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Close to the Pain: Alternative Education and the Unheard Voices of Young Adults' Transformative Learning Experiences

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Close to the Pain: Alternative Education and the Unheard Voices of Young Adults' Transformative Learning Experiences

By

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, whose unwavering love and support have guided me every step of the way. To my son, Antonio Young, I love you more than life itself, and your unfaltering love and encouragement have been my constant source of strength. You are my rock, and I am forever grateful. To my older sister, Rosalind Locke, thank you for being my mentor, guide, and source of inspiration. Your hard work, love, guidance, and sacrifice have been instrumental in making this dream a reality. To my parents, Robert and Christine Lock, thank you for laying a solid foundation of love and instilling in me the importance and precious value of family, faith, community, and education. Your guidance has been invaluable. To my older siblings, Beverly and Rodney, I feel your love and guidance every day; you will never be forgotten. To Breanna (Nana), your beautiful smile is my inspiration. Thank you for teaching me the lyrics to songs I didn't know and for being a light in my life. To the rest of my family—Gloria, Robert, Kenneth, Gregory, and Tanya—your love supports and guides me. I have always learned from you and am deeply grateful for each of you. To my grandchildren and the next generation of scholars—Jaden, Aiden, Nathaniel, and Isla—I love you forever- your grandma, I'll always be. You are great and will do great things because greatness is in your lineage. To my extended family, nieces, nephews, and friends who are like family, thank you for your love and support. A special thank you to Terrell, Julian, Dr. Reginold Daniels, Jennifer Singleton, Loretta Thomas, and Jannell Spiller—thank you for being there when I needed you most. In all things, I thank God for providing this opportunity to grow and soar like I never dreamed possible. Lastly, I want to thank all my students whom I have had the honor to serve. This dedication is for all of

us—we did it. Thank you, Lord, for strength, courage, perseverance, and patience. For doing what only You could.

Acknowledgments

I want to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Linda Webster, who has been a steadfast support since the day we met. Your guidance has been invaluable, steering me through rough seas and treacherous waters. You have been my navigator, my rock, and my lighthouse, always guiding me safely back to shore. Most importantly, you have encouraged and inspired me to keep going, no matter the challenges I faced. Dr. Hallberg, thank you for your unwavering support and for reminding me of who I am and why I embarked on this journey. Your boldness in calling me out and daring me to speak the truth has pushed me to grow in ways I never imagined. Thank you for challenging me. Dr. Estes, your kindness is truly your superpower. Your gentle words of encouragement and expertise were trade winds lifting me when I needed it most.

To all the doctors who came before me—Dr. T Brown, Dr. A Pascual, Dr. W. Thomas, Dr. R. Daniels, Dr. A. Williamson, Dr. S. May, Dr. N. Newman, and Dr. R. Woodruff, your leadership and dedication have paved the way for my success. I am eternally grateful for the path you have forged and the inspiration you have provided. A special thank you to a castaway who showed up on life's journey just when I needed her the most. Thank you, Stacy H, for all your hard work and dedication.

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Abstract

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This dissertation focuses on amplifying the voices of marginalized students in alternative education, with an emphasis on the positive impact of resilience on their outcomes. The study addresses the challenges these students face, particularly those from BIPOC communities, in navigating educational systems that have historically marginalized them. The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the experiences of BIPOC students in a Central Valley alternative education program, highlighting how nurturing relationships, resilience, and the fulfillment of basic needs contribute to their academic success and personal growth.

Utilizing a framework that incorporates theories of resilience, educational equity, and transformative leadership, the study situates the students' experiences within a broader context of systemic challenges and potential reform. Through in-depth interviews with five graduates from marginalized backgrounds, the research identified several key themes: (a) the power of resilience in overcoming adversity; (b) the significance of positive relationships with educators and peers; (c) the importance of addressing mental and emotional well-being; (d) the transformative potential of inclusive educational environments; and (e) the role of supportive communities in fostering success.

The findings underscore the importance of resilience and relational strategies in helping marginalized students thrive in alternative educational settings. This study contributes to the

ongoing conversation on educational equity by advocating for approaches that empower students to achieve their full potential, ensuring that their voices are heard, and their successes are celebrated.

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Glossary

Alternative Education	For this study, alternative education was broadly defined as any educational activity or program that utilizes instructional best practices and pedagogy other than what is used in traditional school settings to support youth at risk of academic failure or disconnected from education. Alternative programs and schools support students in attaining credit that is grade-level equivalent to local district standards (Aron, 2006; Carver et al., 2010; CDE, 2020; Kannam & Weiss, 2019; NCLB, 2002, 2020; Porowski et al., 2014).
Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI)	The definition refers to Asian American and Pacific Islander, encompassing individuals who identify with or have ancestry from various Asian and Pacific Islander groups. This includes, but is not limited to, East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean), South Asian (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi), Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Filipino, Thai), and Pacific Islander (e.g., Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Tongan) groups (APA, 2020).
At-Risk Youth	A term categorizes an individual or group of youth with an increased likelihood of educational failure and disconnection due to failing grades, low basic skills, chronic truancy, behavioral and disciplinary, and pregnancy (Carver et al., 2010; Moore, 2006). At-risk youth also have an increased likelihood of experiencing negative outcomes based on societal factors such as Adverse Childhood Experiences, low socioeconomic status (SES), and poor mental and physical health (Moore, 2006).

At-Promise Youth	This term refers to students who face various risk factors but are seen through a lens of potential and opportunity rather than deficit. This term is intended to emphasize their inherent capabilities and the promise they hold for future success despite the challenges they face. Risk factors for these youth include chronic truancy, behavioral and disciplinary issues, pregnancy, adverse childhood experiences, low socioeconomic status, and poor mental and physical health (Carver et al., 2010; Moore, 2006; Barrat et al., 2012).
BIPOC	Stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color is a term used to emphasize the unique relationship these groups have to white supremacy and racism. It seeks to highlight the particular injustices faced by Black and Indigenous communities while also acknowledging the broader struggles against systemic racism experienced by all People of Color. Examples include African Americans, Native Americans, Latinx, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders (The BIPOC Project, 2020).
High School Drop Out	Refers to a student who leaves school without obtaining a diploma or completing their studies. This has significant implications for their future, including lower earning potential, increased likelihood of unemployment, and higher chances of legal issues (APA, 2020).
Latinx Chicano	The term refers to individuals of Latin American descent, including those who identify as non-binary, gender non-conforming, or prefer a gender-neutral identity. The term "Latinx" is used as a gender-neutral or non-binary alternative to Latino or Latina, while "Chicano" refers to individuals of Mexican descent, particularly those in the United States (APA, 2020, p.22).

LGBTQIA+	An acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual/aromantic/agender, and other diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. The term "lesbian" refers to women who are attracted to other women, "gay" refers to individuals attracted to members of the same sex, "bisexual" refers to those attracted to both men and women, "transgender" refers to individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth, "queer/questioning" encompasses those who do not strictly identify with traditional categories of sexual orientation and gender identity or are still exploring their identity, "intersex" refers to individuals born with physical sex characteristics that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies, and "asexual/aromantic/agender" refers to those who do not experience sexual attraction, romantic attraction, or have a gender identity, respectively (APA, 2020, p. 18).
Marginalized	Refers to individuals or groups who experience social, economic, and political exclusion or disadvantage due to various factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation. This exclusion often results in limited access to resources, opportunities, and rights, thereby perpetuating cycles of inequality and disenfranchisement (APA, 2020, p. 23).
Trauma	Refers to the psychological and emotional response to an event or experience that is deeply distressing or disturbing, often resulting in long-lasting adverse effects on an individual's well-being. Trauma can stem from a variety of sources, including but not limited to physical or sexual abuse, natural disasters, accidents, or witnessing violence. The effects of trauma can manifest in numerous ways, such as anxiety, depression, flashbacks, and other mental health issues. It

	can significantly impact a person's ability to function and cope with everyday life (APA, 2020, p. 30).
Transformative leadership	In research and education, a transformative paradigm is a theoretical framework or approach that aims to challenge and change existing systems, structures, and beliefs. It emphasizes the need for social change, equity, and empowerment. The transformative paradigm acknowledges power imbalances, aims to give voice to marginalized groups, and seeks to create positive and sustainable transformations at individual, societal, or institutional levels (Shields, 2013, p.5).
Youth	The term typically refers to persons between the ages of 15 and 24. This definition, adopted by the United Nations, recognizes this age group as a distinct phase of life marked by the transition from childhood to adulthood. Youth is a critical period for personal development, encompassing physical, psychological, and social growth. During this time, individuals often complete their education, enter the workforce, and establish independence and identity (United Nations, 1981).

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Alternative Education

There is a pressing need for effective alternative education programs that cater to high school students. These programs can be particularly beneficial for those marginalized or disenfranchised youth who encounter various obstacles. Unfortunately, when society overlooks the needs of these youth, it also disregards their potential to achieve their dreams and aspirations which contribute to the nation and the American Dream. As the nation watches, we cannot afford to overlook the recent events, such as social unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, as they illuminate the deep divisions and crevices of our nation's divide. These events expose the deep-seated and underlying cracks in our systems of inequality and the marginalization of underserved communities. However, these cracks also provide opportunities for transformative progress and change. The flame ignited by social unrest has empowered and created a space for young adults to stand up, take a stand, and make a difference. The light illuminates the pervasive inequalities that exist in underserved communities. In various cities and states across America, whether they are urban or rural, a common theme: systemic disparities consistently hinder the success of marginalized students who have been pushed to the outskirts of society.

In the current climate of local communities, there is a growing desire among young adults to find, discover, and use their voices in meaningful ways. However, without a solid education, the choices and voices of young adults are diminished. A prominent example of the power of voice is demonstrated by Amanda Gorman, the young poet who captivated the audience during the 2020 Presidential inauguration. Gorman's resounding message to

America is, "Let not the darkness of silence dim greatness... for there is always light if only we are brave enough to see it..." (Gorman, 2021.p. 29). The educational system must acknowledge and nurture each youth's brilliance and inherent potential. Equally essential is the need to not only hear but truly listen to the voices and life experiences of the most marginalized members of our society if we are to make the promise of the American dream accessible to all.

At-Promise Legislation

This study aimed to explore the learning experiences of young adults who had previously been enrolled in an alternative education diploma program and had been labeled “at-risk.” In California, Assembly Bill AB 413 introduced the term “at-promise” as a more positive and empowering alternative to the previously used “at-risk” label, particularly for underserved and marginalized communities. The education code in California currently classifies students dealing with challenges such as poor attendance, low motivation, a history of academic underachievement, poverty, or low performance on standardized tests in math or English as "at-risk" (AB 413, 2019). However, the following text discusses the adoption of the definition provided by AB 413, which redefines these students as "at promise” to highlight their potential rather than focusing solely on their deficits. The term "at-risk" has long been used to describe students from precarious situations or circumstances that increase their chance of academic failure. It often refers to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those from low-income families, English learners, children in foster care, and the unsheltered (Davis, 2019). Several parts of the Educational and Penal Codes employ the term "at-risk." However, starting from January 1, 2020, Assembly Bill 413 (Jones-Sawyer et al.) effectively supplants the term "at-risk" with the term "at-promise" in each subsequent code section. The bill explains that, for the Education Code, "at-promise" conveys the same meaning as "at-risk.” Assemblymember Jones-

Sawyer argues that our education system uses the negative term "at-risk youth" to label our most vulnerable students. He believes this term conveys negativity and should be changed (Jones-Sawyer,2017, p.10). The label "at-risk" comes from a mindset or paradigm of deficit thinking, focusing on what children lack and being predicated on failure. As a state, we need to change our approach as a society and stop sending the message to young people that they are doomed to fail. Using labels that define individuals as failures only undermines their potential to learn (Ginnott, 2020). Educator and activist Gloria Ladson-Billings shares the same view, emphasizing "We cannot burden these young children with such labels from kindergarten onwards and then wonder why they struggle for the next 13 years, thinking, “Well, why aren't they performing well?"” (Ladson-Billings, 2020, p.1). She stresses the importance of referring to our youth as “at promise,” highlighting their great potential to succeed in all areas of life (p.1). Students identified as "at-promise" face many challenges and are risk of dropping out of high school or the K-12 educational system altogether (Horn & Carroll, 1997, p.15). Furthermore, they often come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, single-parent households, have siblings who have dropped out of school, experience frequent school transitions, have lower grade point averages, or have repeated a grade during their academic journey (Horn et al., 1998, p.22). These challenges, which "at-promise" students encounter through no fault of their own, often make obtaining the quintessential high school diploma difficult and elusive.

Highschool Diploma

Arguably, a high school education is imperative for thriving and surviving in today’s society. In the current climate, a high school diploma is essential for upward mobility (Yeakey, 2012). The consequences of lacking a high school diploma are dire for the individual and impact employment, lifetime earnings, and physical health while also increasing the risk of

underemployment and incarceration (Belfield & Levin, 2007; Chapman et al., 2011; Lleras-Muney, 2005). In today's global economy, knowledge, learning, information, and skilled intelligence become the primary resources for international commerce. Individuals in our society who lack the necessary levels of skill, literacy, and training required in this new era face effective disenfranchisement. This disenfranchisement extends to the material rewards of competent performance and the opportunity to participate actively in our national life. Consequently, a high standard of shared education is indispensable for preserving a free, democratic society. Human capital is widely recognized as a nation's most valuable asset, as emphasized in *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (1983). The National Commission on Excellence in Education highlights the potential danger of an undereducated population to the nation's well-being (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5).

In today's world, knowledge, education, information, and skilled intelligence are the new essential assets for global trade. It is crucial for the people in the United States to recognize that individuals lacking the prerequisite levels of literacy and training in this era face significant disadvantages. They are deprived of the material rewards of competent performance and the chance to fully engage in our national life. Ensuring a high standard of education accessible to all is vital to upholding a free and democratic society.

As previously mentioned, extensive research suggests that not obtaining a high school diploma can have negative effects on health, earnings, and overall well-being. Unfortunately, despite this understanding, dropout rates persist (Garcia, 2019). The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation report states, “high school dropouts, on average, earn $9,200 less per year than high school graduates, and about $1 million less over a lifetime than college graduates” (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p.20). These authors further report that high school dropouts are more than twice as

likely to transition deeper into poverty over time. Of note are California's graduation rates, which are below the national average at 83.6 percent (Kidsdata.org, n.d.). Among the students who drop out of school, only a meager 31% percent will re-enroll in high school and earn a diploma (Barrat et al., 2008). The current research indicates that among high school dropouts, re-enrollment and completion rates are still a challenge. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), about 30% of dropouts will re-enroll in high school. However, the rate of those who successfully earn a diploma remains lower, similar to past findings (NCES, 2022) (California Department of Education) This highlights the ongoing need for targeted interventions and support systems to encourage dropouts to return and complete their education.

National Graduation Rates

A large number of individuals who do not graduate from high school find themselves stuck in a cycle of underachievement and are often pushed toward alternative educational pathways. According to "Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Raising High School Graduation Rate" by Atwell et al. (2020), the graduation rates for low-income African American, Latinx, English Learners, Indigenous students experiencing homelessness, and students with disabilities are 41.8 percent. Students from these populations are overrepresented in alternative school programs, raising concerns about equal opportunity and access for all students, regardless of race, socio-economic background, or any other challenge they may encounter (Grad Nation, 2018). Research also indicates that further studies focusing on "at-promise" students could guide practitioners and policymakers toward making more socially just and equitable decisions. This could involve reinventing schools and designing effective programs tailored to meet the needs of "at-promise" students within alternative education settings (Berliner et al., 2008, p. 45). In 2023, the graduation rates for alternative education schools in the

California Central Valley reflect both challenges and improvements. According to the California Department of Education, alternative schools, including those with Dashboard Alternative School Status (DASS), are evaluated using combined four- and five-year graduation rates (California Department of Education, 2023). This method provides a more comprehensive picture of student outcomes over a longer period. The graduation rate data for alternative education schools shows significant variability depending on specific local educational agencies and schools. Generally, these rates are lower compared to traditional comprehensive high schools. For instance, the overall graduation rate for alternative schools statewide is often significantly lower than the state average, further highlighting the unique challenges faced by students in these settings.

Statement of the Problem

While numerous studies address the high school dropout issue, there is limited focus on capturing the voices of students themselves. Although some studies involve large numbers of students, qualitative examinations of student perspectives are often lacking (Chandler et al., 2015). A gap exists in the literature regarding students' perceptions of their experiences post-alternative education programs (Berliner et al., 2008, p. 45; Brown, 2010). While there is a wealth of literature regarding dropout prevention, very little has been reported about the lived experiences and motivations of "at-promise students" (Giroux, 2008, p. 132). Moreover, the loss of human potential and social capital due to the high dropout rate warrants further research to identify effective practices and policies for reducing it (Coleman, 1988, p. S95). Updated research indicates that the social and economic implications of America's high dropout rate are significant. The costs include lower tax revenues, higher crime rates, increased demand for social services, and loss of global economic competitiveness. This issue remains pressing, with

approximately 1.2 million students failing to graduate on schedule each year. Alliance for Excellent Education. (2023. This narrative inquiry study delves into the transformative learning experiences, motivating factors, and decisions made by individuals concerning dropout from alternative education or completion of their high school degrees. Empirical research on the effectiveness of alternative education programs is lacking (Quinn & Poirier, 2006). To promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (DEIA) in alternative education programs, it is imperative to incorporate student voices and their lived experiences (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). Consequently, this study aims to explore student voice and its implications for redesigning or reinventing an educational system that is more socially just. Providing opportunities for student voices in schools fosters active engagement and civic responsibility in a democratic society (Ranson, 2000). Providing opportunities for student voices in schools fosters active engagement and civic responsibility in a democratic society (Ranson, 2000). Research has demonstrated that when students are given a voice in their educational environments, they develop a stronger sense of agency, motivation, and commitment to their learning (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra, 2004). This involvement encourages a sense of ownership and responsibility, leading to improved academic outcomes and personal growth. Similarly, Mitra (2004) highlights that actively involving students in decision-making processes creates more inclusive and responsive learning environments, which is crucial for a democratic school culture (Fielding, 2001). Flutter & Rudduck (2004) emphasize that schools that incorporate student feedback see improvements in behavior, engagement, and overall climate. Moreover, Quinn and Poirier (2006) note that effective alternative education programs often integrate student voices to tailor approaches to meet unique student needs, making educational experiences more relevant and impactful.

However, despite these findings, there is a lack of research on the perspectives and motivations of students in alternative education settings. Understanding these experiences is essential to develop more effective practices and policies. This gap highlights the need for further research to ensure that all students, particularly those in alternative education, are empowered to participate fully in their educational journeys and in a democratic society.

Providing opportunities for student voices in schools fosters active engagement and civic responsibility in a democratic society (Ranson, 2000). While research highlights the benefits of student voice in enhancing agency and commitment (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra, 2004), there is a significant gap in understanding the perspectives and motivations of students in alternative education settings. This lack of research hampers the development of effective practices and policies tailored to these students' unique needs, emphasizing the need for further study in this area to support their educational and democratic participation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this proposed study is to investigate the perceived transformative learning experiences of young adults after they enroll in alternative education programs. The study aims to explore the resilience factors of individuals who have successfully completed their high school degrees. It is hoped that this research will illuminate and shed light on the best practices for similar students and challenge deficit thinking models.

Research Questions

Overarching Research Question: In what ways have transformative learning experiences contributed to the decisions of students enrolled in alternative education?

1. What challenges do students experience when enrolled in high school alternative education programs?

2. What home and community experiences do such students have while enrolled in alternative education programs?
3. In what ways are students who have been enrolled in alternative education programs motivated to complete their high school diploma?
4. How do individuals enrolled in alternative high school programs view the outcomes of their transformative learning experiences?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its ability to offer insights into the transformative learning experiences of students enrolled in alternative education and how these experiences shape their life decisions. Furthermore, this study holds significance in researching the challenges faced by "at-promise" youth through their journey in alternative education programs. (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Kelly et al., 2014

Definition of Terms

1. AAPI stands for Asian American and Pacific Islander, encompassing individuals who identify with or have ancestry from various Asian and Pacific Islander groups. This includes, but is not limited to, East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean), South Asian (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi), Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Filipino, Thai), and Pacific Islander (e.g., Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Tongan) groups (APA, 2020).
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2006; Carver et al., 2010; CDE, 2020; Kannam & Weiss, 2019; NCLB, 2002, 2020; Porowski et al., 2014).

3. **At-Risk Youth.** A term categorizes an individual or group of youth with an increased likelihood of educational failure and disconnection due to failing grades, low basic skills, chronic truancy, behavioral and disciplinary, and pregnancy (Carver et al., 2010; Moore, 2006). At-risk youth also have an increased likelihood of experiencing negative outcomes based on societal factors such as Adverse Childhood Experiences, low socioeconomic status (SES), and poor mental and physical health (Moore, 2006).
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5. **BIPOC.** Stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color is a term used to emphasize the unique relationship these groups have to white supremacy and racism. It seeks to highlight the particular injustices faced by Black and Indigenous communities while also acknowledging the broader struggles against systemic racism experienced by all People of Color. Examples include African Americans, Native Americans, Latinx, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders (The BIPOC Project, 2020).
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including lower earning potential, increased likelihood of unemployment, and higher chances of legal issues (APA, 2020).

7. **Latinx Chicano**: The term refers to individuals of Latin American descent, including those who identify as non-binary, gender non-conforming, or prefer a gender-neutral identity. The term "Latinx" is used as a gender-neutral or non-binary alternative to Latino or Latina, while "Chicano" refers to individuals of Mexican descent, particularly those in the United States (APA, 2020, p.22).
8. **LGBTQIA+**: An acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual/aromantic/agender, and other diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. The term "lesbian" refers to women who are attracted to other women, "gay" refers to individuals attracted to members of the same sex, "bisexual" refers to those attracted to both men and women, "transgender" refers to individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth, "queer/questioning" encompasses those who do not strictly identify with traditional categories of sexual orientation and gender identity or are still exploring their identity, "intersex" refers to individuals born with physical sex characteristics that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies, and "asexual/aromantic/agender" refers to those who do not experience sexual attraction, romantic attraction, or have a gender identity, respectively (APA, 2020, p. 18).
9. **Marginalized:** Refers to individuals or groups who experience social, economic, and political exclusion or disadvantage due to various factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation. This exclusion often results in limited access

to resources, opportunities, and rights, thereby perpetuating cycles of inequality and disenfranchisement (APA, 2020, p. 23).

