[Insert City/State/Zip]

Dear [Insert Name]:

As part of my work in the doctoral program for Instructional Leadership at Western Connecticut State University, I am conducting research on non-urban charter schools utilizing an experiential learning curriculum.

This study will consist of a document review of material published on the school web site, interviews conducted with administration and teachers, focus group interviews with current students, and field observations. Focus groups and interviews will take place in school and will last approximately 30 minutes. Observations will be conducted for no more than one hour per session. Participants may refuse to answer any question, and are free to withdraw from this study at any time.

This study was reviewed and approved by Western Connecticut State University's Institutional Review Board (Protocol Number - 1314-69) Participation in this study is completely voluntary. The focus group responses will be coded to ensure that all responses will be held strictly confidential. Individual responses will not be made available.

Thank you for your cooperation and contribution to this research study. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or via email at XXXXX@XX.com.

Sincerely,

Karen A. Fildes

Superintendent/Principal Signature

Date

School/School District

Appendix E: Consent Document for Teachers

*Department of Education and Educational Psychology
181 White Street
Danbury, CT 06810*



May 15, 2015

I am writing to invite you to take part in a study that is being conducted as part of WCSU's doctoral program in Instructional Leadership. I am conducting research on non-urban charter schools utilizing an experiential learning curriculum and am interested in learning how teachers perceive the educational model.

Interviews will take place in school and will last approximately 30 minutes. You may refuse to answer any question, and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time.

This study was reviewed and approved by Western Connecticut State University's Institutional Review Board (Protocol Number – 1314-69). To protect your privacy, your name will not appear in this study and will be held in the strictest of confidence. No one besides the researcher will have access to your replies. All data will be reported in aggregate (group) form, and will not identify individual participants.

If you are willing to participate, please sign the consent form below. An identical copy of this letter has been included and is yours to keep. If you have any further questions about the study, please contact me at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or via email at XXXXX@XX.com.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

Karen A. Fildes

Teacher Assent

I have read the description of the research project and agree to participate. I am aware that the results will be used for research purposes only, that my identity will remain confidential, and that I can withdraw at any time.

Name: _____ Signature: _____

Phone number: _____ Email address: _____

Appendix F: Assent/Consent Document for Students/Parents



*Department of Education and Educational Psychology
181 White Street
Danbury, CT 06810*

May 15, 2015

I am writing to invite you to take part in a study that is being conducted as part of WCSU's doctoral program in Instructional Leadership. I am conducting research on non-urban charter schools utilizing an experiential learning curriculum and am interested in learning how students perceive the educational model.

Focus group interviews will take place in school with a teacher and will last approximately 30 minutes. You may refuse to answer any question, and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time. If you do not wish to participate, it will not have any effect on your school grades.

This study was reviewed and approved by Western Connecticut State University's Institutional Review Board (Protocol Number – 1314-69). To protect your privacy, your name will not appear in this study and will be held in the strictest of confidence. No one besides the researcher will have access to your replies. All data will be reported in aggregate (group) form, and will not identify individual participants.

If you are willing to participate, please sign the student assent portion of the consent form below sheet, and ask a parent or guardian to sign their portion. Please return the signed consent forms directly to _____ . An identical copy of this letter has been included and is yours to keep. If you or your parent/guardian has any further questions about the study, please contact me at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or via email at XXXXX@XX.com.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

Karen A. Fildes

Student Assent

I have read the description of the research project and agree to participate. I am aware that the results will be used for research purposes only, that my identity will remain confidential, and that I can withdraw at any time.

Name _____ Signature: _____
Phone number: _____ Email address: _____

Parent/Guardian Consent

I have read the description of the research project and agree to let my child participate. I am aware that the results will be used for research purposes only, that my child's identity will remain confidential, and that he/she can withdraw at any time.

Name _____ Signature: _____ Relation to student: _____
Phone number: _____ Email address: _____

Appendix G: IRB Approval

Carol O'Connor 

April 2, 2014 at 10:41 AM



I.R.B. approval

[Hide](#)

To: Karen Fildes,

Cc: WCSU IRB, Karen Burke

Dear Karen,

I am pleased to inform you that your I.R.B. protocol number 1314-69 has been approved by full review. This email is documentation of your official approval to start your research. If you need a copy of this official approval for funding purposes, please let me know occonnorc@wcsu.edu. The WCSU I.R.B. wishes you the best with your research.

You have 1 year from the date of this email to complete your research; if you are still conducting that date, you will need to fill out a renewal application. When are you finished with your study please fill out and return via email a Termination/Completion Report (available here: <http://wcsu.edu/irb/forms.asp>) so we know your study is complete.