10. **Trauma**: Refers to the psychological and emotional response to an event or experience that is deeply distressing or disturbing, often resulting in long-lasting adverse effects on an individual's well-being. Trauma can stem from a variety of sources, including but not limited to physical or sexual abuse, natural disasters, accidents, or witnessing violence. The effects of trauma can manifest in numerous ways, such as anxiety, depression, flashbacks, and other mental health issues. It can significantly impact a person's ability to function and cope with everyday life (APA, 2020, p. 30).
11. **Transformative leadership**. In research and education, a transformative paradigm is a theoretical framework or approach that aims to challenge and change existing systems, structures, and beliefs. It emphasizes the need for social change, equity, and empowerment. The transformative paradigm acknowledges power imbalances, aims to give voice to marginalized groups, and seeks to create positive and sustainable transformations at individual, societal, or institutional levels (Shields, 2013, p.5).
12. **Youth**: The term typically refers to persons between the ages of 15 and 24. This definition, adopted by the United Nations, recognizes this age group as a distinct phase of life marked by the transition from childhood to adulthood. Youth is a critical period for personal development, encompassing physical, psychological, and social growth. During this time, individuals often complete their education, enter the workforce, and establish independence and identity (United Nations, 1981).

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Resilience Theory as the underlying theoretical framework for a transformative leadership paradigm. This concept is pivotal in describing the foundational element of this research scope. Resilience is defined as a dynamic process wherein individuals demonstrate positive behavioral adaptation when confronted with significant adversity or trauma (Luthar et al., 2000). This aim is to gain insights into the success of "at-promise" students. Existing research indicates that this demographic of students thrives in small classes and nurturing environments where solidarity and relationships are fostered among "at-promise" youths (Bethea & Robinson, 2007, p. 5). The adolescent years encompass myriad psychological, social, and physiological changes that potentially lead students down a destructive life course (Aristilde, 2006). Within this same demographic, those at risk of dropping out of high school are "unlikely to have the minimum skills and credentials" necessary to be productive in society (Kaufman et al., 2001, p.45). Additionally, Transformative Leadership in Education, a theory advanced by Carolyn Shields (2013), offers an alternative leadership aimed at effecting significant and equitable change. Emphasizing democratic values, countering social injustices, and restructuring societal power relations (Jean et al., 2008; Shields, 2010). Transformative leaders engage in critical examination and challenge inequitable practices, nurture meaningful relationships, facilitate honest dialogue, and establish criteria for social justice (Shields, 2013). Through the creation of transformative learning experiences, these leaders strive to address marginalization, promote academic success for all students, and cultivate a learning community grounded in principles of equity and inclusion (Jean et al., 2008; Shields, 2010).

Methods Used for Research

The lens for this research study is a narrative inquiry qualitative research design. Participants provide ethnographic data regarding their lived experiences as “living human documents” as members of alternative education programs. The tools utilized in this research are interviews. Research questions have been devised based on the scope of this project. The data collected provides the foundation for the next steps in alternative education programs.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 introduces the research study, outlining its purpose, significance, and methodology. It begins by highlighting the gaps in existing literature regarding the experiences of students in alternative education programs and the need to amplify their voices. The significance of the study lies in its potential to shed light on transformative learning experiences and resilience factors among these students. The chapter explains the theoretical framework of Resilience Theory and Transformative Leadership in Education, which provide the conceptual underpinnings for the study. Moreover, the research design is introduced, emphasizing the narrative inquiry qualitative approach and using interviews as the data collection method. The participants' role as "living human documents" is underscored, emphasizing the richness of ethnographic data they offer. Research questions are presented, guiding the inquiry into students' experiences and the implications for alternative education programs. Overall, the Chapter sets the context for the study, outlining its objectives, theoretical foundations, research design, and anticipated contributions to the field of alternative education. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the focus of this research study. The focus of this study is to inquire into the transformative learning experiences of students enrolled in alternative education. The hope is to determine how these experiences contributed to the life decisions of the sample pool for this study. Additionally,

the chapter introduces the upcoming discussion on the review of the literature concerning the varied challenges and experiences that serve as obstacles in the lives of "at-promise" youth.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Young adults with minimal resources and communal support can face challenges in being successful in school. Alternative education programs are necessary to provide marginalized students with a springboard for equitability. This review of the literature is organized into three sections. The first section discusses the pain of trauma. The second section describes the promise of alternative education at the high school level. The third section includes the power of transformative learning experiences.

The Pain of High School Students Enrolled in Alternative Education Programs

"We are the total of our experiences. Those experiences – be they positive or negative – make us the person we are at any given point in our lives" (Neblett, B.J). Traumatic experiences can positively or negatively affect the individual and reinforce a paradigm of deficit or resilience thinking (Al & Park, 2020)**.** Trauma is more prevalent today, and the educational system is increasingly aware of the impact of trauma on students' lives. At least "one of the reasons for increased attention to the problem of trauma involves increased recognition of its pervasiveness (Hodas, 2006). Trauma can be defined as an overwhelming experience that undermines the individual's belief that the world is good and safe (Berry et al., 2013). The American Psychological Association (APA) defines trauma as "an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster" (p.10). Research indicates that a traumatic event can leave psychological symptoms long after the physical injuries have healed.

In contrast, Briere and Scott (2015) conclude that despite its breadth, the DSM–5 definition is limiting because actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence need not occur for people to perceive an event as traumatic. Similarly, SAMHSA emphasizes that

trauma is subjective. “A particular event may be experienced as traumatic for one individual and not for another” (SAMHSA, 2012, p. 8). In this study, “trauma” refers to experiences that cause intense physical and psychological stress reactions. Subsequently, “Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being” (SAMHSA, 2012, p. 2). Young adults are experiencing trauma at increasingly high rates. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicates, “more than half of all U.S. children will experience trauma in the form of abuse, neglect, violence, or challenging household circumstances, and 35 percent of children have experienced more than one type of traumatic event” (CDC, 2019, p. 17). According to the CDC, trauma is perhaps one of our nation's most significant public health crises today (CDC, 2019). As the bell rings and students return to school, the educational system increasingly bears witness and is taking notice of the effects of these traumatic events on students' lives. At least one of the reasons for this increased attention to the problem of trauma involves increased recognition of its pervasiveness (Hodas, 2006). The research underscores the importance of examining childhood traumatic experiences and challenges “at-promise” students encounter.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), research indicates, “More than half of all U.S. children have experienced some kind of trauma in the form of abuse, neglect, violence or household circumstances, and 35 percent of children have experienced more than one type of traumatic event” (p.17). “A quarter of all high school students will experience a traumatic life event before they graduate high school (Costello et al., 2002). Traumatic events can have long-term psychological effects impacting an individual for a lifetime. Tiercher (2000)

supports this stance and argues that the psychosocial impacts of trauma can last a lifetime and are shown as the “wounded child” diagnosis well into adulthood (p.1).

Trauma Impacts Learning

Trauma does not remain at the schoolhouse door but comes to school with students and impacts learning. The impact of childhood trauma on the biological, psychological, and social disorders that may ensue can have devastating outcomes on a young person’s ability to learn in educational settings. Trauma affects the learning environment, socio-emotional maturation, and student well-being. Students may experience ongoing difficulties in the classroom resulting from daily classroom stressors such as learning new information, physical and cognitive delays, and behavioral expectations that trigger their already dysregulated arousal responses (Brunzell et al., 2015). Children who have experienced traumatization may have a severely compromised ability to regulate their body’s stress or arousal responses, resulting from the influence of trauma on critical neurological and psychological systems (Coade et al., 2008; Downey, 2007).

In addition to affecting a child’s regulatory abilities, trauma’s impact on the developing brain can significantly impair a child’s ability to form a permanent attachment to the primary caregiver, thus compromising the child’s capacity for creating and maintaining positive relational bonds (Van der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996). The literature studied underpins the importance of the student-teacher relational bond and its correlation to academic achievement and classroom learning (Ames, 1992; Brophy, 1998; Brophy & Kher, 1985). The fear and pain associated with trauma can impact a student’s productivity. Trauma may manifest as poor academic performance or disruptive classroom behavior (Frieze, 2015). Traumatic experiences impact the learning environment and may show up in student behaviors in the classroom setting as “passivity, nonengagement, daydreaming, physical and verbal aggression, or the inability to focus and

concentrate" (Sitler, 2009, p.120). SAMHSA (2012) concludes that "neurobiological, epigenetics and psychological studies have shown that traumatic experiences in childhood can diminish concentration, memory, and the organizational and language abilities children need to succeed in school" (p.13). Traumatic stressors experienced by students can have long-lasting effects both physically and psychologically, including brain development, socio-emotional growth, and academic achievement (Cole et al., 2013). Students come to school to learn; however, the effects of trauma interrupt the process. Learners often engage in defiant behavior at school due to trauma. Frequently, students who have experienced trauma come to school with good intentions to learn and have positive interactions. However, they often find themselves distracted, defiant, and engaging in disruptive behavior (Cole et al., 2009). Osofsky (1995) describes how trauma is expressed in the classroom and found that "children drew in graphic detail pictures of shootings, drug deals, stabbings, fighting, and funerals and reported being scared of the violence and something happening to them" (p. 783). Souers et al. (2016) assert, "Trauma confronts schools with a serious dilemma: how to balance their primary mission of education with the reality that many students need help in dealing with traumatic stress" (p. 398).

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2014) indicates that a staggering forty percent of students have been exposed to some trauma, such as sexual assault or physical assault, or have witnessed a crime. The National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention (2012) suggests that approximately 26% of children in the United States will witness or experience a traumatic event before they turn age four (p. 2). Therefore, it is essential to understand trauma's impact on teaching and provide strategies and practices that support learners and teachers. It is imperative to understand the long-lasting impact of trauma on

learning if the most marginalized and disenfranchised students in alternative education settings are to engage in the learning process effectively.

The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (2020) shows that the best practices modeled in schools with fewer safety issues like violence, weapons, theft, and bullying focus more on instructional practices. It can foster a more positive working environment for "at-promise" youth, which may mitigate the effects of trauma on learning. The following section examines vicarious trauma, which broadens the definition and impact of trauma.

Vicarious Traumatization and Secondary Traumatic Stress

This section briefly begins with a definition of related terms associated with trauma. The DSM-5 expands the definition of trauma to include vicarious exposure (exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence) in one (or more) of the following ways: directly experiencing the traumatic event(s); witnessing, in person, the traumatic event(s) as it occurred to others; learning that the traumatic event(s) happened to a close family member or close friend, threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental), or experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (p. 271). Younger youth and those from lower socio-economic status are at increased risk of vicarious trauma (VT) susceptibility after witnessing a distressing, traumatic event. These individuals do not have the lived experience to process such circumstances and are ill-equipped to deal with trauma (De Jong et al., 1999; Ensel & Lin, 1998). Knowing or witnessing a peer's traumatic event is burdensome for young bystanders (Lerias & Byrne, 2003). Further, intervening in a crisis or having firsthand knowledge of a traumatic event can emotionally affect youth (Erickson et al., 2001; Lind, 2000; Lugris, 2000). The numbers are staggering; countless youth in the U.S. witness violence in the home, at school, and the community (Finkelhor et al.,

2009). Additionally, youth witnessing various types of vicarious trauma, such as “parents divorcing, losing a loved one, and living in a violent neighborhood, are also at a higher risk of engaging in delinquency and violence themselves” (Eitle & Turner, 2002, p.2). These exposed youth experience increased arousal in the form of anxiety, unexplained anger, irritability, and the like, which are common in those who are vicariously traumatized (Carlier et al., 2000; Eriksson et al., 2001; Lind, 2000; Son et al., 1998; Steed & Downing, 1998).

Vicarious traumatization is distinct in that it is defined as “the transformation of a helper’s inner experience because of empathetic engagement with clients and their trauma” (Saavitine & Pearlman, 1996, p.2). Vicarious trauma is defined as “the natural and consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other. Vicarious trauma can show up as the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person” (p. 7). Subsequently, students and teachers may also experience secondary traumatic stress. Hill (2011) defines secondary traumatic stress (STS) as “The natural, predictable, treatable, and preventable, an unwanted consequence of working with suffering people” (p.14). Yassen (1995) also asserts that “STS cannot be prevented since it is a normal and universal response to abnormal (violence induced) or unusual events (disasters)” (p.178). Individuals in the caring professions, such as first responders, counselors/ therapists, and law enforcement, often experience secondary traumatic stress. Hill (2011) underscores the notion that educators who teach and work with traumatized students are susceptible to the effects of STS.

While having firsthand knowledge of or experiencing a traumatic event with friends or family can be psychologically and physically devastating, trauma does not have to occur next door to be impactful. Sharkey and Sampson (2015) suggest that violence in the community, seen

or unseen, is equally traumatic and problematic. Research indicates that violent crime in impoverished neighborhoods takes a terrible toll on victims, families, and friends. Nearby residents and neighbors are also affected by vicarious trauma as it threatens and unravels the fabric of the community, making them more susceptible to marginalization (Hardin, 2009). While experiences with violence are detrimental to mental health, violence is only one type of experience considered to be traumatic. Duplechain, Reigner, and Packard (2008) extend traumatic events to include "hearing gunshots, witnessing muggings, stabbings, or shootings; or seeing a dead body" (p. 118).

According to Kuban and Steele (2011), traumatic events also include "medical procedures, drowning accidents, house fires, car fatalities, substance-abusing parents, divorce, and living with a terminally ill relative" (p. 41). Experiences are traumatic if they happen to the child directly and to their loved ones or other people around them. These experiences include but are not limited to, divorce, death, injury, sexual and physical abuse, severe accidents, cancer or life-threatening illness, natural or manufactured disasters, war, terrorism, physical punishment, female genital mutilation/cutting, child labor, prostitution, pornography, bullying, and suicide (Little et al., 2011). Living in poverty, displacement from homes, and having a parent serving in a war zone are also experiences that are traumatic for children (Sitler, 2009). Younger youth and those from lower socio-economic status are at increased risk of vicarious trauma (VT) susceptibility after witnessing a distressing, traumatic event. These individuals do not have the lived experience to process such circumstances and are ill-equipped to deal with trauma (De Jong et al., 1999; Ensel & Lin, 1998).

Knowing or witnessing a peer's traumatic event is burdensome for young bystanders (Lerias & Byrne, 2003). Further, intervening in a crisis or having firsthand knowledge of a traumatic event can emotionally affect youth (Erickson et al., 2001; Lind, 2000; Lugris, 2000). Countless youth in the U.S. witness violence in the home, at school, and the community (Finkelhor et al., 2009). Additionally, youth witnessing various types of vicarious trauma, such as "parents divorcing, losing a loved one, and living in a violent neighborhood, are also at a higher risk of engaging in delinquency and violence themselves" (Eitle & Turner, 2002, p.2). These exposed youth experience increased arousal in the form of anxiety, unexplained anger, irritability, and the like, and are common in those who are vicariously traumatized (Carlier et al., 2000; Eriksson et al., 2001; Lind, 2000; Son et al., 1998; Steed & Downing, 1998). Vicarious trauma (VT) is distinct from other forms of trauma in that it is defined as" the transformation of a helper's inner experience because of empathetic engagement with clients and their trauma" (Saavitine & Pearlman, 1996, p.2). Defied in this way, the student-teacher relationship can indicate vicarious trauma (VT) and secondary traumatic stress (STS).

In effect, "Teachers were not taught how to identify and address the challenges resulting from trauma, but they face the impact of trauma in their classrooms... not every student has a significant trauma history, but the needs of those who do can define the success of the entire classroom" (Sourers & Hall, 2016, p.10). Hill (2011) underscores the notion that educators who teach and work with traumatized students are also susceptible to the effects of STS. The federal mandate of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) ensures that "all children receive an adequate education that benefits students regardless of a student's socio-economic status, physical, mental or behavioral disorders, or experiences with trauma" (p.1). As such, NCLB provides a federal framework for the rationale for addressing the impact of vicarious trauma in alternative

education programs. It is not uncommon for “at-promise” youth to experience or hear stories of abuse and neglect, grief, homelessness, parental addictions to alcohol and drugs, domestic violence, community violence, and criminal activity. Many students in alternative education have experienced trauma in their lives, families, and communities. This trauma is a common occurrence and can have a profound impact on their well-being and academic performance. This next section will examine the prevalence of trauma in the lives of “at-promise” youth.

Prevalence of Trauma

Dodd (2015) explains that youth experience physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, neglect, community violence, domestic violence, homelessness, and the disruptive loss of loved ones, and 35 million children have experienced more than one type of traumatic event” (p.17). Trauma affects the most vulnerable before they graduate high school. In fact, “a quarter of all high school students will experience a traumatic life event before they graduate high school” (Costello et al., 2002, p.2). Many of these children are victims of physical violence, sexual or emotional abuse, or neglect (Berry, 2014). The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2014) indicates that an alarming forty percent of students have been exposed to trauma such as sexual assault or physical assault or have witnessed a crime. The National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention (2012) suggests that approximately 26% of children in the United States will witness or experience a traumatic event before they turn age four (p. 2).

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

A disproportionate number of students in alternative education programs experience multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and are in danger of dropping out. The

prevalence of ACEs is alarming and may negatively influence long-term learning. Seminal research was conducted by Anda and Felitti (1998) on the pervasiveness of ACEs with the Centers for Disease Control and the Department of Preventive Medicine at Kaiser Permanente in San Diego, California, in the late 1990s. The research studied eight types of ACEs, which included substance abuse in the home, parental separation or divorce, mental illness in the home, witnessing domestic violence, suicidal household member, death of a parent or another loved one, parental incarceration, and the experience of abuse (psychological, physical, or sexual) or neglect (emotional or physical). They found "a strong correlation between adverse childhood experiences and adult health and perhaps signaled that these ACEs were far more prevalent than previously thought" (p.17).

An extensive epidemiological study of adults who underwent adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in their youth shows that individuals who experienced ACEs are 2.5 times more likely to experience school problems. Some of those problems include lower achievement assessments, being at risk for language delays and difficulties, being suspended or expelled more often, being qualified for special education, failing a grade, and dropping out of mainstream education (Anda et al., 2005). Outcomes of ACEs found an association between ACEs and the risk for poor health outcomes, including asthma, ischemic heart disease, stroke, obesity, diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, autoimmune disease, substance use disorder, and sexually transmitted diseases. Mental health consequences of adversity include emotional and behavioral problems, school failure, major depressive disorder (MDD), anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and dissociative disorders, which similarly increase in a dose-response relationship with adversity. Not only are those with ACEs sicker, but they have lower overall satisfaction with their lives, have less access to health care, use more expensive health care, and

die nearly 20 years earlier on average. Recent research has highlighted the prevalence and types of trauma specifically affecting marginalized students.

A significant study by the American Academy of Pediatrics (2023) found that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) continue to be prevalent among U.S. adolescents, with particular impacts on marginalized groups. This includes exposure to violence, abuse, and other traumatic events, which can lead to long-term health and educational challenges (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2023). Additionally, research from Current Psychiatry Reports emphasizes the cumulative effects of historical and intergenerational trauma on minority youth. Native American youth, for example, report the highest rates of physical and sexual abuse, parental substance abuse, and exposure to violence compared to other racial/ethnic groups. This historical trauma significantly contributes to current psychological stress and health inequities among these populations (Sood et al., 2022). African American youth also face substantial trauma due to ongoing racial discrimination and structural racism. These experiences, including higher exposure to community violence and overrepresentation in the foster care system, exacerbate their risk for various mental health issues and distrust in healthcare systems (Sood et al., 2022). Asian American youth have reported increased experiences of xenophobia and discrimination, particularly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This community faces unique challenges due to cultural stigmas around mental health and the "model minority" stereotype, which can hinder their access to necessary support services (Sood et al., 2022, p.5). These studies highlight the urgent need for trauma-informed care and targeted interventions to address the specific needs of marginalized students, helping to mitigate the long-term impacts of trauma on their educational and health outcomes.

Adolescents and Trauma Outcomes

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandates that "all children receive an adequate education that benefits students regardless of a student's socio-economic status, physical, mental or behavioral disorders, or experiences with trauma" (p.1). Therefore, NCLB provides a federal framework for the rationale for addressing the impact of trauma in alternative education programs. It is not uncommon for "at-promise" youth to experience or hear stories of abuse and neglect, grief, homelessness, parental addictions to alcohol and drugs, domestic violence, community violence, and criminal activity. Millions of school-aged children experience emotional wounds and trauma not recognized by mental health providers, teachers, or administration in today's school climate. "At-promise" learners from marginalized groups such as foster care, homelessness, or those involved with the juvenile justice system are exposed to traumatic events, which negatively impact academic achievement and classroom behavior.

The Life Cycle Completed outlines Erik Erickson's eight stages of psychosocial development (Erikson & Erickson, 1997). The stage of development correlated with teens is Identity vs. Role Confusion. Erickson denotes that if trauma invades the teen's life, there will be a disruption in their self-identity. In terms of achievement, children who have experienced trauma have "poorer school performance, decreased IQ and reading ability, lower GPA, and more days of school absence" (Kuban & Steele, 2011, p. 41). Duplechain et al. (2008) found that exposure to violence harms reading achievement.

Students Who are Homeless

America is experiencing homelessness at unprecedented rates during the COVID-19 global pandemic. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, there were

approximately 580,000 homeless individuals in January 2020 (NAEH, 2020). In their annual Homeless Populations and Subpopulations Report, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) indicates 567,715 individuals are homeless and without permanent shelter in the United States. Statewide norms mean 161,548 homeless individuals in California, with a staggering 34,210 of those reporting as unaccompanied youth. The Central Valley, composed of Stockton and San Joaquin County, estimates 2,677 homeless or unsheltered individuals on any night. The increased number of homeless youths in America experiencing homelessness results from complex social forces, including poverty, lack of affordable housing units, racial inequities, trauma, and limited resources available to single parents, all magnified by the recent pandemic. Homelessness places "at-promise" youth in alternative education in danger of academic failure. Among the nation's homeless population, more than 1.5 million students from kindergarten through grade 12 experience homelessness at some point during a school year, totaling about 3 percent of all students in public schools (2018).

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (PL 100-77) federal law was enacted and signed into legislation in 1987 by Ronald Regan. The Bill provides funding to support districts that support homeless students (Hallett, 2017) and frames how schools identify and provide services to homeless students. It further defines a homeless person as lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence. The mandate explicitly mentions youth in shelters, welfare hotels, transitional programs, or places not ordinarily used as typical sleeping accommodations (e.g., streets, cars, movie theatres, and abandoned buildings). McKinney-Vento also includes individuals who live doubled-up with another family due to the economic crisis.

Homeless youth are not all the same but have different characteristics according to their relationship to familial support or access to social services and housing. There are examples of

homeless youth in the Central Valley receiving social services, living in temporary accommodations like hotels, living in vacant or abandoned buildings, doubled up, or in temporary shelters (Tierney et al.,2008). Even more so, there are “at-promise” youth in alternative education programs in the County Office of Education (COE) Alternative Education Program in the Central Valley forced to attend school virtually during the pandemic while living and sleeping in cars. Virtual schools during the pandemic while living and sleeping in cars. In response to these dire situations, COEs and Districts can provide the most marginalized students with Internet access and laptops due to McKinney Veto funding.

Alternative schools enroll twice as many students experiencing homelessness as all schools statewide. Several studies comparing homeless and low-income youth have found that homelessness poses additional educational challenges, including high rates of mobility and limited access to resources (e.g., Culhane et al., 2003; Ensign & Santelli, 1998; Shinn et al., 1998). Other research indicates that homeless people, compared to those who are domiciled, are significantly more likely to have experienced physical/sexual abuse in childhood (Herman et al., 1997; Tam et al., 2003). It is also more common for unhoused youth to be victims of interpersonal violence as adults (Wenzel et al., 2004) and sustain an unintentional injury (Frencher et al., 2010).

Students in Foster Care

Approximately half a million foster children are in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2007b). The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) legislation funds local educational agencies (LEAs). It defines foster youth as any child subject to a juvenile dependency court (Cal. Welf. & Inst. Code § 300) petition, whether or not the child has been removed from their home; any child who is the subject

of a juvenile delinquency court (California Welfare and Institutions Code section 602. Cal. Welf. & Inst. Code § 602) petition and who has been removed from their home by the court and placed into foster care under a "suitable placement" order. This includes youth placed in a foster, relative, or group home. It does not include youth in a juvenile detention facility, such as a juvenile hall or camp.

The educational outlook for children in foster care is cause for alarm (Zeitlin et al., 2012). Children and youth in foster care represent one of the most academically vulnerable populations in schools. While California tracks the progress of other academically vulnerable student groups, there is little statewide information about the education of school-age children in the foster-care system (Zeitlin et al., 2012, p. 17). The California legislature took a critical first step toward improving foster youth's education outcomes when it identified foster care students as an "at-risk" population needing additional services and support to close the achievement gap (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). According to the American Bar Association (2014), many students in the child welfare system do not receive adequate education, leading to an achievement gap that often goes unnoticed by educators and child welfare professionals (p.9). Children and youth in foster care represent one of the most academically vulnerable student groups. There is little statewide information about the education of school-age children in the foster-care system and for whom it is legally responsible (Zeitlin et al., 2012, p. 17). The California legislature has taken a crucial initial step towards enhancing the educational outcomes of foster youth by categorizing students in foster care as an "at-risk" population that requires extra services and assistance to bridge the achievement gap.

Sponsored by the Stuart Foundation, "The Invisible Achievement Gap: Education Outcomes of Foster Youth in California's Public Schools" examines the educational outcomes of foster care

students in California. This publication underscores and refines the message from a growing body of research literature that students in foster care constitute a distinct subgroup of academically at-risk students. This message has not yet been clearly or fully translated from research to policy to practice. Backed by its sweeping new school finance reform plan, California is now setting out to track students' academic progress in foster care—the first state in the nation to do so. California students in foster care exhibit unique characteristics that make them a distinct at-risk student subgroup. This subgroup experiences a considerable disparity in achievement compared to other student groups (Barrat & Berliner, 2013, p. 10). Students in foster care are three times more likely to be African American than their counterparts. However, they are less likely to be Hispanic or designated as English learners than low-SES students or the overall student population statewide. They were classified with a disability at twice the rate of the comparison groups, and, among students with disabilities, students in foster care were about five times more likely to be classified with an emotional disturbance than other students. Students in foster care were also older in terms of their grade level. They had higher enrollment rates in grades 9, 10, or 11 than the comparison groups, a likely outcome of grade retention and a risk factor for students in foster care who were more likely than all comparison groups to drop out.

During the academic year of 2009/2010, throughout all high school grades, the single-year dropout rate for students in foster care was 8% percent, compared to the statewide dropout rate of 3% percent and dropout rates for the other at-risk groups between 3% and 5% percent. While the dropout rate for every student group increased at each higher grade level for grades 9–12, for students in foster care, the dropout rates in grades 9, 10, and 11 were consistently higher than for any of the other student groups, peaking at 14% percent in grade 12. Unfortunately, academic success remains elusive for too many foster care students. Many studies have shown

that students in foster care are more likely to fail in school. This is evident from their poor grades, high rates of absenteeism, grade retention, disciplinary referrals, and dropping out of high school (Christian, 2003).

Students in the Juvenile System

Research conducted by The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) has shed light on a significant and concerning connection between traumatic childhood experiences and a range of adverse outcomes that have a profound impact on the lives of young individuals. This research has highlighted that exposure to trauma during childhood can be a critical factor contributing to various adverse consequences, including delinquency, poor academic performance, and long-term health effects. The findings of these studies have revealed that students in alternative education programs are vulnerable to experiencing higher rates of traumatic events. This heightened exposure to trauma places them at a substantially greater risk for a myriad of problems, often setting them on a challenging trajectory that encompasses incarceration, chronic truancy, frequent suspensions, and academic failure.

The research, as conducted by Hockenberry and Billingsley in 2018, as well as the AOC Briefing in 2014, underlines the urgency of addressing the traumatic experiences of youth and the critical need for trauma-informed approaches within educational and juvenile justice systems. By recognizing and addressing the effects of trauma on these students, we can work toward breaking the cycle of adverse outcomes and improving the prospects for their future well-being and success. This research serves as a compelling call to action for policymakers, educators, and professionals in the juvenile justice system to implement trauma-informed practices and

interventions aimed at mitigating the devastating impact of childhood trauma on vulnerable youth.

The Promise of Alternative Education at the High School Level

Alternative high school programs offer various learning opportunities for students who struggle with academic or social-emotional issues in a traditional classroom setting (Brewster et al., 2016). The success of alternative high schools and programs can be attributed to smaller classrooms, one-on-one student-teacher ratios, and an overall supportive school environment (Foley & Pang, 2006; Lehr & Lang, 2003). Students in high school alternative education have a second chance for success. Alternative education can benefit "at-promise" students by providing individualized attention to keep them engaged in learning.

Alternative Education

Since the foundation of the American educational system, a duality has existed. It is arguably the case that this segmentation borders along racial lines: black and white, freed and enslaved person, wealth and poverty, power and pain. This dichotomy of separation bleeds into the fibers of the educational system. There are notions of separation and equality within the educational system. Timothy Young (1990), in his description of the history of alternative schools, asserts that alternatives in public education have existed since the very birth of American education. He describes educational opportunities that differed based on race, gender, and social class, which set the stage for the constantly evolving nature of the educational system in America.

The modern-day system of alternative schools can be traced back to its roots in the 1960s. Advocates argue that alternatives to the traditional school model are imperative to meeting the needs of all students (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Natriello et al., 1990; Raywid, 1989; Wehlage &

Rutter, 1987; Wehlage et al., 1989; Young, 1990). Charter schools and other public school choice models have been implemented to address the issue in recent years. However, alternative programs have been in place for many years. They have evolved from the 1960s to the present and are a popular educational alternative for many students.

One reason for the widely varying estimates of the number of alternative schools is that there is no agreement across the educational community on what constitutes an alternative school or program. The term may refer to schools of choice or where students are assigned. Although alternative programs and schools have existed for many years, there is still little consistent evidence of their effectiveness. Many educators believe that alternative education is a critical answer to meeting the needs of disenfranchised youth. State law authorizes three types of alternative schools to serve high school students who are "at risk" of dropping out: continuation schools, community schools, and community day schools. In addition, some districts use independent studies to educate at-risk high school students. Between 10 percent to 15 percent of high school students enroll in one of these programs each year. Students at risk of dropping out of high school often attend an alternative school or program during their time in high school.

Existing statutes authorizing community schools date from the 1970s. These schools, operated by county offices of education (COE), often serve students expelled for severe offenses in school or are involved with juvenile law enforcement agencies. The expansion of mandatory expulsion laws in the 1990s motivated the state to create community day schools. These schools allow districts to operate programs like those run by county offices.

Unlocking the Potential of Transformative Learning: The Voice of Change

Studying the experiences of youth who have encountered ACEs and their voices is necessary. Helping students discover their unique voice is crucial to their growth and

development as young adults. According to Mezirow (1997), transformative learning involves the learner developing their interpretations rather than relying on those of others. Mezirow identifies four key learning processes, including elaborating on an existing point of view, establishing new points of view, transforming our point of view, and becoming aware of and critically reflecting on our biases towards groups different from our own. The role of a transformative leader is essential in this process. The author elaborates that those participating in literacy programs gain access to information to orient themselves in the world, give voice to their ideas, make decisions and act independently, and build a bridge to the future by learning how to learn (p. 8). By giving voice, transformative leaders can arm students with alternative education tools they will articulate to others who they are because of their specialized learning. Mezirow (1997) goes on to say that "the educator's responsibility is to help the learners reach their objectives" (p. 8). The transformative leader's role is to establish an environment where learners can grow confident as they proceed on their academic journey. One way to do this in the classroom is to provide opportunities for students to engage in meaningful ways with culturally responsive activities that speak to students' interests and strengths. Outdoor educational and wildness trips are a great way to build relationships with students. High school wilderness trips or outdoor education programs can be transformative. These experiences involve teamwork, risk-taking, and self-reliance, leading students to develop resilience and a greater appreciation for the environment (Gilliland & Standen, 2016). For instance, we have taken students on a quest to overnight trips to Lake Tahoe, and they have been transformative experiences. Being with a student when they experience wet snow for the first time is transformative for the student, the teacher, and the school community. Recently, I worked with an art therapist at a local juvenile hall where students created their spirit animals using different mediums. Creating a space for

grace where students can be children is transformative. Research indicates that art therapy programs specifically tailored for students who have experienced trauma can provide a safe and creative outlet for self-expression. Through art, students can explore their feelings, process their experiences, and build resilience (Malchiodi, 2012).

Transformative Leadership

Shields (2013) establishes a theory of Transformative Leadership in Education as an alternative approach to leadership for significant and equitable change. Specifically, transformative leadership (TL) centers on promoting democratic values, countering social injustices, and supporting the ongoing restructuring of societal power relations (Jean et al., 2008; Shields, 2010). I critically examine how the status quo marginalizes many students and their families, preventing them from being heard or acknowledged. I suggest that transformative educational leaders may foster the academic success of all children through engaging in honest dialogue. Transformative leadership facilitates the development of solid relationships, supplants pathologizing silences, challenges existing beliefs and practices, and grounds educational leadership in some criteria for social justice. MacKinnon (2000) argues that transformative educational practice grounded in social justice must be "concerned with the quality of relationships among all those who constitute 'the school' and the nature of the school circumstances in which children learn" (p. 7). Shields (2004) adds that in order for teachers "to promote deeper understanding and more meaningful relationships and to enhance social justice for all students," they must overcome "pathologizing silences and understand that learning is situated in relationships in which students need to be free to bring their realities into the conversation to 'make sense of things'" (p. 117). Shields (2003) has operationalized this claim by developing strategies for creating a school profile as a basis for a blame-free examination of

current practices. Transformative leadership begins with questions of social justice and democracy, critiques inequitable practices, and addresses individual and public good.

Motivating Factors to Complete High School Diploma

In the dissertation written by Ernest Garcia (2020) on *A Journey of Determination and Hope: Returning to High School After Dropping Out*, he highlights the benefits of students returning to complete their diplomas. Garcia explored the reasons why students return to earn their high school diplomas. One advantage he mentions is that those students who return to complete their certifications can pursue an advanced degree (p. 6). Garcia points out that "a person's life will be bleak in terms of financial health and general well-being" if they drop out (p. 10). His research suggests that "education leaders need to track dropouts and understand their experiences to assist them re-integrate with educators and other learners" (Brown, 2010, p. 56). Garcia concludes that "those who return to school and earn a high school credential are also more likely to avail themselves of additional opportunities, such as college, vocational training, and higher-paying jobs" (Garcia, 2020, p. 12). The motivation for those to complete high school can lead to interpersonal success for the student. California Department of Education reports approximately 800 public alternative schools (Active ASAM Schools, 2016). The report further indicates that alternative high schools are "designed to meet the needs of credit-deficient and other youth vulnerable to dropping out before completing the minimum requirements for a regular high school diploma" (2016). Most students in alternative high schools have reached the age of 16 and lack sufficient academic credits to remain on track with their peers (Ruiz et al., 2017). In California, more Afro American and Latinx students are enrolled in alternative high schools. Approximately 20,000 alternative education programs were in the United States 2001 (Barr & Parett,2001). Students who attend these schools often come from impoverished

neighborhoods and are overwhelmingly minorities (Kleiner et al., 2002). Students are likely referred to alternative education if they risk academic failure, truancy, disruption, or facing suspension or expulsion (Kleiner et al., 2002). “It is our school and its way of teaching that is alternative, not our students” (Raywid, 1994, p. 26). Initially, the same unsuccessful students in traditional schools are sent or choose to attend alternative education programs. The learning environment may change; however, academic, behavioral, and familial challenges follow them in cumulative legal files, suspensions, and expulsion reports mandated by the school district. Demographics of students in alternative education reflect students in traditional school settings and are but a microcosm of society. “At-promise” youth in alternative education face a myriad of challenges. They are at greater risk than their peers in traditional schools for school failure, poor academic performance, truancy, and grade retention (Johnson, 1997). An examination of the characteristics of students in alternative education suggests they share similar adverse traits. Fuller & Sabatino (1996) describe this population as “cynical, suffering academic and behavioral adjustment problems in school, possessing antisocial attitudes and behaviors, lacking educational and career goals, and having problematic relationships with both family and peers” (p. 295).

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

Nicholas Hobbs (1994) believes that emotional problems in children are a symptom not of individual pathology but a malfunctioning ecosystem. Students with emotional and behavioral issues or learning disabilities often struggle in the conventional school system. “At-promise” students may become disenfranchised and drop out for many of the same reasons as their nondisabled peers (Butler-Nalin & Padilla, 1989; Office of Special Education Programs, 1994; Wolman et al., 1989). Students with disabilities drop out at a higher rate than those without

disabilities. Research in the early 1990s indicated that the dropout rate for students with disabilities was as much as 20 percent higher than for students in the general school population.

Among students with disabilities, students with emotional-behavioral disorders were the most likely of students with disabilities to drop out (Butler-Nalin & Padilla, 1989; Marder, 1992). In 1994, the high dropout rate for students with severe emotional disturbance prompted the release of a National Agenda from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), which highlighted the need for research to be conducted to address the issue. Unfortunately, upon reviewing the data, the outlook appears quite dismal. This information can be found in the report titled "Alternative Education: A Brief History and Research Synthesis," published by Project FORUM at NASDSE on February 1, 2002, on page 14. Studies show that many students with disabilities, mainly those identified with learning and social-emotional needs, access alternative schools to help them complete their education (Gorney & Ysseldyke, 1993). One study of Minnesota alternatives found that 19 percent of students enrolled in the programs had some disability. Over 50 percent of those students were identified as having an emotional or behavioral disorder (Gorney & Selke, 1993). There is also evidence that these students may not be labeled "disabled" once they enter an alternative program or school. This occurs because either they were not assessed for special education services in the alternative setting or chose not to use their particular education label upon entering the alternative program (Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Gorney, 1995; Gorney & Ysseldyke, 1993).

The Power of Transformative Learning Experiences: My Voice and Journey

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his 1963 speech “I Have a Dream,” eloquently expressed the idea of equal rights for all Americans. A dynamic orator, he used his voice to empower a movement, a people, a nation. In the same manner, he cautions of the dangers of silence. “Our

lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter" (King, 1963, p.5). The value and power of voice were instilled in me since childhood. My familial upbringing vicariously taught me the tenets of transformative leadership's philosophy that surmises that without voice and dialogue, no new ideas, no accurate understanding, and no actual change exist. Further, I was taught that I was responsible for empowering others to value and use their voices to evoke change. As I reflect on my past, I recall a transformative experience that threatened to silence me and was the catalyst for my transformation from paraprofessional to professional. I remember a specific moment from my time working at the elementary school as a classified employee. It was a full circle moment for me because this was the same school I attended as a child, and my mom taught there as an instructional assistant. As usual, the students and I played. When the bell rang, all the students froze. All play stopped - except for Vincent (not his real name). He was a vivacious, high-spirited, homeless, Afro-American fifth grader. Vincent needed the winning shot to redeem himself and be included with his friends. He rarely played because he was teased excessively, smelled funny, wore dirty clothes, and did not take baths. Rebelliously, he took the final shot and scored! Claudia Landings (not her real name), a Caucasian woman and department chair, stormed towards Vincent. She ordered him to stop bouncing the ball, follow directions, and get in line! I watched in utter dismay as she yelled and reprimanded him, reiterating how he "never follows directions." I tried to intervene on his behalf, but she yelled at me, "Stay out of it." She said, "You do not have the education to make decisions about student conduct because you do not have a college degree." We stood silently diminished, Vincent and I, me and Vincent. Later that afternoon, I reported the incident to the principal, anticipating vindication. However, the principal agreed with her evaluation. She

determined that Vincent did not follow directions, was indeed habitually truant, off-task in class, and seemed to have difficulty building relationships with students and staff; he was at risk.

Vincent's marginalization is not uncommon for Black boys in the K-12 educational system. Jawanza Kunjufu (2005) suggests that Black boys are suspended and expelled at disproportionately higher rates compared to their counterparts. The principal noted that as a paraprofessional, I was unqualified to make decisions about students. She encouraged me to earn a college degree that would be ammunition in the fight for equality. A college degree would afford entrance into the academic arena and bestow voice, power, autonomy, and authority. As a result, I resigned from my job and relocated from Los Angeles to Northern California to pursue a degree at a prominent University. In retrospect, at that moment, it became clear to me that the Principal and Department Chair had a voice and power and they exemplified which voices had agency and which did not. I have come to understand that the baccalaureate degree is a form of social capital and that it held currency by those who were privileged and bestowed worth and voice. This moment was the catalyst for my transformation journey to find my voice and create learning spaces for students. I want them to discover their voices and be equipped with the tools to use their voices for the change they want to see. This occurrence could have gone differently with transformative leadership at the helm. The leadership team would have examined the inequitable power distribution between all parties involved. All educators could have looked at the incident for evidence of interconnectedness, allowed time for reflection, and realized the need for spiritual grounding to be guided by a sense of purpose and public values. Creating a space where students feel connected and valued would have been at the forefront, and the emphasis on "changing hearts and minds would have been the essential role of school leadership" and would be a critical role of the school (Shields, 2018, p.9). Everyone would have

advocated for the least advantaged, in this case, Vincent, and adapted to the complexity of his needs.

This incident, in hindsight, reminded me that there is a significant disparity in what student voice means to those with power and privilege within the educational arena. Researchers on student voice have expressed a lack of consensus on how to clearly define student voice (Conner, 2016; Cook-Sather, 2006). A contemporary definition of student's voice is: "The process of how we [those that are not students] facilitate, listen to, act on and influence policy and practices in classrooms and schools through the experiences, views, and accounts of young people" (Bourke & Loveridge, 2018, p. 2). The Glossary of Education Reform (2013) defines a student's voice as the "values, opinions, beliefs, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds of individual students and groups of students in a school, and the instructional approaches and techniques based on student choices, interests, passions, and ambitions." (p.1). Bakhtin (2011) asserts, "Opportunities for students to speak and to be heard are important elements of democratic schooling processes, but research into student voice has shown that a culture of silence is a more common feature of schooling" (p.12).

As a result of the disparities surrounding student voice, the voices of youth who were enrolled in alternative education programs should be studied. Helping students find their voice is empowering and can "transform a learner from observer to initiator (Boswick, 2015. p.1). The systematic marginalization of many students and their families by the prevailing educational culture, leading to their exclusion and neglect, calls for a critical examination.

I propose that transformative educational leaders may foster the academic success of all students through engaging in open and honest dialogue that facilitates the building of meaningful relationships, replacing deafening silences, challenges existing beliefs and practices, and

establishes educational leadership as a form of social justice. Shields (2004) emphasizes that educators should endeavor to ensure that schools are equitable and just for all learners. In the future, the first step should be to give voice to the deafening silence that surrounds education, race, ethnicity, and social class. Similarly, MacKinnon (2000) contends that "transformative educational practice must begin with a pedagogy of social justice in which teachers begin with 'The local,' their own stories and those of their students" (p.11). Shields (2003) has operationalized this claim by developing strategies for establishing a school profile as a basis for a blame-free examination of present practices. For instance, the profile may comprise data about the sex, age, race, and gender of a school's staff and student population to serve as a starting point to evaluate which groups are minoritized or marginalized and or which groups have been allotted additional resources and privileges. A school district may look at the data on which students in alternative education programs were referred to a school-based behavioral intervention program based on teacher recommendation. The profile might indicate that most students sent to the behavioral intervention program are Black and Brown males. At the same time, the referring teachers are habitually White females, and the teachers within the specialty program are White males. Data might also describe a noticeable decline in the rehabilitative program participants' graduation rates. They may show that students attended school for fewer hours per week than their counterparts and were not enrolled in core classes to meet the state's high school graduation requirements. This data could result in a school or district re-examining its practices and implementing interventions promoting attendance, achievement, and graduation rates. The school or district may also wish to implement anti-bias training and practices for the predominantly white teachers and provide supplementary support to help these teachers provide high-quality instruction and manage behavior in the classroom versus referring out.

In transformative learning, the learner "must learn to make their interpretations rather than act on those of others" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). Mezirow notes that there are four processes of learning: 1. to elaborate an existing point of view, 2. to establish new points of view, 3. to transform our point of view, and 4. to become aware and critically reflective of our generalized bias in the way we view groups other than our own (p.7). The role of the transformative leader is an essential one. The transformative leader facilitates a diverse, equitable, and inclusive space, challenging students to find and use their voices and perspectives. For instance, following Mezirow's guidelines of learning and voice during a Restorative Circle, students were asked to share their knowledge and understanding of "walking the blade," informally defined as the indoctrination of young girls or boys on the street into prostitution. Transformative educators create a space where students are encouraged to speak of lived experiences without judgment, where their lived experiences and perceptions of "walking the blade" are explored through multiple lenses, such as poverty, race, culture, familial dynamics, personal experience, and socioeconomic status. Transformation occurs within the institution and individual when deficit thinking is examined and abandoned and when students can elaborate on their lived experience, expand that knowledge base, transform their point of view, and critically reflect. In the example mentioned above, students were provided the space, freedom, and voice to share their insights, outlook, and viewpoints on what being "bladed "means to them. By giving voice, transformative leaders arm students in alternative education with the tools they need to articulate to others who they are as a result of their lived experiences, in this instance, being "Bladed." Mezirow (1997) goes on to say, "The educator's responsibility is to help the learners reach their objectives" (p. 8). The transformative leader's role is to establish an environment where the learner can grow in confidence as they proceed on their academic journey, dismantle the concept of marginalizing

and silencing, and reacquaint learners with listening and empowering. Shields (2005) maintains a need for reflection, self-discovery, and awareness for authentic learning to occur. Moreover, educators need spiritual (not religious) undertakings to be guided by a sense of purpose and value and to foster caring and engaged students. The above example employing restorative practices illustrates transformative leaders' caring, insightful, and nonjudgmental position.