Thanks,

Carol O'Connor
Psychology/Philosophy Department Secretary
C.E.L.T
I.A.C.U.C.
I.R.B.
Warner Hall 304
Phone: 203-837-8470
Fax: 203-837-8905

Appendix H: Qualitative Audit Report

Qualitative Audit for Ms. Karen Fildes

An audit for Ms. Karen Fildes qualitative research study was concluded on February 19, 2018, by Kara Kunst Tanner, Ed. D. Ms. Fildes met with Dr. Tanner to provide and overview of her research study, including the literature review, the multi-case study, the research questions, data collection, analysis, conclusions, and acquisition of participants. This involved a particularly detailed explanation of her coding process of using open codes, which were then categorized into axial codes, and finally collapsed into secondary codes. A review of random parts of the qualitative data from the researcher including field notes, interview transcripts, focus group observations, reflexive journal, code book with definitions, and Excel spreadsheet data files were examined. All coding appeared to be with 100% agreement between the researcher and the auditor.

Ms. Fildes organized her data and conducted her coding using Excel. She explained her coding process, including how she utilized a two-stage approach for analyzing the data both with-in the case and cross-cases. Open codes were developed, which were then categorized into axial codes, and collapsed into secondary codes. This led to the emergence of five underlying themes. After reviewing Ms. Fildes' data, coding process, and themes, the auditor came to the same conclusions as the researcher. The data acquired from the interviews and focus groups allowed for the research questions to be answered fully. Ms. Fildes also provided evidence as to how she established trustworthiness within her study. The resulting implications from the research and conclusions of this study were discussed. Additionally, Ms. Fildes shared suggestions for future research and this audit was completed successfully.

Signature removed for publication

3/19/18

Auditor

Date

Karen Fildes

3/19/18

Researcher

Date

Appendix I: Initial Codes and Frequency

Initial Codes and Frequency

Initial Code Categories	Frequency
1 Allow time	3
2 Alternative background	4
3 Beliefs about learning	35
4 Challenges to staffing	7
5 Challenges with instruction	8
6 Challenges with recruitment	18
7 Character	5
8 Collaboration as an expectation	6
9 Committed leadership	10
10 Communication	6
11 Curriculum	7
12 Evolution over time	2
13 Grouping	4
14 High teacher turnover	7
15 Individual learners	11
16 Interdisciplinary curriculum	1
17 Interdisciplinary learning	4
18 Mastery based	3
19 Mission is central	9
20 Multiple measures	7
21 Multiple roles	2
22 Natural world	6
23 Negative perception of traditional schools	1
24 Organizational structure supports community	4
25 Outside influences	9
26 Personal toll	5
27 Post school graduation	12
28 Relationships	17
29 Replication	5
30 Schedule	4
31 Self-reflection	4
32 Shared leadership	4
33 Small size	5
34 Standardized testing	7
35 Success	29
36 Teacher growth	7
37 Time	1
38 Traditional elements of curriculum	8
39 Valuing individuals	2

Note: 39 codes

Appendix J: Final Themes and Categories

Final Code List

Theme 1: Mission, Theme 2: Flexibility Theme 3: Beliefs Toward Success, Theme 4: Staffing, Theme 5: Student Perception of School Culture

Theme	Category	Sub-Categories
Mission	Beliefs About Learning	Traditional Elements of Curriculum Natural world
	Committed Leadership	Interdisciplinary Learning Shared Leadership Replication Evolution Over Time
	Collaboration	Communication Mission is Central Relationships
Flexibility	Time	Schedule
	Curriculum	Challenges With Instruction
	Individual Learning	Grouping
Beliefs Toward Success	Character	Post School Graduation
	Multiple Measures	Mastery Based Standardized Testing
	Self-Reflection	
Staffing	Recruitment	Alternative Background
	Support	Teacher Growth
	Challenges	High Teacher Turnover Multiple Roles Personal Toll
Student Perception of School Culture	Organizational	Beliefs About Learning
	Structure Supports	
	Community Small Size Relationships Valuing Individuals	

Note: The total number of sources was 32.

**Edd in Instructional Leadership
Department of Education and Educational Psychology
Dissertation Registration Form**

Student Karen A Fildes Date August 20, 2018

Dissertation Title: Experiential Charter School: A Multi Case Study

Dissertation Committee Members: See attached Dissertation Approval Page

For Office Use Only.

<u>Karen Burke, EdD</u>	<u>Karen Burke</u>	<u>8/20/18</u>
Primary Advisor	Signature	Date

<u>Marcia A. B. Delcourt, PhD</u>	<u>Marcia A. B. Delcourt</u>	<u>8/20/18</u>
Program Coordinator	Signature	Date

<u>Dr. Maryann Rossi, PhD</u>	<u>Maryann Rossi</u>	<u>8/31/18</u>
Interim Dean, School of Professional Studies	Signature	Date

<u>Christopher Shankle, EdD</u>	<u>Christopher A. Shankle</u>	<u>31 August 2018</u>
Associate Director, Division of Graduate Studies	Signature	Date