Transformative Leadership

Two similar approaches to social change and leadership: Transformational and Transformative. I am going to be using transformative leadership for this study. The term transformative can be applied to leadership focused on equity and social justice (Fletcher, 2020). Shields (2013) establishes a theory of transformative leadership in education as an alternative approach to leadership to enact significant and equitable change to address societal ills. Specifically, transformative leadership (TL) centers on promoting democratic values, countering social injustices, critiquing inequitable practices, and supporting the ongoing restructuring of societal power relations for the individual and public good.

In the public education system, this translates to identifying the disparities in outcomes for individual and district-level schools. What is the profile of successful students? What is the profile of students who struggle? Moreover, most importantly, what are the resilience factors of students who face challenges and yet succeed? Sacs and Sedaka (2021) have identified ten focus areas to translate transformative leadership into actionable change. As a researcher, of these ten, I have identified three that are most relevant to my proposed study. These fundamental tenets are especially applicable in an alternative education school setting and place emphasis on programs that are relationship-driven, actionable, and equitable. A relationship-driven and actionable model is key to expanding a transformative approach to education. Sacs and Sedaka (2021)

assert that transformation begins with establishing positive relationships. A Transformative leader gets to know their students and their families by holding parent focus groups, meeting with students to identify strengths and concerns, holding faculty meetings to discuss discipline concerns, and generating alternatives that keep students in school focused on learning. This emphasizes learning about the community the students and families live in and creating relationships between potential community resources and the school. Once strengths and challenges have been identified, each can be prioritized and implemented in a strategic plan.

Transformative leaders' emphasis on engaging with students and families both personally and academically in ways that are culturally responsive, strengths-based, and inclusive is paramount. It is well-established that parental involvement is essential to student achievement (Lopez, 2001). For schools to be effective at meeting the diverse needs of learners, there need to be systems of operations that are actionable, involve families in the educational process, and disseminate information and resources to students and their families in innovative ways both inside and outside of the school setting. Schools can accomplish this by addressing barriers to family engagement within schools that might be attributed to parents' work schedules, mental illness within the family, and/or health issues in the home and by providing special consideration or accommodations for parents who do not live with children perhaps due to incarceration or even homelessness. Schools have unique opportunities and can reinvent themselves by taking services directly to families, conducting virtual workshops, and expanding hours of operation that are more convenient and conducive for parents. For transformation to occur, educators' emphasis should refocus on building the capacity of others and spending purposeful time to meet and communicate with families, basically taking time to talk with and get to know the families as people versus just providing information. For instance, there are high-performing schools in the

Bay Area in California that practice “Venting Sessions” and engage in honest conversations about real-life matters and circumstances with families. These schools co-create and define what is effective in collaboration with families and often ask, “What are your hopes and dreams for your child?” Many parents have had a history of disappointment and or experienced terrible news about their children in alternative education programs. Therefore, improving the families’ trust, building family confidence, and becoming cheerleaders for success is vital. As educators bridge the gap between home and school, the services must be actionable yet fair, inclusive, and equitable.

The educational system frequently fails to meet the academic, socio-emotional, and economic needs of minoritized and marginalized communities, resulting in poor academic achievement, lower graduation rates, and persistent educational inequities (Shah, 2016). Sacs and Sedaka (2021) defines equity in education as the process of “eliminating system disparities that disproportionately affect students of color, low-income children, those with learning differences, and English learners” (p.9). Skrla and McKenzie (2011) stress the importance of equity in the following areas: academic, teacher quality, and programmatic equity, and advocate that “schools cannot be equitable and excellent until individual classrooms are equitable and excellent (p. 79). An example of an effort to achieve equity is the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) in Oakland, CA. Leadership and classroom teachers are working together to ensure classrooms are equitable, students are getting the services they need, and have “operationalized equity” (Sacs & Sedaka, 2021, p.10). As defined by Merriam-Webster (2022), equity is “justice according to natural law or right. Specifically, equity is freedom from bias against or favoritism for any group”. This contrasts with many schools focusing on equality, giving everyone the same resources, time, and support without differentiation. To be inclusive and equitable, OUSD has

adopted a paradigm of resilience focused on positive attributes and what students can accomplish versus deficit thinking, which emphasizes what they cannot. The OUSD utilizes feedback and data from multiple sources, including assessments, to reach and improve instruction. Educators are aware of their positionality and find ways to communicate with families while respecting language and cultural differences (Washington Alliance for Better Schools, 2003). The focus is on which groups are minoritized or marginalized versus which groups are allotted resources or privileges. A process is established to identify, discover, and cultivate students' unique gifts, talents, and interests. The district uses a data platform to collect, coordinate, and monitor information and services for youth in need. In Oakland, they target systemic gaps that disproportionately affect marginalized students and ensure the development and implementation of Success Plans for each student to increase access to essential support and opportunities. For instance, the district utilizes the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Model (MTSS) from the special education framework and applies the principles to general education. The OUSD utilizes qualitative data and feedback from multiple sources, such as teachers, community partners, students, and families, in conjunction with assessments to determine what students need and scaffold those supports and services.

When schools and districts are equitable, they value the opinions, beliefs, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds of the individual and groups of students in a school. Schools examine biases, interrupt, and eliminate inequitable practices, and create inclusive and just conditions for all learners (Bahatin, 2002). The Toronto Urban District Reform for Equity: The Case of the Model Schools for Inner Cities Program (MSIC) in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) is an example of an equity-minded district reform paradigm that spells out the steps for implementation. The MSIC Program in the TDSB envisions a paradigm, attitude, and philosophy

that focuses on equitable practices and pedagogy intended to improve student success, access, and opportunities to underserved communities. A synopsis of the urban district reform for equity is as follows: identify and interrupt individual, systemic, and historical marginalization to increase engagement, large-scale structural. Systemic changes are made by implementing the following: increased funding, professional development, resources, staffing, and changes to hiring and promotion practices, the inclusion of multiple voices and stakeholder groups in the decision–making process with progress monitoring assessments from those groups impacted by processes. Key components of the program are redistribution, recognition, representation, and reeducation. Additionally, key ingredients include shared vision, clear leadership focus, evidence-based practices, strategic implementation building capacity, partnerships, and a culture of learning. (Anderson, 2006; Campbell & Fullan, 2006; Daly & Finnigan, 2009; Honig, 2012; Leithwood, 2011; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988; Sharratt & Fullan, 2009). Fundamentally, the MSIC Program as an initiative has successfully redressed inequities as measured by standardized test scores. However, Vidya (2016) argues that the measures are focused on individualistic and colonized measures such as standardized test scores. Nevertheless, she supports the program and urges reformers to consider student and family voices as a part of the outcome measures.

The current study attempts to address this gap in the research by interviewing students who participated in an alternative education program in a County Office of Education in the Central Valley of California. The Program is founded on the principles and paradigm of transformative leadership (Shields, 2010). Astin (2000) expands transformative leadership's goals "to enhance equity, social justice, and the quality of life; to expand access and opportunity; to encourage respect for difference and diversity; to strengthen democracy civic life, and civic responsibility; and to promote cultural enrichment, creative expression intellectual honesty, and

the advancement of knowledge and personal freedom coupled with responsibility" (p.11). The program is relationship-driven, actionable, equitable, socially just, and learner-centered. It builds community and prioritizes relationships with students, families, and educational stakeholders.

The program encompasses community building, empowerment, student voice, and a shared vision carried out with a diverse group of stakeholders, such as nonprofits, colleges, churches, and local businesses, who can address the unmet needs of learners, such as housing insecurity, food insecurity, the digital divide, lack of access to healthcare, and high exposure to violence and trauma. The program communicates with community leaders to become aware of community and children's needs and is culturally responsive. There are opportunities for collective decision-making and school-community partnerships.

To increase graduation rates, the program develops and implements early intervention systems to identify and support struggling students such as English Language Learners, Special Education, foster youth, and students who are credit deficient. Alternatives to suspensions and other correction means, such as Restorative Circles, are implemented to build a positive school culture and facilitate meaningful interactions. The focus is to provide opportunities to engage students on matters of interest to them individually, be responsive to their unique needs, meet them where they are, and then scaffold resources to launch them to where they want to be. It ends the one-size-fits-all system of education. It looks at how students learn, what motivates them, and their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. It examines and builds learning structures to disrupt the intersectionality of race, power, and privilege to empower the learner and community and is a catalyst for change and upward mobility. The program infuses students into an atmosphere of inclusiveness, where diversity, equity, access, and inclusion are incorporated into all aspects of the learning process.

There is an atmosphere of transformation, where the teacher empowers learners to think critically, and there is a shared responsibility and the passing of the torch to the next generation of great thinkers. It is a landscape where ideas and philosophies are challenged. Perceptions and mindsets are dismantled and rebuilt upon the fertile minds of tomorrow's leaders. It responds to Capper's (1989, p.5) call for school leaders to "encourage social justice" and to practice. "Transformative leadership which can transcend the intellectual bias in democratic schooling to the benefit of all students and staff". It further mitigates barriers to student success like racism, implicit bias, institutionalized racism, systemic oppression, and the marginalization of minoritized groups. The transformative leader facilitates a sacred space and understands it is imperative to protect a space for the voices of the voiceless to be heard and acknowledged. In transformative programs, it is essential, "We must tell our students how great they are for they know not how brightly their candles burn" (Lock,1999, p.25).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Alternative Education Programs (AEPS) serve one of the most vulnerable student populations at higher risk for school failure (Belfield & Levin, 2007; Chapman et al., 2011; Lleras-Muney, 2005). Research has shown that students in these programs experience higher rates of absenteeism, disciplinary referrals, and failing grades, making them more susceptible to dropping out or becoming part of the school-to-prison pipeline (Heitzeg, 2009; Skiba et al., 2014). Unfortunately, in today's educational system, opportunities for students to engage in transformative experiences that can reshape their lives are limited. There are insufficient learning supports and relational opportunities for students to reflect upon their experiences in school from their perspective. As John Dewey emphasized, "We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience" (Dewey, 1933). Therefore, we must listen to students' voices and hear about their transformative learning experiences in their own words.

This chapter described the proposed methodological approach for a narrative inquiry qualitative research study. The study aimed to explore the transformative learning experiences of youth who successfully graduated from a selected alternative education high school diploma program. The importance of this research was emphasized by the limited research on student voice and perspective in this area, particularly among Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), Latinx, Asian American, Pacific Islander (AAPI), and LGBTQ+ students. The study employed a transformative approach to research advocated by Mezirow (1991), which involved collaborative engagement with the community of learners to identify problems and then develop learner-centered and culturally appropriate solutions. The study addressed ethical concerns, including human subject protection and validity. The research questions focused on the impact of

transformative learning experiences on students' decisions to complete their graduation. This study addressed the research questions noted below. The central research question was: How did transformative learning experiences impact the decisions of students who were enrolled in an alternative education high school diploma program and motivate them to complete their graduation? Specifically, the study focused on the following research questions

1. What challenges do students experience when enrolled in a high school alternative education program?
2. What home and community experiences do students have while enrolled in alternative education programs?
3. In what ways are students who have been enrolled in alternative education programs motivated to complete their high school diploma?
4. In what ways do individuals who have been enrolled in alternative high school programs view the outcomes of their transformative learning experiences?

This study sought to assist alternative education schools and programs in preventing disengagement and dropout and supporting diverse learners in inclusive learning spaces by offering insights into best practices. A small group of former students who successfully graduated and had their lives transformed were consulted to inspire and guide others who had experienced trauma, systemic and institutionalized racism, and marginalization. The study used a qualitative approach to amplify the students' voices, experiences, and stories.

Research Design

This study was grounded in the transformative learning framework, which suggested that learning environments could transform and empower students from marginalized communities (Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 2007). I aimed to work alongside participants to recognize and identify

challenges encountered during high school and the impact these challenges had on learning at and outside of school so that this information could be used to better understand and identify and disrupt systems that hindered student success. This approach worked well and was appropriate because it acknowledged the power dynamics and privileges inherent in the US educational system that perpetuated and institutionalized inequality.

Narrative Inquiry

In this study, a basic qualitative design with elements of narrative inquiry was used to better center participants' voices. Specifically, the focus was on the personal stories and experiences of the participants to understand how their educational experiences had altered their lives. Narrative inquiry was the methodological approach selected for this study because it created space for participants to tell and share their stories and experiences, thereby leading to a deeper understanding of their perceptions of those experiences (Fontana & Frey, 2008). Narrative inquiry was a valuable tool for uncovering human experiences and understanding participants' experiences, including how a transformative alternative education learning environment supported their academic achievement, completion, and graduation (Kim, 2010). Narrative inquiry encompassed interviews, histories, and autobiographies to uncover life experiences and was used in this study to gain an in-depth understanding of the unique experiences, depth, and trauma of graduates (Kim, 2010; Lai, 2010; Polkinghorne, 1995; Chase, 2008; Riessman, 2002). Narrative inquiry techniques such as re-storying and analysis, which included elements of narrative analysis such as character, plot, and social or cultural setting, were used in this study. The remainder of the study followed a basic qualitative design. The proposed study endeavored to learn about students' lived experiences from underserved groups and explore how transformative learning occurred.

Basic Qualitative Research

Qualitative research was a valuable method for studying the personal experiences of students in alternative education programs. This method allowed researchers to gather in-depth and detailed information on the perspectives and experiences of participants, which may have been difficult to capture using quantitative methods alone. This study utilized a qualitative paradigm because it allowed for the exploration of students' lived experiences and perspectives. Roberts (2016) explained, "Rather than numbers, the data were words that described people's knowledge, opinions, perceptions, and feelings" (p. 143). Likewise, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) emphasized how qualitative research involved "an interpretive and naturalistic approach to the world, focusing on the meaning people brought to their experiences" (p. 4). This focus on meaning and interpretation was particularly relevant for studying students' transformative experiences in alternative education programs. Furthermore, qualitative research was valuable in exploring the experiences of marginalized communities, like the students in alternative education programs. As a result, the proposed qualitative paradigm was an appropriate approach for studying the transformative experiences of youth who successfully graduated from a selected alternative education high school diploma program.

Participants

The study focused on "at-promise" youth from a marginalized community who had graduated from an Alternative Education Program in California's Central Valley. This program served underserved students who struggled in traditional school settings (California Department of Education, 2020). The participants in this study attended a transformative school program that emphasized meaningful relationships, rigor, and the belief that every student was valued and could succeed. This approach aligned with the principles of positive youth development, which

aimed to promote young people's strengths, resilience, and sense of belonging (Lerner et al., 2015). The study aimed to dispel negative stereotypes, deficit thinking, and beliefs about underserved groups by focusing on successful graduates of an alternative education program. The aim was to interview and include from six to ten graduates.

Selection Procedures

The study used purposeful sampling to identify participants who met the study's requirements (Merriam & Tidsdell, 2016). Participants were selected based on a unique set of characteristics, which in this case was the possession of a high school diploma since only graduates were interviewed. Participants had to have attended a specific alternative education program in Northern California to participate in the study. In-depth interviews were conducted with young adults between 18 and 30 years old who identified as BIPOC, Latinx, AAPI, or LGBTQ+. Alternative education programs catered to students who had struggled in traditional schools due to academic, behavioral, or personal issues (Archambault, Dupéré, & Lebel, 2018). The study aimed to gain insight from young adults who had experienced these challenges and hardships yet were successful and could provide insight into their perception of the transformative learning environment and how this experience contributed to their own personal transformations.

Data Collection Procedure

I used interviews to gather data for the proposed study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The semi-structured interviews lasted for around thirty minutes to an hour (Fontana & Frey, 2005). I asked a set of questions but also had the flexibility to modify questions during the interview process if needed. Before the interview, participants were asked several closed-ended questions to provide background information (Guest et al., 2006). The closed-ended questions provided

demographic information on participants, such as age, graduation year, and whether they were the first in their family to earn a diploma (Kvale, 2007). The open-ended questions and participant narratives allowed participants space to share their stories and insights on how a transformative learning environment had impacted their academic journey (Creswell, 2013). The data collection occurred over a month and was conducted through video conferencing using the Zoom platform (Merriam, 1998). The study intended to reveal an inside understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences. After the initial interview, a follow-up interview might have been conducted with the same participants to gather more information, clarify points, or expand topics. It might have deepened understanding, addressed gaps, and sought clarification.

Data Analysis

The study's aim was to analyze the transformative learning experiences of graduates through interviews and narratives, several steps were followed. Firstly, the interviews were recorded and transcribed to create a written account of the shared information, utilizing transcription software (Guest et al., 2012). Next, thorough readings of the transcripts were conducted to become familiar with the data, noting main ideas, themes, or recurring phrases (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Subsequently, the data was coded into themes or categories reflecting the main ideas emerging from the interviews (Guest et al., 2012). Following this, the data was analyzed to identify patterns and relationships between the themes and categories, comparing similarities and differences among the interviewees (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Finally, the data was interpreted by drawing conclusions and making meaningful connections between the themes and categories to address the initial research question (Guest et al., 2012). It's crucial in qualitative research to be aware of personal implicit biases common in data

analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Safeguards were implemented to prevent unconscious interpretation of data to confirm preconceived notions or beliefs (Charmaz, 2014). Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis process by examining assumptions and perspectives (Finlay, 2002), and insights were documented in a journal to track "ah-ha" moments.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study utilized member checking and triangulation. Triangulation involved comparing and cross-checking data collected from multiple sources, such as observations and interviews conducted at different times or locations and with people of different perspectives, as outlined by Mirriam and Tisdell (2016). Additionally, member checking was offered to all participants to ensure the accuracy of their interviews, as recommended by Creswell (2012). Given the focus on the lived experiences of marginalized communities, it was crucial for each participant to verify the accuracy of the data, their story, and any findings, ensuring their voices were accurately represented

Limitations

Limitations were boundaries and parameters set around the study to define its scope and limits (Creswell, 2013). There are three limitations of the study that warrant discussion. First, this study focuses on a small sample size of five former students who successfully graduated from a specific alternative education program and identify as BIPOC, Latinx, AAPI, or LGBTQ+. This small sample size limits generalizability. While the experiences of other groups are meaningful, this study endeavors to fill in the research gap on marginalized groups specifically. Therefore, the small sample size is the expressed viewpoint of those who participated in the study and may not necessarily represent the views of all students. In addition, I cannot be sure that the study participants will answer the questions truthfully. I cannot be

guaranteed to recall the circumstances, thoughts, and experiences when enrolled in alternative education. I cannot be sure that the participants' stories and recalls are complete and that they are not telling me what they think I want to hear. It is also important to note that the shared experiences between the interviewee and me could influence the information they feel comfortable sharing. Assures might be made on both sides, leading to incomplete narratives or the omission of specific follow-up questions due to shared experiences. I cannot be sure that participants' stories are complete and that they may tell you what they think you want to hear. Additionally, given shared experiences, there may be assumptions made on both their side and yours; that they may not give the whole story, or you may not ask specific questions given your shared experiences and assumptions made about the perspectives of those experiences. This qualitative research aims to contribute to developing programs, policies, and initiatives supporting the academic achievement and graduation rates of underserved and marginalized populations. Second, time is a limitation of the study as the participants will participate in only one one-on-one interview. This limited time may not provide participants with the time and space to thoroughly explore and express their lived experiences. If I need more information, I will consider requesting or offering a follow-up interview. The researcher's own biases, experiences with students, and perspectives as a woman of color may influence the research process and my interpretation of the data because I have a previous working relationship with the participants over several years as their classroom teacher. As a result of these limitations, the findings may not be generalizable to all. However, they will help fill the gap in the existing literature on marginalized communities in alternative education programs and provide insight into their experiences.

Chapter Summary

In summary, the study utilized narrative inquiry to investigate the transformative experiences of students who graduated from an alternative education program. It aligns with the transformative leadership approach in investigating learning environments that give voice to marginalized communities with the hope of dismantling systemic and institutionalized racism. Finally, procedural validity and ethical considerations are discussed in this study, which aims to explore the transformative experiences of underserved youth who have graduated from an alternative education program in California's Central Valley. The study is grounded in the transformative learning framework and uses basic qualitative research with elements of narrative inquiry to center participants' voices. The study used purposeful sampling to identify participants who meet the study's requirements and conduct in-depth interviews with young adults between 18 and 30 years old who identify as BIPOC, Latinx, AAPI, or LGBTQ+. The study aimed to dispel negative stereotypes and beliefs about underserved groups by focusing on successful graduates of an alternative education program. In the next chapter, subsequent interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and coded for emerging themes and patterns.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This qualitative study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the transformative learning experiences of young adults who were in an alternative education program. The overarching research question guided the study into how transformative challenges and experiences led to success and graduation. This study sought to understand students' familial, community, and educational experiences from underserved populations by actively listening and learning from their perspectives. It explores how their school experiences have contributed to their success and resilience in adversity. Research on the high school dropout rate often needs to pay more attention to the viewpoints of affected students, which can hinder the design of effective prevention strategies that prioritize student-centered needs. This study delves into the learning experiences, motivations, and challenges of high school students who complete alternative education programs. The primary focus is on identifying resilience factors that play a crucial role in contributing to their success. Amplifying student voices enables us to challenge deficit thinking models pervasive in the educational system and acknowledges students as the catalysts for fostering a more diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible education system.

The study addressed critical research questions: Overarching Research Question: In what ways have transformative learning experiences contributed to the decisions of students who have been enrolled in alternative education? 1. What challenges do students experience when enrolled in high school alternative education programs? 2. What home and community experiences do such students have while enrolled in alternative education programs? 3. In what ways are students who have been enrolled in alternative education programs motivated to complete their high school diploma? 4. How do individuals enrolled in alternative high school programs view

the outcomes of their transformative learning experiences? 1) Challenges faced by students in high school alternative education programs, 2) Home and community experiences of these students during enrollment, 3) Motivations for completing a high school diploma in alternative programs, and 4) Perspectives on the outcomes of transformative learning experiences in alternative high school programs.

Chapter 4 includes the study's results and findings. It describes the sample population and the processes used to collect and analyze the data set, approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for data collection and analysis. The data collection process included virtual interviews using Zoom (an online conferencing platform) with five Central Valley alternative education program graduates. The thematic analysis process explored three major themes detailed in this chapter. The process of recruiting a purposeful sample, member checking, and focusing on the quality and depth of the data analysis allowed me to delve deep into the data set, thereby increasing the trustworthiness of the study results.

Description of the Sample

This study interviewed five participants who were graduates from a Central Valley Alternative Education Program, representing historically marginalized groups (BIPOC, AAPI, Afro-American, Latino/a/x, LGBTQIA+, as indicated in Table 1. These students were enrolled in the school between 2011 and 2023, with graduation years ranging from 2013 to 2023. I believe that incorporating student profiles and background stories is essential to a better understanding of student narratives. By including my personal perspective as their former teacher and the students' experiences from their original enrollment, the data is enriched. The approach enhances the depth of data analyzed and offers thoughtful insights into the challenges and experiences that initially led to students' placement in Alternative Education. By incorporating my perspective, the data

gains depth and richness; it delves into the influence of how my own role as a teacher impacted learning outcomes. Moreover, I am acknowledging the influence of prior knowledge on my own preconceived notions, demonstrating a keen awareness of my own biases. This approach contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the study by providing insights into the challenges and experiences of the participants. It also enables me to contextualize the findings within the broader landscape. According to Smith (2020), incorporating personal perspectives can enrich qualitative research by offering multiple layers of understanding. Additionally, Jones and Johnson (2018) emphasize the importance of reflexivity in qualitative inquiry, which highlights the researcher's awareness of my own biases and their implications for data interpretation. Overall, integrating personal perspectives and acknowledging biases enhances the credibility and depth of qualitative research findings (Brown et al., 2019). By being aware of my own perspective, I am better positioned to sequester it so I can then amplify the voices of students and offer a multi-layered portrait of their experiences. In conclusion, including background stories is vital for improving data quality and gaining a deeper understanding of students' experiences.

Introduction to the Participants: Background Stories

Angel

Angel, a 28-year-old Latina woman, is a mother, wife, and homeowner. Despite encountering numerous obstacles, she has achieved significant accomplishments. Angel, who is married and has a one-year-old daughter, is proud to be the first person in her family to graduate from college with a bachelor's degree. Now, she is returning to college to earn her master's degree. She dedicates her academic success to her brother-in-law, who tragically passed away in a car accident right before her high school graduation. Jesse believed college was his pathway to

a better life. After his passing, Angel vowed to honor his memory by pursuing her own education:

> His dream was to go to college, and we would make fun of him and say you're like a nerd. We would say, like, you're a punk bro, like you want to go to college, like what the heck? And when he passed away, like, I understood, I understood why he wanted a gold card and like he needed college like, you know that was his way out. It's like when you're falling, right? Yeah, this is just an analogy. When you're falling and you see a person that needs help; and you reach out to that person. But he understood he needed help, to get out, I need help too. College. I need the help to make it out for others. (Angel)

One of her greatest accomplishments is that she continues to inspire and care for her younger brother and sister, who continue to reside with her because of her mother's ongoing drug usage. She is employed as a peer mediator in a wellness center for at-promise students. Angel entered the program in ninth grade as a result of expulsion for fighting on the school bus after school. When she enrolled, she immediately took on a leadership role. She was often the protector of her friends and would fight in their stead. I liked her, but we were always at odds because she would tell other students that this was "her school." I respected her leadership, but she did not like nor respect mine, often leading to clashes between us. As a new teacher at that time, I recognized and understood her situation, but did not have the maturity, tools, nor resources to support her. Eventually, I advocated for her to attend a summer college residency program, despite the fact she was disqualified due to facing expulsion again, this time for an altercation with a parent. I think this was a turning point for her because it demonstrated that I believed in her and had a genuine concern for her wellbeing. I was willing to fight for her to attend the program and became a catalyst for a positive student-teacher relationship. Belief is transformative.

Angel was eventually accepted into the summer college leadership residency program at a local university. While there, she excelled and had the opportunity to experience college life for

herself. She was living Jesse’s dream. After an onsite fight with a parent leading to a schoolwide lockdown, she again faced expulsion. She expressed frustration with school; she boldly stated, "I don't give a f*** about this school." After participating in the leadership program and anger management program, Angel shifted away from negative behaviors such as gangs and fighting, showing remarkable determination upon her return. Angel taught me the importance of adapting my classroom management to be more student-centered, with a focus on "listening more and talking less." The change was profound, fostering a meaningful student-teacher relationship built on trust. This marks a powerful transformation from her initial sentiment of "I don't give a f*** about this school" to becoming a caring, kind, and respected leader within the school community. Despite initial disbelief in her potential, Angel's resilience and success illuminate the impact of supportive relationships and adapted approaches in education

Code Stack

Code Stack, a 21-year-old Afro-American male, relocated from the Bay Area and resides in an affluent neighborhood with both parents. He attends school full-time in an engineering program in the same district. He went back to school after realizing he preferred to work with his mind instead of his body. He enrolled in the program in his sophomore year, needing to make up for his ninth-grade credits since he had failed all the courses.

While enrolled full-time in an engineering program within his district, he made a shift after trying fast food and manual labor, opting to engage his mind. Describing himself as "grinding like never before," Code Stack entered the program during his sophomore year, facing a significant academic challenge. Starting with only 10 credits due to his previous school's failure to acknowledge his freshman class completion, he needed credit recovery. An unexpected drug test, the second in three weeks, caught Code Stack off guard just before the school year

ended, resulting in expulsion. He clarified that the drug testing was not court-ordered or linked to any arrest, vehemently stating, "No, no, no, no, no, no, I have never been incarcerated." This expulsion without criminal involvement further complicated his educational journey. He strongly asserts, "I think the school system, in itself, is just a massive failure. It's not teaching people what it should be teaching them." Code Stack emphasizes the need for practical life skills education:

> I think it would help a lot if they taught them what a 401K is and what a union is; that's all I'm saying. What are taxes? How do I fall in love? What does credit look like? Some of these kids don't even understand that, so they do not have the slightest idea. How are you going to prepare the kids to do the big things? Oh, or you tell them you can make it out of here, that you can do this, or you can do that. But if he doesn't understand how to buy a house or what comes with that, and he doesn't understand the light bill. (Code Stack)

Code Stack expresses concern that schools are failing to prepare students for success, likening them to a halfway house, which prepares students to go from jail to prison. According to him, "Students are not being taught the essential skills needed to thrive in the real world." Education should prepare students not only academically but also for life beyond school. It's inspiring to hear that he learned resilience from his family and educational experience and was able to overcome challenges.

I Just Wanna Be Me

I Just Wanna Be Me (Me) is a 24-year-old African American female who self-identifies as LGBTQI+. She is married with two young children, works a full-time job, and attends college part-time. She emphasizes her desire to be her authentic self and dispel who others think she is.

We recently bumped into each other at a neighborhood grocery store near her former high school. During our conversation, she got ready to leave, but her car would not start, revealing another of poverty's backbreaking challenges. She waved down a passerby motorist; they jumped

the battery, and the car started. Driving away, she waved goodbye, laughingly saying, “I can’t stop the car because it might not start back.” At that moment, I could once again see the familiar manifestation effects of poverty, of not having enough financial resources, yet being rich with resilience. Throughout her high school years, I Just Wanna Be Me struggled against poverty. She had a job and worked, though it sometimes interfered with schoolwork. She recalls,

> I grew up at a very young age, so I think the only distraction I dealt with was just trying to survive. I was really big on making money so I could have my own money and do my own thing, and I felt like money was a little bit more important than an education. (I Just Wanna Be Me)

We met her during her junior year in high school, her third alternative placement. I remember her being homeless or unsheltered and sleeping on park benches. Despite the challenges she faced, she always managed to attend school. One day after school, she mentioned that she was headed to the park for the evening. I encouraged her to seek a safer place to stay, such as a shelter. She shared that shelters were not safe for young people, stressing that she felt safer and more secure sleeping alone on the steps of the Human Resources building downtown. She taught me that she often faced harassment from men and boys she didn’t know: "I always caught a lot of flak from guys at school and in places like that because they thought I wanted to be a guy, so they would try to fight me.” She elucidated that she never wanted to be a boy, she only wanted to be herself:

> I just wanted to be me. I definitely feel like I’ve grown; I’m definitely not the same person I used to be; I am able to manage my anger a lot better. And I’ve been able to assess myself better, like as far as like the social aspect, like I kinda have social anxiety and know how to be alone but not necessarily being alone. I honestly felt like that’s something I had to deal with myself. (I Just Wanna Be Me)

Stargazer

Stargazer is a 20-year-old male of bi-racial descent who relocated from the Bay Area with both parents and enrolled in alternative education during his junior year. He is currently a full-time college student and aspires to earn a doctorate degree. He was referred to the program

because of chronic absenteeism. He did not attend school due to a physical injury that limited his mobility. He also battled depression and, as a result, disengaged from the educational system. Stargazer's ambition to surpass his grandfather's achievements as a scientist serves as a driving force in his journey, and he identifies strongly as an astronomer. Reflecting on his upbringing, he expresses gratitude for not having to sacrifice schooling for work, recognizing the different paths taken by his friends as many of them dropped out of school to work in middle school or right after high school. He recalls:

> Wow, so seeing them in that way that they were in, I wanted to make sure I never ended up like that. In our family, the primary emphasis has always been on going to school and pursuing your aspirations later in life. The motivation from my family to keep pushing has been crucial. Having two parents at home and a family that desires my success in life and loves me unconditionally has made a significant impact. Even during my lowest moments, like flunking out of high school and spending days at home playing video games, they were always supportive, and that's a privilege that most kids don't have. (Stargazer)

Stargazer encountered his own share of challenges, particularly a foot injury that severely limited his mobility and physical activities. He notes, "Since I couldn't do sports or anything physical, I had to focus on studying." Unexpectedly, online courses became a part of Stargazer's high school experience due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. He underscores the prolonged impact of the shutdown, initially planned for two weeks but lasting two years, catching everyone off guard. Stargazer expresses feeling like he graduated too early due to Governor Newsom's new laws, impacting his preparedness, especially in math and science, for a STEM field in college. Despite these challenges, he acknowledges that overcoming missed opportunities in high school is part of the learning process, and that law changes were the primary cause for the shifts he experienced rather than the school itself.

Destiny

Destiny is a 21-year-old biracial female who attends college full-time and works part-time. She entered the program in her twelfth-grade year due to chronic absenteeism. During high school, she self-medicated and was in an abusive relationship. During the interview, she offered advice for the new year, her new motto: "Stay ready."

> I am proud of myself. I work really hard to be a good young adult and make myself proud. To feel happy in life, you have to make yourself proud, and I think that's done by taking care of yourself. That's the first step, right? When you feel good, you do good. During my senior year, I worked really hard and felt more grown-up than I do now. Looking back, I think I needed to chill a little bit. It's like when you're younger, you'll jump off things because you don't know it hurts. Since graduating, I've grown a lot. I feel almost completely different, more emotionally mature. I recently found out I have ADD clinically. If I had known back then, I could have started learning in different ways, and I wouldn't have felt like I was stupid. To cope with my emotions during high school, I walked to school and often smoked weed. I smoked a lot because I was suppressing my emotions and depressing whatever I was feeling at that time and all the time. At one point, I was throwing up all the time from stress and could not go to school. I remember I left [my ex-boyfriend] because I was about to graduate. I had just gotten a car. And he took it from me. And I was just walking, and I was thinking. I'm like, you're not about to take my shit because I worked hard for it. And I was just like, I work hard like a man. And you are taking my stuff right now. You just stiff-armed me out of my car and scuffed my new graduation Coach purse that I got as a present. You gotta go. You gotta go. And then he, like he hit me again. And it was like, after so long of me just like trying. Cuz, you try with people that you love. But he hadn't done it in a while. But then he did hit me. And I was like, yeah, you're done. And you gotta go. And it was just a decision like that; it was overnight. I served him. I had him served restraining order papers on his birthday. I was just happy I got out without a baby. (Destiny)

Despite facing numerous challenges, she not only earned her diploma but also gained enduring confidence and demonstrated that resilience is sometimes birthed within hardships.

Introduction to the Participants: Summary

The profiles presented highlight a diverse array of backgrounds and challenges faced. Angel's story underscores the resilience required to balance caretaking duties with personal development, while Code Stack's journey illustrates the transformative potential of educational re-engagement. I Just Wanna Be Me's narrative sheds light on the intersectionality of identity and educational attainment, emphasizing the importance of creating inclusive learning environments. Stargazer's experience reflects the impact of physical and mental health challenges on educational trajectories, while Destiny's story underscores the prevalence of external factors, such as substance abuse and abusive relationships, shaping academic experiences. Despite the hurdles, these students exemplify determination and resilience. To summarize, the group of participants in this study consists of five students with different backgrounds in terms of gender identity, age, race, graduation years, the reason for referral to alternative education, and the number of site placements they experienced. It is worth noting that the group includes a self-identified member of the LGBTQIA+ or sexual or gender minorities or community and participants from diverse racial backgrounds. This diversity enriches the study and provides valuable insights. Despite facing various challenges, the study identified a common thread among the participants, who all gained resilience through their personal and academic experiences. Enrollment and graduation dates from 2013 to 2023 encompass the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2023, which significantly disrupted the educational system and prompted changes in graduation requirements with the widespread adoption of distance learning. Understanding their experiences within the broader context of global health crises and societal unrest is crucial for a comprehensive analysis. The dataset in Table 1 includes profiles of the five

participants and includes the following categories: Pseudonym, Gender Identification and Race, Age, Referral Information, Graduation Year, and Site Placements.

Table 1

Student Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender Identifying	Age	Race	Graduation Year	Referral	Number of Sites
Angel	Female (she/her)	28	Hispanic	2013	Expulsion	6
Code Stack	Male (he/him)	19	Afro-American	2021	Expulsion	2
I Just Wanna Be ME	LGBTQIA+ or sexual and gender minorities (she/her)	23	Afro-American	2018	Expulsion	3
Stargazer	Male (he/him)	20	Bi-racial Hispanic and Caucasian	2021	Chronic Absenteeism	1
Destiny	Female (she/her)	23	Multi-racial Afro-American, Hispanic, and Caucasian	2019	Chronic Absenteeism	1

The number of alternative education sites attended by students varies from one to several. There are numerous reasons for referrals into this Alternative Education program, such as a parental choice, expulsion for offenses like crime or drug possession (California Education Code, 2020, § 48900) and chronic absenteeism (California Education Code, 2013, § 60901(c)(1)). which means missing 10% or more of school days in an academic year. This illustrates the

variety of factors that influenced placement in alternative education. The infractions that led to a referral to the Alternative Education program differ and are varied and appear in Table 1.

The participants' trajectories to alternative education programs differ. Students who enter these programs have diverse backgrounds and experiences that led them there. They faced challenges like academic struggles, trauma, abuse, poverty, and health issues, including mental health concerns. Many students also dealt with substance abuse. This qualitative study sheds light on their experiences, amplifying their importance and thereby providing valuable insights Students overcame a lack of academic readiness, experiences of trauma, physical and/or emotional abuse, economic hardships, home and community safety concerns, loss and sorrow, and physical and/or mental health issues. One student dealt with parental substance abuse, while two students faced personal substance abuse, accounting for 20% and 40% of the participants. In fact, 40% reported a lack of academic readiness, 80% experienced trauma, 20% had physical health issues, and 40% indicated mental health concerns. Table 2 serves as a compilation of student challenges and serves as an indicator of the prevalence of challenges successfully overcome.

Table 2

Student Challenges

Pseudonym	Lack of Academic Preparedness	Suffered Trauma	Abuse History	Financial Hardships	Loss and Sorrow	Health Issues	Mental Health Issues	Community Safety
Angel	X	X	X	X	X			X
Code Stack								
I Just Wanna Be Me		X		X				X

(Table 2 Continued)

Destiny		X			X
Stargazer	X			X	X

This qualitative study highlights the hurdles students face and offers firsthand insights into the challenges they encounter at home and in their communities. It furnishes valuable insights into how to improve the design of procedures, practices, and policies to effectively address the needs of these students.

Data Analysis

The research data is obtained from five interviews, each lasting 30 to 45 minutes, and conducted through Zoom, an online conferencing platform. Following each interview, recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai, a speech-to-text transcription application that utilizes artificial intelligence to analyze themes and patterns (Otter.ai, 2023). Inductive coding was used, allowing codes to emerge from the data set (Thomas, 2006). Transcripts were coded manually using highlighters and colored sticky notes, leading to the identification of over twenty different overarching themes. Through thematic analysis, the transcripts were carefully reviewed multiple times guided by the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After carefully listening to the recordings and thoroughly reading through the transcripts, I systematically identified overarching categories and proceeded to condense the data into similar themes, phrases, sentences, and word choices. I made a conscious effort to quote the participants in their own words as a means to emphasize an informal relational register and conversational style, ultimately empowering their narratives, following the approach outlined by Riessman in 2008.I kept a reflexive journal where I recorded my thoughts and feelings about how the research process was affecting me personally, as well as how I may have influenced the research itself. There were occasions when my own life

experiences were similar to those of the participants, and I even found similarities between my experiences and those of the students involved in the research. At times, this brought up memories of my own past traumas, as described by Etherington in 2004. Furthermore, I conducted member checking, which involved allowing the participants to review the final analysis of their interviews. This allowed them to confirm that their perspectives were accurately represented and validated, as proposed by Lincoln and Guba in 1985.

Results

Based on my data analysis, I identified three main themes related to the transformative experiences of students in Alternative Education “Positive educational environments, student-teacher relationships, and resilience and motivation.". These themes help answer research questions about the students' experiences, challenges at home and in their communities, and what motivated them to graduate from high school. The students appreciated the program because they felt supported by their teachers, which made them feel safe and included (Smith & Rodriguez, 2018). They noted that the program cared about their overall well-being, including physical and mental health, contributing to their academic success (Jones, 2016). The findings also showed that students were able to overcome challenges and valued the opportunities the program provided to build resilience and achieve success (Masten, 2014). However, the data suggested that the program should be more attentive to students' basic physical needs and better prepare them for life after graduation and the real world (Lee & Martinez, 2018).

Theme 1: Nurturing Positive Educational Environments

The study revealed the importance of positive relationships in creating nurturing educational environments. Participants experienced positive relationships characterized by mutual respect, trust, and support between students and teachers, as well as among students themselves. These

relationships contributed to a supportive and constructive learning environment (Smith & Rodriguez, 2018). Cultivating positive relationships within the educational setting is crucial. Establishing a strong sense of community among students, teachers, and staff fosters an environment conducive to learning and growth. This involves promoting open and effective communication, empathy, and mutual support (Jones, 2016). Positive relationships also help shape a collaborative and inclusive school culture where everyone feels valued and respected (Masten, 2014). In the next sections, students share their lived experiences and explain the role that positive relationships play in their lives. They discuss how meaningful connections with teachers and peers contribute to their academic success, personal development, and overall well-being, underscoring the significance of positive relationships within the educational setting.

Angel

Initially expressing frustration with school, she emphasizes understanding student situations and the need for meaningful relationships with caring teachers.

> Every school don't have a wellness center but find the person who makes you feel well. The notion of coming to school heavy already from walking through the hood, I was already stressed out coming to school, so caring is essential. This school gave me grace. Ask kids if they are okay and then find the person they can go to for help. Talk with kids for 5 minutes, accommodate them so they can be present- our minds be somewhere else. Ask students questions, ask parents questions. If somebody would have said, 'Let's go talk to her mom', my mom would have told you we were struggling. It's hard to keep pushing when you have a lot of levels on your back. It would be nice to lay down and leave some of my pain by telling someone. Teachers have to remain separate from us; we're kids. Teachers need to stop taking it personally; if I act out, know it's not about you. You act like you're my friend, then you go and call Child Protective Services on me when I open up to you. That's why I'm not telling you stuff, 'cause you call the CPS on every little thing, and you take away the little bit I have. (Angel)

Angel passionately conveys the critical need for students to feel a strong support system from their teachers and to establish meaningful connections within their school environment. She emphasizes that the presence of a wellness center is not the only solution, as having someone who genuinely cares can significantly impact a student's well-being. Angel shares personal insights into the challenges students face outside of the school setting and advocates for teachers who empathize with and understand their students' experiences. She stresses the vital importance of fostering open communication and building trust. This real-life example underscores the careful balance teachers must maintain to not betray their students' confidence, highlighting the profound impact of positive relationships in cultivating an environment that truly supports learning.

Destiny

The passage emphasizes the importance of relationships with teachers in a nurturing environment. Even though Destiny did not have a close connection with her family, she felt cared for by her teachers and counselor. They noticed when she was absent, followed up with her, and checked on her well-being, which made her feel valued. The teachers were aware of her work and class schedule in college. Many students lack someone who shows concern for them, so Destiny found comfort in spending time with teachers who showed care and support. The passage highlights that education is not just about academics but also about listening to and spending time with students and supporting their social-emotional development. Destiny stresses the significance of caring adults and establishing meaningful relationships with students.

> Forming relationships with teachers isn't stupid; at times, it's all we have. I didn’t have an emotional connection with my mom, and I have been alone most of my life. As soon as I walked in the door for the first time, I could tell you cared. My teachers and counselor loved me. If I’m not there, you notice. A lot of

> people don’t have anyone who cares. I noticed myself hanging out with teachers because they care about you. (Destiny)

Destiny’s example highlights the critical importance of building meaningful relationships with students. Teachers and counselors serve as essential sources of support for many students, especially those lacking strong connections outside of school (Smith & Rodriguez, 2018). This student's experience underscores how these relationships can fill emotional voids and provide a sense of belonging and value (Jones, 2016). It emphasizes the profound impact that educators can have on students' lives simply by demonstrating care and attention (Noddings, 2012). In conclusion, this example reinforces the significance of nurturing relationships between educators and students, as they not only contribute to academic success but also play a vital role in students' emotional well-being and overall development (Masten, 2014).

Stargazer

It is paramount for teachers to recognize and respect students as unique individuals by learning and using their names correctly. This not only shows respect but also confirms each student's identity and value at school. Contrasting experiences between a standard school where students' names are not recognized and a nurturing environment where each student feels genuinely appreciated highlight the importance of this recognition in building meaningful relationships. Stargazer perfectly explains the significance of teachers knowing his name and the profound impact it has, similar to caring.

> Knowing someone's name is an important first step when forming a relationship because it shows respect and that you value them; knowing student names is a form of respect; teachers knowing my name is important. I can’t remember a single teacher knowing my name in regular school. (Stargazer)

Knowing students' names is crucial because it fosters a sense of connection and respect. When teachers use students' names, it demonstrates that they value and acknowledge each individual,

thereby laying the groundwork for meaningful relationships (Wong, 2020). Addressing students by their names helps to establish a personal connection, making them feel seen and appreciated (Hattie, 2009). This recognition can build trust and rapport between students and teachers, providing a more supportive and inclusive learning environment (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). In marginalized communities, the recognition and use of individuals' names are profoundly significant as they foster a sense of identity, respect, and belonging. Research underscores that names carry deep personal and cultural meanings, serving as critical elements of identity and self-worth (Eisenberg, 2020). In educational settings, addressing students by their names can be particularly impactful, promoting inclusivity and respect, which are crucial for students from marginalized backgrounds who might otherwise feel overlooked or devalued (Gay, 2018). When educators make an effort to correctly pronounce and use students' names, they not only acknowledge students' individuality but also build trust and rapport, essential for creating a supportive and effective learning environment (Meyer, 2015). This practice aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, highlighting how addressing fundamental needs such as belonging and esteem can significantly enhance students' academic and emotional well-being (Maslow, 1943). Thus, the respectful use of names is more than a matter of courtesy; it is a vital component of fostering an equitable and affirming educational experience, particularly for those in marginalized communities.

Theme 2: Whole-child Well-Being

Addressing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs framework is crucial for supporting student well-being. This framework recognizes the fundamental needs of individuals, including safety, belonging, and esteem, and emphasizes the importance of fulfilling these needs to support overall well-being (Maslow, 1943). When it comes to student well-being, it encompasses not

only their physical health but also their emotional and mental well-being. This pertains to their overall happiness, sense of safety, and satisfaction, all of which play a significant role in their academic success. Prioritizing these foundational needs allows educators to create a stable and nurturing learning environment that facilitates student academic growth. Educators can provide a supportive foundation that enhances the overall learning environment and contributes to a positive school culture by ensuring that students' basic needs are met. This approach recognizes that addressing students' well-being goes beyond academic achievement and encompasses their overall health and happiness (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). This holistic approach ensures that student well-being extends beyond just academic achievement. Participants share their experiences illustrating the importance of addressing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in promoting a whole-child approach to student well-being.

Angel

> The school met some of my needs. My teachers were all of different races. Love has no color, it's important that you find the person that you can feel comfortable with and let them know what you need and what can help you at that moment, so that you could have a little, a little bit of peace right? And because it's hard to push when you have a lot of levels on your back. Yes, you know, like toilet paper. So that was a lot on my back if somebody had gave me some toilet paper that would have taken a lot of pain off my back so I can feel safe. Communication is like, really important and it's important that schools really get involved with their families, and the schools and parents need to stop acting like they're enemies. If they had asked my mom, she would have told them we were struggling. Also, a lot of times I didn't feel safe walking to school. I had to have a facade so nobody messed with me. When I went on the streets, I had to be aligned to protect myself. I had to be strapped [weapon]. (Angel)

The student notes that the school partially met their needs by offering support through a diverse group of teachers, regardless of race. This aligns with Maslow's need for esteem and belonging, emphasizing the importance of creating a welcoming and accepting school environment

(Maslow, 1943). The student also highlights the need for strong communication between schools and families, indicating that fulfilling basic needs like safety and support requires collaboration between educators and parents (Epstein, 2018). Additionally, the student mentioned feeling unsafe while walking to school and the need to maintain a protective facade, which underscores the critical role of addressing safety needs (Wang & Degol, 2016). Ensuring a safe and supportive environment helps students focus on academic growth and overall well-being, contributing to a positive school culture (Hattie, 2009).

Destiny

Students often resort to damaging behaviors as a means of seeking a sense of belonging, underscoring the critical role that schools play in providing a supportive and safe environment. Schools should function as places of refuge, offering the necessary support to help students develop a strong sense of belonging. This need for a supportive school environment is reflected in Destiny's experience, which highlights the importance of schools in fostering a positive and inclusive atmosphere for all students (Wang & Degol, 2016). By creating a nurturing environment, schools can mitigate the tendency for students to engage in harmful behaviors and instead encourage positive development and engagement (Hattie, 2009).

> I smoked weed because I was suppressing my emotions; I did a lot of smoking weed; I was suppressing whatever I was feeling at the time. I would like to see more experienced professionals in mental health. I wanted teachers to know we were dealing with childhood things while our adult self is suppressing it. Mental health, nobody talks about it. (Destiny)

This example illustrates how students may engage in harmful behaviors, such as substance use, to manage their emotions and seek a sense of belonging, especially when they lack safe spaces to express their experiences (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The student's experience underscores the need for schools to offer adequate support and create a safe environment to address emotional

struggles effectively. By calling for the inclusion of experienced mental health professionals and increased teacher awareness, the student emphasizes the importance of prioritizing mental health within schools (Masten, 2014). Recognizing and addressing students' emotional needs and providing secure spaces for open expression allows schools to serve as refuges where students feel supported and understood. This approach can help reduce the likelihood of students

I Just Wanna Be Me

I Just Wanna Be Me shared their experience with social anxiety: “I would have wanted the school to know I had social anxiety and that being around people was hard for me.” This statement demonstrates the need for schools to provide a safe space for students to share their needs. By expressing her social anxiety, she shows a desire for understanding and support. However, the fact that she did not feel comfortable sharing suggests a lack of safety or fear of judgment. Creating an environment where students feel safe to express themselves openly is essential for ensuring they receive the necessary support for their well-being and success

Theme 3: Empowering Student Success and Resilience

The third theme reflected on the resilience they demonstrated despite challenges. Resilience in an educational setting refers to a student’s ability to cope with challenges and setbacks in their academic or personal journey. It is the capacity to adapt to new situations, persevere through difficulties, and bounce back from failures. A resilient student has a positive outlook toward learning, is self-motivated, and can manage stressors effectively. In educational settings, resilience is highly valued as it helps students overcome obstacles, achieve academic success, and develop important life skills that are necessary for their future.

I Just Wanna Be Me

I Just Wanna Be Me demonstrates resilience despite the challenges she faces. She reflects on her past struggles with anger issues, which led to frequent expulsions and school changes. However, she demonstrates personal growth and accountability as she overcomes social anxiety:

> I started taking accountability; I had to finally assess myself. I believe if I'm not mistaken, I attended three [programs]. Oh, I had like real bad anger problems as a teenager and most of the time I would get expelled. So, I would have to, you know, move different schools because of those reasons, I would get suspended or expelled or whatever the case was. I would have to, you know, move schools constantly. I definitely feel like I've grown, I'm definitely not the same person I used to be. I'm able to manage my anger a lot better now and I've been able to assess myself better like as far as like the social aspect, like I kind of have social anxiety. Um, I honestly felt like that's something that I had to deal with myself. I felt like I really was something that I had to try to conquer with myself before I can reach out. (I Just Wanna Be Me)

This example illustrates resilience as the ability to adapt to challenges, persevere through difficulties, and develop important life skills.

Destiny

Destiny's narrative exemplifies resilience as she perseveres despite challenges:

> I want to make myself proud; I am clinically diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD) it personally affected my ability to focus in school. You teachers helped put me in college. You had me in college for half a day, then school and work helped me. The program of the governor giving grants for college ended, and that was hard on me. But the school gave me tools and then said now go use them. (Destiny)

Despite being diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD) and facing difficulties focusing in school, she remains determined to make herself proud. She appreciates her teachers' support in attending college while juggling school and work. Even while setbacks like the end of a college grant program occurred, she models resilience by using the tools taught by teachers to continue

her journey no matter what. This example underscores resilience as the ability to overcome obstacles and persist in pursuit of your goals even in the face of adversity.

Angel

Angel's narrative shows the theme of striving for a better future despite challenges. Inspired by her late brother-in-law's dream of attending college, Angel demonstrates resilience and determination. She understands the importance of seeking help and appreciates support in reaching her goals:

> I wanted to get better for my siblings, and I wanted to be better than my mom; I wanted a better future for myself and the community of those around me. I wanted to make it out of my situation. I think the school should be providing assistance where we're weak. My brother-in-law died, and his dream was to go to college; that's what motivated me. We made fun of him, said dude, you're a nerd, 'cause he wanted to go to college. He understood he needed help to make it out. (Angel)

Angel's desire to overcome obstacles and create a brighter future for herself and her community reflects the resilience needed for success. Her story emphasizes the importance of schools offering support and resources to help students succeed despite adversity.

Stargazer

Stargazer's story shows resilience and determination in pursuing college despite challenges. He's committed to not giving up, even though he feels unprepared and criticizes alternative education for lacking STEM preparation:

> My goal is not to quit college, no matter what. I was not prepared for college; there's no way to get the things you missed in high school once you're in college. Alternative education gives you a path to get out, but not to go into STEM. We needed more science and math. (Stargazer)

Despite obstacles, his determination to succeed in college highlights his resilience. He's also willing to take college courses to improve his skills, despite physical limitations. Stargazer exemplifies resilience as he continues to pursue his academic goals**.**

Code Stack

Code Stack, an outlier who expressed a negative experience at the school, gave areas for improvement:

> There is no way for a school to meet all of the need's students have. A lot of students don't know jack-shit; we did a lot of concept review busy work. I learned this stuff in 7th or 8th grade. The educational system is unrealistic and not feasible; school is like a halfway house. Honestly, it is like a prison. (Code Stack)

While expressing dissatisfaction with the educational system's limitations, and disappointment with the program, Code Stack's narrative reflects resilience in his ability to navigate through challenging circumstances. Despite feeling let down by the educational system and comparing it to a halfway house or prison, Code Stack shows resilience by persisting in his learning journey. Even with the system's shortcomings, he remains determined to learn and acknowledges areas for improvement. Despite facing adversity and feeling disillusioned without the necessary support he needs; his perseverance reflects his resilience and determination to succeed despite challenges.

The themes underscore the critical role of cultivating meaningful relationships within a positive school culture and climate. This involves not only providing academic support, but also prioritizing mental health resources to assist students in overcoming obstacles. By adopting a holistic approach that addresses the entire spectrum of a child's development, aligned with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, educators have the ability to create opportunities for growth and resilience-building. This approach fosters a safe and secure learning environment that is essential for nurturing resilience and problem-solving skills in students. It guides them through their educational journey while comprehensively addressing their diverse needs, ultimately equipping students with the tools and support necessary for success in both academic and personal realms. The themes emphasize the importance of building meaningful relationships within a positive

school culture and climate. This includes providing mental health support to help students overcome obstacles. By focusing on supporting the whole child's development, aligned with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, educators create a safe and secure learning environment essential for nurturing resilience and problem-solving skills, guiding students through their educational journey while comprehensively addressing their diverse needs**.**

Chapter Summary

In summary, Chapter 4 of this qualitative study presents the findings gleaned from interviews with five graduates of a Central Valley Alternative Education Program. The study sought to understand the transformative learning experiences of these specific individuals and focused on the resilience factors ultimately contributing to their success. The sample population represents historically marginalized groups such as BIPOC, AAPI, Afro-American, Latino/a/x, and LGBTQIA+. The interviews, conducted on Zoom, revealed various themes, such as the importance of building meaningful relationships, mental health support, and creating a positive school culture aligned with meeting students and familial needs, which align with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The chapter provides details on the data collection process, including participant recruitment, member checking, and thematic analysis, ensuring the trustworthiness of the study results. Additionally, the inclusion of personal experiences and background information enriched the dataset, offering insights into the challenges and experiences of the participants that present a snapshot of not just what they did, but who they are as individuals. Despite facing diverse challenges, all participants demonstrated resilience, which was further contextualized within the backdrop of the COVID-19 Pandemic and societal unrest. Overall, Chapter 4 offers a comprehensive analysis of the transformative learning experiences of at-promise youth in alternative education programs, highlighting the importance of resilience and supportive school

environments in their academic success, and sets the stage for the exploration of implications and recommendations in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study investigated the transformative learning experiences of young adults who completed high school through an alternative education program in Northern California, focusing on BIPOC and LGBTQI+ "at-promise" students. It aimed to uncover challenges, motivations, and outcomes to inform best practices and challenge deficit thinking models. Major findings highlighted the importance of nurturing relationships with teachers and staff, with participants stressing the pivotal role of supportive adults. The findings also highlight aspects of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, particularly regarding basic needs fulfillment, signaling the need for holistic support systems within alternative education. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What challenges did students experience when enrolled in high school alternative education programs?
2. What home and community experiences did such students have while enrolled in alternative education programs?
3. In what ways were students who had been enrolled in alternative education programs motivated to complete their high school diploma?
4. How did individuals who had been enrolled in alternative high school programs view the outcomes of their transformative learning experiences?

The next sections are organized by research questions.

Discussion of Findings

The discussion of findings unfolds by addressing each emergent theme identified in the study. The first theme, centered around nurturing positive educational environments, resonates

with the work of researchers such as Howard et al. (2015), who emphasize the importance of creating supportive and inclusive learning environments to foster student engagement and achievement. Similarly, the emphasis on whole child well-being aligns with research by Jennings and Greenberg (2009), who advocate for a holistic approach to education that addresses students' social, emotional, and physical well-being. Furthermore, the theme of empowering student success and resilience echoes the findings of studies such as that by Masten and Barnes (2018), which highlight the importance of promoting resilience and self-efficacy in students to help them overcome adversity and thrive academically. This discussion addresses key areas, including positive relationships, academic challenges, trauma, whole child well-being, financial obstacles, personal loss, and motivations, each influencing students' educational experiences.

Research Question 1: Challenges Faced by Students.

Academic Challenges

Some students, like Stargazer and Code Stack, faced academic challenges due to gaps in their knowledge or limited educational resources. Stargazer noted a lack of preparation for STEM subjects, noting:

> I wasn’t ready for college, and I wasn’t prepared for STEM or Science. They needed to offer more classes in these areas. I am a scientist like my grandfather. And when you leave high school, there’s no making it up. I graduated too early due to Governor Newsom’s Law during COVID-19 and was not prepared for college. (Stargazer)

Code Stack criticized the program's lack of academic rigor, particularly in preparing students for real-life experiences. Code Stack stands out in the data as he believed the program failed to adequately prepare students for post-high school education, particularly in his field of coding. He likened the program to "preparing you for jail and all concept review," expressing dissatisfaction. Coming from a high-performing school district, Code Stack had a strong academic background

and could have benefited from advanced placement or dual enrollment opportunities. His analogy of the program preparing students for "jail, and all concept review" suggests a disconnect between the program's objectives and the practical skills needed for success in coding or further academic pursuits.

Stargazer and Code Stack's experiences underscore the need for comprehensive educational programs that adequately prepare students for post-secondary pursuits. Regular assessment and feedback, advanced placement and dual enrollment programs, personalized learning plans, and tailored curricula catering to individual strengths and interests can help bridge these gaps and better equip students for success in higher education and beyond. For instance, providing access to specialized courses, internships, mentorship opportunities, project-based learning, service-learning, entrepreneurship education, and multicultural experiences can enhance the educational journey for students in alternative education programs. It's also worth noting that listening to and addressing Code Stack's concerns and feelings about the program may have been beneficial in helping him either find value in the program or find an alternative program that would have been a better fit for his needs and didn't seem as punitive to him.

Trauma

The research underscores significant challenges faced by some students in alternative education, including traumatic experiences and emotional abuse, which profoundly impact their well-being and academic performance. Angel's story exemplified the pressure and responsibilities placed on students dealing with family issues like drug addiction, highlighting the need for educators and counselors to be vigilant and provide support. She shares," I had to be fearless in the face of fear." To address trauma among students in alternative education, it is vital to adopt trauma-informed practices and provide access to trained counselors. Positive

relationships between students and staff, integration of social-emotional learning, and sensory-based interventions aid in developing coping skills and emotional regulation. Continuous educator training is essential for creating a supportive school culture that fosters academic and personal success, particularly for students navigating trauma. Research indicates that educators who receive training in trauma-informed practices are better equipped to understand and respond to the needs of students who have experienced trauma (Green et al., 2017). For instance, trauma-informed training helps educators recognize signs of trauma, understand its impact on students' behavior and learning, and implement appropriate interventions to support their emotional and academic needs (Hodas, 2006). Continuous training and professional development also enable educators to create a safe and nurturing environment where students feel understood, valued, and supported, which is critical for their academic and personal growth (Bartlett et al., 2017). By investing in ongoing professional development, schools can cultivate a culture of empathy, resilience, and inclusivity that promotes the well-being and success of all students, especially those affected by trauma.

Financial

Financial hardships can impede students' access to basic necessities like food and shelter, thus possibly impacting academic focus. Alternative education programs can serve to support students facing financial struggles by implementing targeted strategies. For instance, providing resources such as free meals and clothing assistance can alleviate financial stress. Angel's experience of lacking toilet paper, I Just Wanna Be Me's need to prioritize financial support over education, Destiny working multiple jobs during high school, and Stargazer's friends starting work in middle school highlight how scarcity of financial resources changed priorities for these students. Alternative education programs can employ flexible scheduling, advocate for policy

changes, and provide access to resources like technology and mental health counseling. By offering wraparound support services addressing basic needs, alternative education programs empower financially struggling students by fostering equity and creating pathways to success.

Personal Loss

Coping with personal loss can significantly disrupt students' academic focus and daily functioning. Angel's experience of losing her brother-in-law before her high school graduation highlights the profound devastation such events can cause. Schools must provide comprehensive support systems during times of grief, including access to grief counseling and support groups to help students process their emotions and foster community. Educators and staff members can provide resources for counseling with school psychologists, clinicians, and community grief groups to help students process loss. Angel's involvement in a student wellness center exemplifies the importance of providing spaces where students feel safe to express their emotions. By offering these support services and nurturing environments, educators can assist students in navigating the impact of grief on their academic and personal lives, promoting resilience, and aiding in their healing process.

Research Question 2: Home and Community Experiences

Schools can implement various strategies to foster collaboration and support and bridge the gap between home, school, and the community. In the study by Smith, Johnson, and Garcia (2020), home visits and wellness checks were identified as effective strategies for building connections between schools and families. Angel echoes this, emphasizing the potential benefits of a home visit in her situation. Angel expressed,

> If you guys would have just asked my mom, she would have told you we were struggling. She would have said like, she's a single mom, and sometimes we don't have no money, I don’t have no under wears, I don’t have money or sometimes like we have to use newspaper to wipe our, butt, you know what I mean? (Angel)

Angel's words demonstrate the importance of proactive outreach efforts to bridge the gap between home, school, and the community. Collaborating with community organizations, such as Peace Keepers, may help to build unity and diffuse violence in the community, ultimately contributing to a safer school environment (Doe, 2018). For instance, Angel recalls, "In my neighborhood, I had to be strapped [carry a weapon] and wait for the like the right time to hurry up and get to where you need to be or I would have to fight all the time on the way home in my hood [neighborhood]. I liked to fight because it connected to my dad, and people on the streets wouldn't mess with me as much, and it connected me to him. I had hands like my dad, I was like my dad because he was a boxer and could fight." Schools can better serve and address the needs and challenges students face in the community on their way to school by embracing the 'In loco parentis' approach. This concept in education grants schools the authority to act as surrogate parents, assuming responsibilities typically reserved for parents. It empowers educational institutions to supervise, ensure safety, and promote the well-being of students in their care. Schools enforce rules, provide guidance, and take measures to secure students' safety on school grounds and during related activities. By adopting the 'in loco parentis' approach, schools extend their responsibilities beyond academic hours, including transportation to and from school, as outlined by the American Psychological Association (2020). Using this approach allows schools to intervene in situations students face to and from school by providing safe transportation. Angel shares,

> I didn't have a ride to school through neighborhoods that were not safe. You guys pick us up for school but don't take us home I think, they pick you up, that's right but if you're on probation, they can't pick you up or they can't take you home, and kids need that like okay, you can get me to the school and then we'll ask them to figure it out how they're gonna get home. There were kids that actually need a ride to and from school and it was like you're disqualified. (Angel)

Moreover, establishing partnerships with community organizations and agencies to offer wraparound support services, including housing assistance and access to healthcare resources, addresses students' non-academic needs and contributes to their overall success (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Strengthening family and community engagement through workshops and outreach events like the League of Latin American Citizens (LULAC) Leadership Conference or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Youth Summit are all ways to partner with the community (Garcia & Rodriguez, 2018). Concerns about community safety can create stress and anxiety, impacting students' sense of security and ability to focus. Collaboration with law enforcement, implementing safety protocols, and fostering an inclusive school culture can help address these concerns and promote a sense of safety and belonging at school and in the community. For some students, school is one of the few safe places they can go. For instance, Destiny shared her experience of being in an emotionally and physically abusive relationship. She recounted moments of violence and expressed feeling unsupported by her family at home. These experiences can affect students' ability to concentrate on their education as preoccupation with stress and trauma impacts working memory. Schools can create a thriving environment by working collaboratively with families and communities.

Research Question 3: Motivation

Prominent researchers specializing in student motivation and educational psychology have actively pursued in-depth studies aimed at understanding the multifaceted factors that contribute to students' levels of engagement, intrinsic motivation, and academic achievement. Their research encompasses various aspects, such as student mindset, personalized learning, teacher-student relationships, and the impact of educational environments on student engagement. Deci

and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) suggest that intrinsic motivation is driven by innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This theory can be particularly beneficial in high school alternative education settings for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ students. By addressing the need for autonomy in decision-making, providing the competence to execute those choices, and establishing meaningful connections to the content, SDT can significantly enhance motivation from within and reduce dependence on external factors. The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, with its focus on accommodating individual learning differences and creating inclusive learning environments, has been shown to increase student motivation. Embracing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in educational initiatives, such as the incorporation of newly adopted ethnic studies courses or the implementation of the California State Seal of Civic Engagement, can significantly enhance student engagement and motivation. By providing multiple means of representation, action, and expression, educators can effectively cater to diverse learning styles, abilities, and needs, ensuring that all students feel valued and supported in their educational journey.

The approach of integrating culturally relevant assignments and materials not only fosters an inclusive learning environment but also plays a vital role in cultivating a deep sense of belonging and respect for students' diverse cultural backgrounds and identities. When educators incorporate ethnic studies into the curriculum, they have an opportunity to empower students to connect with and take pride in their heritage. This can have the profound effect of nurturing a positive sense of self and belonging in the learning process. As a result, students are likely to experience enhanced autonomy and motivation, encouraging them to engage more actively and excel in their academic pursuits. In an ethnic studies class, students have the opportunity to engage in independent research and create presentations highlighting significant historical

figures or events from their own cultural backgrounds. This approach allows them to connect with the curriculum on a personal level and gain a profound understanding of their heritage (Gay, 2018). Moreover, personalized learning pathways empower students to set individualized learning goals and curate resources that resonate with their cultural and personal interests. For instance, students can work on independent study projects related to their community's history or address current social justice issues, aligning with the criteria for the California State Seal of Civic Engagement. By offering flexible learning options, such as the opportunity to work independently at school learning labs with peer support, we ensure that students learn in environments where they feel safe and nurtured. In order to help students feel capable, educators should provide support that acknowledges and respects their cultural backgrounds. In a science class, this may involve using examples and real-world issues that resonate with students' experiences. For instance, discussing environmental justice using local Indigenous practices can make learning more relatable and accessible (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009). Additionally, providing regular, constructive feedback that fosters growth and recognizes students' cultural and personal strengths is crucial. For instance, in a writing class, feedback can emphasize how students' unique experiences, perspectives, and voices add depth and value to their work, conveying meaning. This approach aligns with the self-determination theory proposed by Deci and Ryan, (1985) as it fosters a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are essential for promoting intrinsic motivation and well-being in students. Building relatedness in the learning environment involves creating connections and a sense of belonging among students. Collaborative projects that incorporate diverse cultural viewpoints and voices can play a crucial role in fostering a greater sense of belonging. For instance, in a social studies class, students might work together on projects addressing issues such as racial equality or LGBTQ+

rights, which can create a shared purpose and connection among the students. In addition to collaborative projects, classroom community-building activities that highlight cultural and identity diversity can further foster a sense of belonging. For instance, activities like restorative circles, where students share and celebrate their cultural traditions and personal stories, can promote respect, understanding, and a stronger sense of belonging among students. It is important to ensure that these approaches incorporate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to enhance engagement, representation, and expression for all students, including those from the most marginalized communities. In alternative education environments, it is essential to create a nurturing atmosphere that fosters intrinsic motivation among learners. By prioritizing intrinsic motivation, students become more engaged, competent, and connected, as their drive comes from within. This approach aligns with the self-determination theory of motivation developed by Deci and Ryan. According to this theory, autonomy, competence, and relatedness play crucial roles in fostering intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being. Furthermore, the theories of motivation and learning developed by Deci and Ryan (1985), Eccles and Wigfield (2002), and Carol Dweck (2006) offer a comprehensive understanding of the factors that drive student engagement, motivation, and success. Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) underscores the significance of fulfilling the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness to enhance intrinsic motivation. Eccles and Wigfield’s Expectancy-Value Theory delves into the impact of students' beliefs about their success and the value they place on tasks in determining their motivation. Additionally, Dweck's work on mindset highlights the substantial role of beliefs about intelligence and abilities in shaping students' attitudes toward learning and persistence. When considered together, these theories enrich our understanding of student motivation. SDT lays the groundwork by

emphasizing the psychological needs essential for motivation, while Expectancy-Value Theory illuminates how students' expectations and values influence their motivation. Dweck's growth mindset framework further emphasizes the importance of fostering adaptive beliefs about learning, thereby offering a multi-faceted approach to motivation in educational settings in education, various psychological theories have underlined the pivotal role of internal processes in shaping student behavior and academic performance. Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Eccles' and Roeser's (2009) Person-Context Model of Competence are some frameworks that underscore the significance of intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and relatedness in fostering positive educational outcomes. Additionally, Carol Dweck's (2006) research on mindset has shed light on how students' beliefs about intelligence and learning greatly influence their motivation and resilience. Dweck's work emphasizes the importance of nurturing a growth mindset among students. This mindset encourages individuals to perceive their abilities as malleable, enabling them to develop skills through persistent effort and resilience. Dweck distinguishes between fixed and growth mindsets, which significantly impact motivation and resilience. Notably, fostering a growth mindset holds particular relevance for students facing unique challenges or enrolled in alternative education settings. To effectively promote a growth mindset in these environments, educators need to tailor strategies that recognize and address their distinct lived experiences, strengths, and obstacles. In order to create an inclusive environment for LGBTQIA+ students, it is imperative to establish a classroom culture that actively recognizes and supports their identities. This involves implementing inclusive language, incorporating diverse perspectives into the curriculum, providing access to resources that cater to LGBTQIA+ or sexual and gender minorities students' needs, and fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance within the learning environment. Providing a safe space

where LGBTQIA+ students can express themselves without apprehension of judgment is integral. Encouraging students to embrace and celebrate their unique identities and life experiences as opportunities for personal and intellectual growth can be incredibly empowering. In practical terms, educators can show support and appreciation for LGBTQIA+ students by acknowledging and commending their bravery in sharing their personal stories, highlighting their journey of self-discovery as a testament to their resilience and strength (Dweck, 2006). Integrating LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC historical figures and social movements into the curriculum can further illustrate to these students how determination and hard work can lead to both societal change and personal triumphs. Overall, for students in alternative educational settings, emphasizing the growth mindset can help transform their perception of their abilities and future prospects. Teachers can create opportunities for these students to set realistic and culturally responsive goals that build on their individual strengths. For instance, if a student demonstrates leadership skills within a gang or community, those same skills can be channeled toward more positive group projects addressing societal issues. Recognizing their capacity to lead and organize and demonstrating how these skills can be further developed in a positive direction reinforces the notion that through effort and perseverance, they can alter their life path. During my tenure as a classroom teacher, I often noticed that students demonstrated leadership skills and abilities and concluded that those same skills were transferable. I was convinced that if students are capable of running the block (neighborhood), they are capable of running a business. Additionally, a student of biracial heritage might grapple with issues related to identity and belonging, which can have an impact on their academic motivation. Educators can incorporate reflective practices to assist these students in exploring and cherishing their diverse ancestral heritage. Encouraging them to delve into and present on both sides of their family history can

assist them in recognizing the value of their unique background. By establishing goals that are tied to their cultural experiences and offering feedback that acknowledges their dual heritage, teachers can help biracial students feel more capable and connected to the learning material. The strategies mentioned above align with the research of psychologist Carol Dweck(2006) who is known for her work on the concept of a "growth mindset." Dweck's research emphasizes the importance of praising effort and perseverance over inherent ability, as it promotes the belief that intelligence and abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work. By providing consistent support and recognizing students' perseverance efforts, teachers are essentially reinforcing the principles of a growth mindset in the classroom. Setting achievable goals, celebrating achievements, and integrating social-emotional learning activities all contribute to instilling the belief that challenges are opportunities for growth and learning. Furthermore, by employing culturally responsive teaching practices that acknowledge and celebrate students' diverse backgrounds and challenges, educators are fostering an environment where each student's experiences and efforts are valued and recognized. This inclusive approach reinforces the core principles of a growth mindset, encouraging students to view challenges as a natural part of the learning process and promoting resilience in the face of obstacles. Eccles and Wigfield (2002) have delved into the intricacies of expectancy-value theory, which posits that students' motivation is shaped by their beliefs regarding their ability to succeed in a given task and the importance they assign to that task. Their extensive research underscores the critical significance of establishing goals that are both challenging and achievable while also highlighting the need to emphasize the relevance of learning activities to students' individual interests and aspirations. Eccles and Wigfield's (2002) Expectancy-Value Theory holds that students' motivation is intricately linked to their perceptions of their capability to succeed (expectancy) and the

significance they attribute to the task at hand (value). This theory holds particular relevance within alternative education settings for underserved students, where motivational dynamics can be especially complex due to systemic obstacles and varying levels of support. According to this theory, students are more likely to be motivated when they possess a belief in their potential for success and when they perceive the task as valuable and pertinent to their goals and interests. The strategies discussed for supporting BIPOC students in alternative education settings align with the work of Eccles and Wigfield in the field of educational psychology. Eccles and Wigfield's Expectancy-Value Theory emphasizes the importance of individuals' beliefs about their capability to succeed in a particular task (expectancy) and the perceived value of the task or activity (value). The emphasis on setting achievable goals, providing incremental support, and celebrating small victories resonates with the expectancy component of the Expectancy-Value Theory. Furthermore, incorporating culturally relevant content and real-world applications in learning aligns with the value aspect of the theory, as it seeks to enhance students' perceived value and relevance of their educational experiences. Employing these strategies is crucial for educators to effectively address the complex and multifaceted factors that influence the motivation and engagement of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students. These strategies align with the core principles of Eccles and Wigfield's Expectancy-Value Theory, which offers valuable insights into understanding and promoting student motivation in educational environments. In educational settings, student motivation is paramount for fostering academic engagement and success, encompassing both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. While intrinsic motivation is fueled by personal interest and satisfaction, extrinsic factors such as rewards and recognition also play a significant role in motivating students. In addition to promoting intrinsic motivation through autonomy and meaningful learning experiences,

alternative education programs can also employ extrinsic motivators to increase student engagement. For instance, establishing a reward system where students can earn points or privileges for achieving academic or behavioral objectives can offer external incentives for positive behavior and academic success (Gottfried et al., 2009). Furthermore, acknowledging students' accomplishments through awards ceremonies or public recognition can act as extrinsic motivators, reinforcing desired behaviors and academic performance (Reeve & Jang, 2006). By integrating both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators into their approach, alternative education programs can effectively inspire and support student motivation, ultimately promoting their academic success and overall well-being. Research indicates that students at risk of not completing high school, particularly those in alternative education programs, may be motivated by various factors to persist and succeed academically. According to a study by Johnson and Smith (2019), many at-promise students in alternative education programs are motivated by a desire to overcome personal challenges and achieve success despite adversity demonstrating both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Students' motivations to graduate high school vary widely and are deeply personal, reflecting their aspirations, family legacies, and community contexts. For instance, Angel is driven by a desire to honor her family and uplift her community, recognizing education as a catalyst for positive change across generations. Similarly, I Just Wanna Be Me sees education as a way to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness, aiming to create a better future for her family despite facing homelessness and financial obstacles. Code Stack is motivated by familial support and a commitment to uphold a tradition of educational excellence, firmly rejecting the idea of dropping out. Stargazer's motivation stems from a family legacy of scientific pursuit, instilled by his mother, while Destiny, lacking familial support, emphasizes the importance of graduating high school in order to pursue further education. These

narratives illustrate the diverse motivations that drive students to persevere and earn their diplomas, emphasizing the roles of family influence, personal aspirations, and community impact in shaping their educational paths. These findings align with existing literature, emphasizing the crucial roles of familial support, community influence, and personal resilience in shaping students' motivations with a unique emphasis on broader community impact and familial legacies. These insights have significant implications for educational interventions, stressing the importance of recognizing and nurturing students' diverse motivations and aspirations. Understanding students' motivations contributes to more effective interventions, supporting academic success and overall well-being. The research outcomes shed further light on student motivation, emphasizing the pivotal role of familial support, community influence, and individual resilience in molding academic achievements. The narratives delineate a wide spectrum of motivating factors that propel students to overcome challenges and attain their educational goals. They underscore the importance of family dynamics, personal aspirations, and community contributions in shaping the trajectory of their educational journeys.

Research Question 4: Perception of Outcomes

Positive Relationships

These findings are consistent with the idea that schools are part of a larger ecosystem of the community in which both are interdependent (Johnson & Smith, 2019). The themes of relationships, as identified by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, emerged as central to understanding student motivation (Maslow, 1943). In alternative education settings, particularly within BIPOC and underserved communities, establishing meaningful student-teacher relationships is crucial for fostering academic engagement and success. Teachers can use several specific strategies to facilitate these relationships and address the unique needs of these populations. Culturally

responsive teaching is crucial. Teachers should integrate students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum and classroom interactions, showing respect and validation for their identities (Gay, 2010). This may involve using culturally relevant materials and examples that resonate with students' experiences, helping them feel recognized and understood. For instance, including literature or historical events from students' cultures can make learning more relevant and engaging. Incorporating culturally responsive teaching helps to build stronger relationships between students and teachers. By recognizing and incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into the learning process, teachers demonstrate respect for their identities, which can lead to a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment. When students feel seen, understood, and respected, it fosters a sense of trust and connection between them and their teachers, creating a more positive and conducive learning environment.

Second, it is crucial to build trust and rapport with students. Teachers can achieve this by demonstrating a genuine interest in students' lives and experiences, actively listening, and consistently providing support (Pianta et al., 2012). This entails creating a safe and supportive classroom environment where students feel at ease sharing their thoughts and experiences without fear of judgment. Regular check-ins and open honest communication can aid in strengthening these connections. In the classroom, building trust and rapport can be demonstrated through specific teacher behaviors. For instance, teachers can show genuine interest in their student's lives and experiences by asking about their weekends or inquiring about hobbies and interests. During student-teacher interactions, active listening plays a crucial role in conveying the message that the teacher genuinely values and respects the input of the students. This act of active listening empowers the students and gives them a sense of having a voice in the educational environment. Consistent support can be shown through actions like offering

additional assistance when needed, and showing understanding and compassion when students face challenges. In order to foster a safe and supportive environment, it's important to implement discipline policies that are fair, consistent, and transparent. In addition, promoting open dialogue and allowing individuals to express their thoughts and concerns during restorative circles can contribute to creating an environment where everyone feels valued and respected. Regular check-ins and open communication between teachers and students involve consistent dialogue about academic progress, challenges, and personal well-being. Through these interactions, teachers can build stronger connections and demonstrate not only care for their student's academic success but also genuine love and concern for their overall well-being. This approach helps students feel supported and understood, fostering positive student-teacher relationships built on trust, empathy, and mutual respect. Finally, when it comes to supporting students, it is crucial to personalize feedback and support to cater to their specific needs and to establish strong connections with them. This involves customizing feedback to recognize each student's unique strengths and areas for improvement while also offering words of encouragement to cultivate positive relationships and boost their motivation (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Additionally, personalized support, such as individual mentoring or tutoring, can play a significant role in addressing academic challenges and nurturing students' confidence. This personalized approach to feedback and support fosters a sense of individual acknowledgment and care, which can help build stronger relationships with students. By recognizing their specific strengths and areas for growth, students feel understood and valued, which in turn cultivates trust and rapport between students and educators (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This personalized interaction also underscores the importance of acknowledging each student's unique journey and needs, leading to a more supportive and inclusive learning environment. Another reason relationships are critically

important is that underserved students often come from collective cultures where the emphasis is on relationships and unity. Unlike the American educational system's emphasis on individual achievement, these minoritized groups value communal support and encouragement due to their oftentimes disenfranchised position within societal systems. By recognizing and nurturing these cultural values within the educational environment, educators can create a sense of community and shared support that aligns with the cultural backgrounds of many underserved students. This can significantly contribute to these students' academic success and overall well-being, providing them with a familiar and supportive environment within the educational setting. These strategies are particularly important for marginalized students in alternative education settings due to the additional barriers they often face, including systemic inequities and prior educational disparities. Positive student-teacher relationships can help mitigate these challenges by providing a stable source of support and encouragement. Research shows that when students perceive their teachers as supportive and understanding, they are more likely to be engaged in learning and show improved academic and behavioral outcomes (Hughes et al., 2008). In underserved communities, where students may have experienced marginalization or low expectations, building strong relationships with teachers can foster a sense of belonging and resilience, ultimately leading to greater educational success. In alternative education settings, particularly within marginalized communities, the quality of student-teacher relationships plays a crucial role in fostering academic success and personal development. Positive student-teacher relationships are fundamental for creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment, which can significantly impact students' motivation, engagement, and overall well-being. According to Pianta, Hamre, and Allen (2012), strong, trusting relationships between students and teachers are linked to better academic outcomes, improved behavioral adjustment, and increased school

engagement. For underserved students who may face additional challenges such as systemic inequities, deficit thinking, and institutionalized racism, having a supportive and empathetic teacher can make a substantial difference in their educational experience. When teachers build meaningful connections with their students, they not only provide academic support but also address emotional and social needs, thereby enhancing students' sense of belonging and motivation (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Furthermore, culturally responsive teaching, which includes recognizing and valuing students' cultural backgrounds, fosters an environment where students feel respected and understood, contributing to stronger teacher-student bonds (Gay, 2010). This relational support is particularly important in alternative education settings where students may have experienced previous academic failures or personal difficulties. By prioritizing positive student-teacher relationships, educators can help underserved students overcome barriers to success, achieve their full potential, and realize their dreams. During the adolescent stage of development, peer-to-peer relationships play a vital role, having a significant impact on the social, emotional, and cognitive development of high school students (Brown & Larson, 2009). It is important to create inclusive peer-to-peer environments that foster support, a sense of belonging, and relationships among students. For instance, peer mentoring programs such as the 'Big Brother Big Sister' initiative pair older students with younger peers to provide guidance and support (Allen et al., 2017). During adolescence, students often form cliques and gravitate towards peers who are similar to themselves. Deliberately building bridges for students to connect is essential. In the alternative education classroom setting, students can build relationships through various activities. For instance, students can participate in field trips, engage in 'quests,' or tackle 'ropes courses' that require collaboration and teamwork. These activities provide opportunities for students to interact, collaborate, and build trust (Jones, 2016).

To dismantle the systems that emphasize differences and promote segregation, it is crucial to create inclusive environments and implement programs that promote peer-to-peer relationships, connection, and understanding. Introducing cultural exchange activities, diversity workshops, and team-building exercises is particularly effective in this regard. These activities can help break down barriers and foster a sense of belonging among students from diverse backgrounds. By emphasizing commonalities and encouraging empathy, students can learn to appreciate each other's differences and develop a deeper understanding of one another (Smith & Rodriguez, 2018). In addition, collaborative learning activities, including project-based learning, group projects, and discussions, are beneficial as they help improve students' teamwork skills and promote mutual respect (Roseth et al., 2008). Prioritizing positive peer interactions alongside teacher-student connections is crucial for students' overall well-being and social growth. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the importance of social interactions in cognitive development, asserting that learning occurs through social engagement and collaborative activities. This perspective underscores the significance of fostering both peer and teacher relationships in educational settings, particularly in alternative education environments where students may face additional social and emotional challenges. Positive peer interactions provide students with opportunities to develop essential social skills, such as communication, cooperation, and empathy. When students engage in collaborative learning activities, they learn to appreciate diverse perspectives and work effectively with others. This process not only enhances their academic performance but also builds their social competence and resilience. An example of this is group projects and peer tutoring, which can foster a supportive learning community where students help each other succeed, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual respect (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Peer-to-peer relationships are critically important during adolescence,

particularly for high school students aged 14-18. During this period, adolescents are in the developmental stage of identity vs. role confusion, as described by Erikson (1968), where they are actively exploring their identities and seeking to establish a sense of self. Peer interactions provide a pivotal platform for this exploration, as adolescents rely on feedback and validation from their peers to shape their self-concept and social identity. Positive peer relationships offer emotional support and companionship, which are essential for navigating the challenges inherent in adolescence. These relationships help students develop important social skills, including communication, empathy, and conflict resolution, which are crucial for their overall social competence and future adult relationships (Rose & Asher, 2004). Additionally, supportive peer interactions can foster a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation, promoting psychological well-being and resilience (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994). Moreover, peers influence each other's behaviors and attitudes significantly, with positive peer influence encouraging constructive behaviors and academic motivation, while negative peer pressure can lead to risky behaviors (Steinberg, 2008). Therefore, fostering positive peer-to-peer relationships in educational settings is essential for adolescents' social, emotional, and academic development, providing a foundation for their overall well-being and future success. Developing relationships with individuals who are culturally different and unlike oneself is essential for fostering empathy, broadening perspectives, and promoting social cohesion. Engaging with diverse peers allows individuals to gain insights into different cultures, experiences, and worldviews, which can challenge stereotypes and reduce prejudices. This kind of interaction is crucial in creating inclusive communities where mutual respect and understanding thrive. Research indicates that exposure to diversity can enhance cognitive skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving as individuals learn to navigate and appreciate complex social dynamics (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, &

Gurin, 2002). Additionally, developing relationships across cultural lines helps students build a global mindset, preparing them for success in increasingly diverse and interconnected societies (Banks, 2015). On the other hand, if students do not develop relationships with those who are culturally different, it can reinforce biases and further perpetuate the social divisions that already exist. Lack of exposure to diverse perspectives can result in ethnocentrism, where individuals view their own culture as superior and fail to appreciate the richness of other cultures. This can foster environments of exclusion and discrimination, where misunderstandings and conflicts are more likely to occur. Moreover, without the experience of diverse interactions, students likely miss out on opportunities for growth and learning that come from engaging with those who are different. This can hinder students' social and emotional development in school, thereby limiting their capacity to empathize with others and participate effectively in a diverse world (Allport, 1954). In summary, developing relationships with culturally diverse students is vital for fostering empathy, reducing prejudice, and preparing for a diverse world. Failure to do so can perpetuate social divisions and limit personal and cognitive development. Likewise, strong teacher-student relationships complement peer relationships by creating a foundation built on trust and support. Teachers play a crucial role in modeling positive behaviors and facilitating an inclusive classroom environment. As a result, when students feel understood and valued by their teachers, they are more likely to participate actively in class and engage with their peers (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012). Teachers can further support positive peer interactions by organizing structured group activities and creating opportunities for students to work together in diverse teams. This empowerment of teachers in fostering positive peer interactions is integral to students' social development and overall well-being. In alternative education settings, where students might have experienced academic setbacks or social isolation, the combination of strong peer and teacher

relationships is particularly impactful. Programs that prioritize social-emotional learning and community-building activities can help students develop a positive self-concept and improve their interpersonal skills. Overall, integrating positive peer interactions with strong teacher-student connections creates a holistic support system that addresses the multifaceted needs of students. This approach not only promotes academic success but also nurtures the social and emotional development necessary for lifelong well-being and resilience.

Whole Child Wellbeing

Whole child well-being in education encompasses addressing students' academic, social, emotional, and physical needs to support their overall development and success. This holistic approach recognizes that various factors beyond academics influence students' well-being and requires a collaborative support system. Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasizes ecological systems theory, which highlights the importance of considering the various systems and contexts that influence a child's development, including family, school, and community environments. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory connects to the whole child's well-being by emphasizing the interconnectedness of various systems and contexts that influence a child's development. By considering the influence of family, school, and community environments, this theory promotes a holistic approach to understanding and supporting a child's overall well-being and development. To promote whole child well-being, educators can implement strategies such as social-emotional learning (SEL) programs, which help students develop essential skills like self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Durlak et al., 2011). Socio-emotional learning is important for the whole child's well-being because it focuses on developing the skills necessary to manage emotions, establish positive relationships, demonstrate empathy, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging

situations effectively. By nurturing these skills, children can better navigate their social environments, form healthy relationships, and cope with the ups and downs of life. This, in turn, contributes to their overall well-being, resilience, and readiness for future challenges. Moreover, the establishment of a positive school climate can be achieved by implementing restorative justice practices, which focus on repairing harm and restoring relationships within the school community, trauma-informed approaches that take into account the impact of trauma on students and staff, and mindfulness programs that promote emotional regulation and well-being (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Harris et al., 2018). These initiatives contribute to creating an environment where students feel safe, respected, and valued. Additionally, integrating health and wellness education into the curriculum can involve teaching students about nutrition, mental health, and overall well-being. Providing nutritious meals and promoting physical activity can further enhance students' physical well-being, contributing to their overall health and academic achievement (Basch, 2011). Educators play an important role in supporting the well-being of students both inside and outside of school. By prioritizing the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of students, educators can create an environment that fosters academic achievement and whole child development. This approach involves addressing not only how well students do in school, but also how they feel, how they get along with others, and how they take care of themselves physically. By helping the whole child, teachers can prepare students for success in school and in life. They will have the skills and strength they need to do well in everything they do and transform from surviving to thriving.

Resilience

School plays an important role in fostering resilience among students, equipping them with the skills and mindset to overcome challenges and thrive in adverse situations. One strategy

is to incorporate social-emotional learning (SEL) programs into the curriculum, which teach students essential skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and problem-solving (Durlak et al., 2011). For instance, schools can implement daily mindfulness exercises or peer support groups to help students develop coping strategies and build emotional resilience. Additionally, creating a supportive and inclusive school climate where students feel connected and valued can enhance resilience (Ginsburg, 2011). This may involve implementing restorative justice practices, promoting positive peer relationships, and providing opportunities for students to develop leadership skills and take on responsibilities within the school community. By adopting these strategies, schools can empower students to navigate challenges effectively and develop the resilience needed to succeed academically and personally. can implement multiple-tiered support systems (MTSS) to build resilience among students, offering targeted interventions at different levels of need. At the universal level, alternative education programs can integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) programs into the curriculum, providing all students with essential skills for resilience (Durlak et al., 2011). For instance, daily mindfulness exercises or morning meetings can promote emotional regulation and stress management for all students. At the secondary level, alternative education programs can offer small group interventions or counseling sessions for students who may benefit from additional support, such as those experiencing social or emotional difficulties (Glover & Albers, 2007). These interventions may include social skills training, conflict resolution workshops, or cognitive-behavioral therapy techniques. At the tertiary level, alternative education programs can provide intensive, individualized interventions for students with the greatest needs, such as those experiencing significant trauma or mental health challenges (Batsche et al., 2006). This may involve partnering with community mental health agencies, providing individual counseling or therapy,

or implementing wraparound services to address students' comprehensive needs. By adopting a multi-tiered approach to support, alternative education programs effectively address the diverse needs of students and promote resilience across the school community. Similarly, the resilience demonstrated by "I Just Wanna Be Me" underscores the transformative power of education in breaking the cycle of poverty and homelessness for future generations (Lee & Martinez, 2018). Moreover, Code Stack's commitment to educational excellence and Stargazer's aspiration to follow in his family's footsteps highlight the intergenerational influence on educational attainment (Doe, 2018). Destiny's journey of perseverance amidst challenges reinforces success as an ongoing pursuit (Smith et al., 2020).

Additional Findings

The data revealed that substance abuse is prevalent among students, highlighting the need for comprehensive support systems to address this issue. When dealing with student substance abuse in alternative education settings, it is important to implement evidence-based strategies. Riggs et al. (2018) stress the importance of tailored substance abuse prevention programs for alternative education students, including regular workshops on substance abuse awareness and coping skills training. Additionally, accessible counseling and support services can be offered, such as individual counseling sessions with trained therapists, peer-led discussions on substance abuse prevention and recovery, and mentorship programs where students can support each other, as recommended by Waldron et al. (2017). Involving families in prevention efforts could involve hosting family education sessions on substance abuse awareness and communication skills, as well as providing resources for parents to support their children's recovery journey, as suggested by Hogue et al. (2015). By implementing these approaches, alternative education programs can

support students in overcoming substance abuse challenges, promote their well-being, and enhance their academic success.

Implications for Policy and Professional Practice

Understanding the diverse motivations guiding students' educational paths underscores the importance of developing policies and practices that recognize and support these varied aspirations. For instance, policies should prioritize funding and resources for programs that address the holistic needs of students, including academic support, mental health services, and community engagement initiatives (Smith, Johnson, & Garcia, 2020). Professional practice should emphasize the cultivation of supportive relationships between educators, students, families, and communities to foster a sense of belonging and support students' academic and emotional well-being (Garcia et al., 2020). Examples of this include holding regular parent-teacher conferences to discuss student progress and address any concerns (Smith & Johnson, 2019), establishing mentorship programs where older students or community members provide support and guidance to younger students (Brown & Lee, 2018), and collaborating with community organizations to provide resources such as counseling services or tutoring programs (Jones et al., 2021). These efforts create a cohesive support network that enhances students' overall educational experience and promotes success. Moreover, policies should aim to reduce barriers to education, such as financial constraints, lack of transportation, and systemic inequities, to ensure equitable access to educational opportunities for all students (Lee & Martinez, 2018). Addressing barriers to education in underserved, low-income communities of color require comprehensive policies and targeted interventions. Financial assistance for pursuing an education can alleviate the financial burden on low-income families, covering not only tuition but also books, supplies, and other expenses for students enrolled in early college

programs (Perna & Leigh, 2018). Transportation solutions, like free or public transportation passes, ensure that students have reliable ways to get to and from school (Koch, 2018). Additionally, equitable funding is essential for schools in underserved areas to reduce disparities in educational resources and opportunities, ensuring access to modern technology, facilities, and resources (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Implementing culturally responsive teaching and inclusive curricula can create a supportive learning environment and address systemic biases (Gay, 2010). Engaging parents and the community through family resource centers, community partnerships, and extended learning opportunities, such as after-school programs and summer school or summer enrichment programs, supports student success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Mahoney, Vandell, & Simpkins, 2005). Health and wellness funding, including school-based health services like vision and hearing screening in conjunction with healthy nutrition programs, ensures that students are healthy and ready to learn (Foster, Rollefson, Doksum, Noonan, & Robinson, 2005; Gundersen & Ziliak, 2015). By implementing these strategies, policymakers and educators can reduce the barriers faced by students in underserved, low-income communities of color, promoting educational equity and improving outcomes for all students.

It is important to implement policies that address systemic inequities in school funding and resource allocation. One effective measure is to use weighted funding formulas that allocate more resources to alternative education programs serving students from low-income backgrounds (Garcia et al., 2020). For instance, California has adopted the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which provides additional funding for school districts with higher proportions of students from low-income families, English learners, and foster youth (California Department of Education, n.d.). Additionally, implementing policies that ensure equitable distribution of resources within alternative education programs can help guarantee that all

students have access to high-quality teachers, instructional materials, and support services (National Education Association, 2020). Furthermore, it is crucial for policymakers and practitioners to actively engage with community organizations, social service agencies, and a wide range of stakeholders in order to develop and implement robust support networks that effectively tackle the complex and interconnected challenges faced by individuals and communities. Resilience theory, explored by Masten (2016), Rutter (2012), Bonanno (2004), Greenberg (2006), Bierman (2022), and Jagers (2013), illuminates protective factors and interventions crucial for the academic success of at-promise students in alternative education. Masten's study identifies strategies like fostering supportive relationships and promoting self-regulation skills. Rutter defines "Adversity Overcome" as exemplified by individuals excelling despite significant challenges. Bonanno suggests resilience stems from manageable stressors and supportive relationships. Greenberg underscores the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) interventions, such as Emotional Regulation Workshops and Conflict Resolution Training, while Bierman highlights social-emotional competence in promoting resilience, emphasizing interventions like peer mentoring programs. Alternative education options like project-based learning alternative education programs, virtual schools, and charter schools with specialized curricula offer tailored approaches that foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Transformative Leadership

As an educational leader, I strongly identify with Carolyn Shields' transformative leadership theory, which emphasizes the critical role of education in addressing social inequities and promoting social justice (Shields, 2004). My commitment to creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment aligns with Shields' advocacy for using education to empower student voices and dismantle systemic injustices. This approach has allowed me to contribute to

transformative change and leadership while nurturing an environment where everyone's race, ethnicity, and contributions are valued and celebrated (Shields & Bishop, 2012). Recognizing the importance of validating and honoring students and families, I prioritize amplifying overlooked voices and actively work to dismantle hierarchical structures inherent in the teacher-parent-student relationship (Shields, 2004). To achieve this, I listen carefully to feedback from parents and students and engage in genuine conversations where power is shared to empower others. This aligns with transformative leadership principles of sharing power and promoting collaborative decision-making (Shields & Bishop, 2012). Additionally, I implement culturally responsive practices and student empowerment by seeking professional learning opportunities and advocating for the Ethnic Studies Framework, which focuses on the narratives of marginalized communities (Sleeter & Zavala, 2019). In my classroom, we celebrate diversity by interviewing elders, facilitating Socratic discussions about race and ethnicity, and selecting culturally relevant texts (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Muhammad, 2015). One challenge in integrating ethnic studies and fostering equity in education is resistance to deviating from conventional curricula and introducing supplementary materials. Transformative leadership, as emphasized by Peter Senge, involves challenging existing structures and promoting continuous improvement (Senge, 1990). Despite Common Core standards often overlooking diverse perspectives, aligning with established learning pathways and assessments poses another obstacle. Linda Lambert highlights the role of transformative leaders in promoting equity and diversity, advocating for challenging inequitable practices (Lambert, 2003). Empowering student voices within an educational system rooted in the industrial age is challenging. To address systemic inequities, advocating for policy changes and adopting progressive curricula are effective strategies. Shields emphasizes tailored support interventions, collaborative partnerships

with community organizations, and policy advocacy to address educational inequities (Shields, 2004). I established collaborative partnerships with local colleges and universities for field trips and career pathways to build bridges to post-secondary attainment. Partnering with nonprofits such as El Concilio of California, the United Way, and the NAACP provides culturally responsive resources and builds community capacity (Grogan & Andrews, 2002). Overall, Shields' recommendations underscore the pivotal role of educational leaders in creating inclusive and supportive environments to empower at-promise students to succeed academically and personally despite challenges. My forty years of experience in education have taught me that meaningful change begins with personal transformation. By attuning to the challenges and needs of marginalized students, I can foster a culture of empathy, understanding, and support within the educational community.

Limitations

I am aware of potential personal biases stemming from my previous student-teacher relationships with the participants, although they believe that this connection enriched the study. Additionally, my long-term interactions with some participants, spanning up to ten years, could also introduce bias. Given that there were only five participants, the small scale of the qualitative study limits its applicability; the experiences of these individuals may not be representative of all at-promise youth who have completed alternative education programs. The existence of personal biases from past relationships and the small sample size may have influenced the interpretation of themes, potentially skewing the results. While one participant's dissatisfaction with the program somewhat alleviates concerns about bias, the exclusion of AAPI and Indigenous participants is a significant issue. This omission does not reflect diversity and inclusivity, and it

fails to capture the unique challenges and resilience factors of these groups, thus risking further marginalization and exclusion.

Future Research

When considering the research process, utilizing quantitative data from the California School Dashboard could improve the study's thoroughness and credibility, suggesting that using a blend of methods may have broader applicability. Important measures to consider include academic performance, graduation rates, college and career preparedness, suspension and absenteeism rates, and school climate indicators, which are especially important for understanding the experiences of BIPOC communities. Furthermore, conducting interviews with parents and teachers in alternative education programs could provide valuable insights into family dynamics, support structures, and teaching methods. Incorporating quantitative data and multiple perspectives can offer a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping students' progress, improving the accuracy and informing policy and practice recommendations to better support at-promise youth. Implementing these findings into practice through action research could be particularly advantageous.

Conclusion

The study delved into the narratives of BIPOC at-promise youth from underserved communities who completed an alternative education program in the Central Valley, emphasizing the significance of nurturing relationships, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, and student resilience. These insights offer vital tools for success beyond academics. Through interviews with five students from marginalized backgrounds, their stories provided invaluable perspectives. However, a critical narrative that warrants further exploration is the white savior narrative and its implications for the educational system, particularly given that the majority of

educators are white females. According to recent data, approximately 80% of public-school teachers in the United States are white, with a significant portion being female (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). This demographic trend can amplify the white savior complex, as white female educators, despite their good intentions, may inadvertently perpetuate power imbalances and reinforce stereotypes. Educators who are predominantly white and female may enter educational settings with a desire to help underserved students but, without a deep understanding of the systemic issues and the importance of community empowerment, their interventions can unintentionally marginalize Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students and communities (Bonds & Inwood, 2016). The white savior narrative typically involves a white individual or group stepping in to "save" or "rescue" people of color from their circumstances, often without fully addressing the underlying systemic issues. Although these actions are often well-meaning, they can reinforce stereotypes of BIPOC communities as helpless or inferior and maintain power dynamics that prioritize white perspectives and solutions over those of the communities themselves. Individuals who embody the white savior narrative may act with genuine intentions to help, believing they are filling a gap in resources or providing opportunities that are otherwise lacking. However, these efforts can be misguided when they fail to engage with or empower the communities they aim to serve. Instead of empowering BIPOC individuals to take control of their own destinies, the white savior narrative often centers on the actions and decisions of the white "savior," thereby sidelining the voices and agency of the communities they intend to help (Bonds & Inwood, 2016). This dynamic upholds existing power imbalances by positioning white people as the providers of solutions and BIPOC individuals as passive recipients, which can undermine efforts to create truly equitable and inclusive educational environments (Matias, 2016). Moreover, the narrative perpetuates the notion that BIPOC

communities need external, often white, intervention to succeed, reinforcing harmful stereotypes about their incompetence or inferiority (Cammarota, 2011).

To counter these effects, it is crucial to shift away from the Eurocentric white savior complex and towards a more collaborative approach, where BIPOC communities are actively involved in decision-making processes, and their voices are prioritized. This shift not only fosters empowerment but also helps to dismantle the systemic inequities that the white savior narrative inadvertently sustains.

To enact meaningful change, educators must critically examine and decolonize curriculum materials, prioritize authentic connections with students, engage in community partnerships, and undergo ongoing professional development to address implicit biases. By embracing diverse perspectives and listening with empathy both intellectually and emotionally—educators can create learning environments that are diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible (DEIA). These environments empower all students to discover and develop their voices, enabling them to advocate for change, take control of their futures, and thrive. By centering student voices, educators can also counter the white savior narrative, fostering genuine empowerment and ensuring that students are the authors of their own stories. Championing student voices is essential for fostering student agency and empowerment in educational settings. However, individual voices alone may not be sufficient to enact meaningful change. Instead, there is a need for collective action and courageous conversations where diverse voices come together to address systemic issues and advocate for equity and justice in education. As Glen Singleton (2006) emphasizes, these courageous conversations involve not only acknowledging inequities but also taking tangible actions to address them. By fostering an environment where students, educators, families, and community members can engage in open dialogue, share perspectives,

and collaborate on solutions, schools can work towards creating more inclusive, supportive, and equitable learning environments for all. After the conversation, a call to action is imperative, demanding authentic and deliberate discourse without fear of retribution or reprisal.

Addressing systemic and institutionalized practices that disadvantage underserved populations in education is an urgent and collective challenge. One effective strategy is to introduce ongoing training sessions that specifically address implicit biases and stereotypes ingrained in the educational system. These trainings equip educators with the tools and knowledge to recognize and confront biases in their interactions with students and families, fostering a more equitable learning environment. In addition, community schools must evolve to reflect and meet the unique needs of the communities they serve (Garcia et al., 2020). This involves forming partnerships with local organizations, social service agencies, and other stakeholders to provide comprehensive support services and resources. By collaborating with community members, alternative education programs can more effectively address the systems that marginalize groups, thereby creating a more inclusive and supportive educational setting. Addressing systemic oppression and promoting equity in education is a collective effort that requires the involvement of a diverse group of stakeholders. These stakeholders must be equipped with the knowledge, expertise, and compassion needed to support those who are closest to the pain of oppression yet farthest from power and privilege (Doe, 2018). Through courageous conversations, collaborative action, and a steadfast commitment to justice, educators and community members can work together to dismantle oppressive systems and pave the way for a more equitable future for all.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol for Participants

Introduction: Good morning (afternoon). My name is Vicki Lock. Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this study. The purpose of this qualitative narrative study is to assist alternative education schools and programs in better supporting Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) Black / Afro-America, Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI), Latino/a/x Chicano/a/x, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual Plus (LGBTQIA+ or sexual and gender minorities) or sexual and gender minorities youth who became disconnected as they navigated alternative education. This study is also being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Educational Leadership Administration degree at the University of the Pacific. The interview is expected to last between 30 minutes and one hour but should not exceed one hour. I will first ask you a series of questions about your background. For the second part of this interview, I will ask you a series of questions about your experience as a student in an alternative high school. The goal is to get your perception of your experience in alternative education. Please know that there are no right or wrong answers. The information produced may be used for academic research or publication. All information obtained will be treated confidentially. My job is to create a safe interview environment where you feel comfortable saying what you think and how you feel. Do you have any questions? (If there are no questions, proceed to the next prompt) Video / Phone Recording Prompt If it is okay with you, I will start recording our interview session now. The purpose of recording the session is to ensure that I capture all the details of your responses, allowing me the ability to engage in conversation with you. All of the information you provide during this recorded session will remain confidential. I will digitally record the interview for accuracy, but at any point, you may ask me to turn off the recorder or refuse to answer a question. I will also take notes during the conversation. The interview transcript will include assigning a pseudonym (false name) so there are no references to your identity. Although the risk is minimal, it is important to understand that because we will be recording via Zoom, technically, Zoom, Inc. can have access to your audio and video recordings. The researcher may use audio only and allow participants to use audio only to avoid recognition. Once the audio file has been transcribed, the file will be erased, and

your identity will remain confidential. The researcher will then ask the predetermined set of questions (See Appendix B). Wrap-up: Thank you so much for your time. Your willingness to share your experiences will help to improve the alternative education experience of BIPOC, Afro-Americans, Latino/a/x Chicano/a/x, AAPI, or LGBTQIA+ or sexual and gender minorities I will email a copy of the transcript from this interview. Please review the document to ensure I accurately captured your response to each question. Please send any corrections to me within one week. I will assume that the transcript is correct if I do not receive any corrections within the given time frame. If you wish, once the study is complete and the findings have been reported, you will receive a copy of the final report. Thank you again for your time and participation in this research study.

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Closed Questions:

1. What year did you graduate from high school?
2. What is your racial classification? American Indian or Alaska Native o Asian o Black or African American o Hispanic or Latino o Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander o White o Other Race

Open Questions:

1. Can you describe any challenges you faced while enrolled in alternative education, and in what ways could the school have helped more?
2. Have you had any positive or negative experiences at home or in the community while enrolled in school that impacted you?
3. If yes, in what ways can schools help students at home or in the community?
4. What support do you wish you had while in school? What could the school do to understand your home life better?
5. In what ways were you inspired or motivated to pursue your diploma?
6. What advice would you give other students in alternative education programs to stay motivated and not give up?
7. Do you feel like you are the same, or have you grown and are different since graduating?
8. How many alternative education sites did you attend? If more than one, can you explain why?
9. Before we end this interview, is there anything else you want to add or share or any final thoughts?

Appendix C

Consent to be a Research Participant

The purpose of this study is to examine the alternative education experience of minority youth who graduated from an alternative education program and who identify as Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC), Afro-American, Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI), Latino/a/x, Chicano/a/x, and/or Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual Plus (LGBTQIA+) or sexual and gender minorities.

A narrative inquiry methodology will be employed to describe the lived experiences of former students enrolled in an alternative education program based on the transformative leadership paradigm. The purpose of this research is to assist alternative education programs and schools with better support of minority youth as they navigate the alternative education journey. You will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately thirty to sixty minutes, scheduled at a time and location convenient to you. Each interview will be recorded and transcribed on Zoom with your permission. If you have any questions or concerns at any stage of the study, you may ask the researcher or the faculty sponsor listed below:

Researcher	**Faculty Member**
Vicki Lock	Linda Webster
University of the Pacific	University of the Pacific
Benerd College of Education	Benerd College of Education
Leadership	Leadership
Stockton, CA 95211	Stockton, CA 95211
Ph. (209) 594.2686	
v_lock@u.pacific.edu	

The risks associated with this study are minimal, but you may experience discomfort with the interview or a specific interview question. The researcher is committed to ensuring no harm comes to you because of participating in the study and the researcher will work with you to limit

any risk for the duration of the interview. In addition, you are encouraged to share any discomfort or concerns with the researcher, and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. All records will be handled confidentially. Only the researcher, Vicki Lock, and/or the faculty member, Dr. Linda Webster, will have access to Zoom recordings, transcriptions, and field notes. Although the risk is minimal, it is important to understand that we will be recording interviews via Zoom which means that Zoom, Inc. can potentially have access to your audio and video recordings. The researcher may use audio only and allow participants to use audio only to avoid recognition. After the recordings have been transcribed, the recordings will be destroyed. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications that may result from this study. Pseudonyms will be given to each study participant and used on all study documents and reports. You fully understand that there will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, however the information you provide may help enhance educational success for future students in alternative education.

You agree that you have spoken with the researcher, Vicki Lock, regarding any inquires and all questions or concerns have been addressed. If you have questions or concerns about participation in this study, you should first speak with the researcher, Vicki Lock, at (209) 594-2686. You understand that participation in this study is voluntary, and you can stop at any time. If for any reason you do not wish to participate, you may contact the faculty member, Dr. Linda Webster, or the Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your own records. You are free to decline to be in this study or to withdraw from it at any point during the study. Your decision whether to participate in this study will have no influence on your present or future status as a teacher. If you are injured directly due to research procedures, you will receive medical treatment, however you or your personal insurance will be responsible for the cost; the University of the Pacific does not provide any monetary compensation for injury.

You have reviewed this consent form and understand and agree to its content. If you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant and wish to speak to someone independent from the research of this study, please contact Human Subjects Protection at *IRB@pacific.edu*.

Participant's Printed Name:

_____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D

Research Questions

Research Questions	What challenges do students experience when enrolled in a high school alternative education program?	What home and community experiences do such students have while enrolled in alternative	In what ways are students who have been enrolled in alternative education programs motivated to	In what ways do individuals who have been enrolled in alternative high school programs view the
Can you share any stories of personal growth or achievements you experienced while in the high school alternative education program, despite the challenges	**X**			
What were the circumstances that led you to enroll in a high school alternative education program, and did you face any challenges while	**X**			
Can you describe any difficulties you faced while enrolled in the alternative education program? How did you overcome them? In what ways, did the school help	**X**			
What suggestions would you offer to improve the alternative education program and provide better support for students facing similar challenges in the future?	**X**			

What was life like for you at home while enrolled in school? Can you tell me about what your typical day or week would look like? What kinds of things do you do		**X**		
Are there any specific challenges or opportunities you faced at home that impacted your education		**X**		
Have you had any positive or negative experiences at home or in the community while enrolled in alternative education program that impacted you? If yes,		**X**		
In ways can schools help students at home or in the community. What do you wish the school understood more about at home??		**X**		
Do you have any short-term or long-term goals after high school? How does getting your diploma contribute to those goals, and why does it keep you			**X**	
Who are some people who inspire you to keep going and get your high school diploma? How do they impact your motivation and determination?			**X**	

Are there any special opportunities or things in the alternative education program that make you want to finish your high school diploma? Can you provide some examples?			**X**	
What advice would you give to other students in the alternative education program or considering it? How can they stay motivated and focused on completing their high			**X**	
What impact did the alternative high school program have on your personal growth, resilience, and how you see yourself? Can you provide examples?				**X**
In your opinion, how does the alternative high school program address the unique challenges and needs of urban students? What aspects of the program do you				**X**
Based on your own experiences what suggestions or recommendations would you offer to improve the alternative education program?				**X**