

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING BETWEEN
ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AND THEIR TEACHERS

A DISSERTATION IN
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by
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University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2011

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological, narratological, heuristic study is to understand the phenomenon of relationship building between teachers and students at an alternative high school. For this study, the phenomenon of relationship building is generally defined as the language, information, ideas, and feelings between a teacher and student that affect perception, understanding, and value between teachers and students.

Areas explored in this study include understanding how teachers in an alternative high school build positive relationships with students who had previously experienced little success at school and often felt marginalized, and understanding how that relationship becomes the tool to allow students to experience success in the classroom. Not all students share the experience of a successful high school career of academics and extra-curricular activities, friendships, or the culture of a traditional school setting. Over half a million students drop out of school each year (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). There are some students who drop out of school due to the lack of experienced success, ownership of the school, or a non-acclimation to the setting (Jessor, Turbin, & Costa, 1998). Being deficient in course credits and not feeling connected to a caring adult at the school may lead some students to develop a sense of hopelessness (National Research Council, 2004). Thus,

alternative schools fill a void and provide students a valuable option for their high school education.

Research questions that guided this study include: What do students and teachers perceive are characteristics that teachers, within an alternative high school setting, need to have to promote positive relationships with students? How do students and teachers perceive that program elements, within an alternative school setting, impact the relationship between teachers and students and their connection to school?

Qualitative research was chosen for the purpose of capturing the lived experiences of the teachers in building relationships with students in an alternative high school. Qualitative research was selected because it would serve as the best tool for gathering students' and teachers' voices, lived experiences, and individual reflection on the goal of gaining access to human experiences. Patton states,

a phenomenological study is one that focuses on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience. Heuristics is a form of phenomenological inquiry that brings to the fore the personal experience and insights of the researcher. (Patton, 2002, p. 107)

In the findings of the study, students and teachers emphasize that caring adults in a school are the vehicle to defining student success, through relationship building. The students and teachers identified the various program elements as positively impacting their learning and relationships with teachers. The findings in this study, centered on teachers building relationships with their students in an alternative high school, revealed three overarching themes: (a) adults relating to their students on a human level with interactions that have relevance, (b) adults being advocates for academic and behavior expectations, (c) engagement of students with opportunities provided by the school. This research expands the

existing research on teacher-student relationships positively impacting students' learning and success at school.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Education, have examined “A Qualitative Study of Relationship Building between Alternative High School Students and Their Teachers,” presented by Robert C. Cordell, candidate for the Doctor of Education Degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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amount of respect for her as a person and teacher. Thank you to the teachers of the focus group, who are passionate and highly dedicated to establishing positive teacher-student relationships, building trust, and caring for all students. Their work serves as an example for all other teachers to follow. Their work and abilities with students is greatly recognized and deeply appreciated, and they continue to inspire me daily.

PREFACE

The motivation behind this study began when I worked for one year as a hall monitor at a large traditional high school. The district's alternative school was physically close by, and some individuals referred to the school in a negative manner. This prompted my interest in alternative schools. The next year I became a social studies teacher at that school. The reality differed from the perception of others. The school was doing great things. But within the organization, the alternative school philosophy was not known or widely accepted. One of many goals I made at this time was to become a transformational leader within the school district and change the mental models of what alternative education is and how it serves stakeholders. Alternative schools are a critical component and serve a vital role for non-traditional students within each district. The work of this alternative school is of tremendous value to the community, the district, and the students. The success of the school pivots on one central concept. That concept is the ability of the adults to build relationships with students and use that relationship as the vehicle to guide them to success. Relationship building is absolutely essential to students and their success, connection to school, and obtaining a sense of belonging. This qualitative dissertation illustrates the work of a few dedicated and passionate teachers at this school.

DEDICATION

The work and accomplishment of this doctorate degree is dedicated to my father and grandfather. My grandfather, Clifford Cordell (1899-1989), was a life-long learner and farmer. He was a self-taught academic and a reflective thinker in applying history and human nature to the current political events. He and his brother continued the tradition of farming and their three sister siblings graduated from Southwest Teachers Normal College (Missouri State University) and became teachers. My grandfather demonstrated success as a relationship builder.

To my father, Robert Cordell, who followed in the footsteps of many generations before him, to become a life-long farmer. After returning from the Korean War in 1954, he began his long and successful career as a farmer. His brother and sister graduated from Southwest Teachers College (Missouri State University) and became teachers. He applied what we would call now Transformational Leadership to his decades-long job as a supervisor at a local factory. My father serves as a role model for others to follow with his hard work ethic, moral character, and success in relationship building over the many decades of staff leadership.

I also graduated from Missouri State University, following two generations before. When my career in education is complete, I plan to follow in the footsteps of the five generations of men before me and farm our family's land. I hope to live a quiet life as a simple farmer when I retire from the leadership of school administration.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the September 2006 issue of *Educational Leadership*, one of the feature articles entitled *Relationships Matter*, written by Deborah Stipek, highlighted the importance of the relationship between the teacher and student and its impact on learning in the classroom. The article began by mentioning standardized scores, high-stakes testing, and the 2001 Educational Law, No Child Left Behind. However, the essence of the article focused on the importance of relationship building. Stipek noted that one of the key factors in a student's education is the relationship between the student and the teacher. Similar to anything else in our experiences, if there is a relationship with someone or something, one is more apt to experience positive engagement and success. A couple of paragraphs into the article, Stipek (2006) writes about her experience in education:

To promote high academic standards, teachers need to create supportive social context and develop positive relationships with students. Being a caring and supportive teacher means holding students accountable while providing the support they need to succeed. For 30 years, I have been conducting research on students' motivation to learn... When students have a secure relationship with their teachers, they are more comfortable taking risks that enhance learning – tackling challenging tasks, persisting when they run into difficulty, or asking questions when they are confused. Urban students claim that when a teacher shows genuine concern for them, they feel that they owe the teacher something in return. They don't want to disappoint a teacher who cares about them (Davidson & Phelan, 1999). Fortunately, research has revealed a great deal about the kinds of teacher behaviors and the school structures that promote students' feeling of belonging. (p. 46)

Much of the academic success of alternative high school students depends on their relationship with their teachers. Research suggests that outcomes are improved when motivated, well-trained, and caring teachers work with at-risk students in alternative schools (Barr & Parret, 2001).

Statement of Problem

Building relationships with other individuals is an essential part of human interaction. The relationships that a person fosters and develops facilitate connections for the development of trust and commitment that enhance their success. For the purpose of this study, success is defined in three areas: (a) attendance—students at school and engaged in learning, (b) academics—the goal of passing courses to meet the credit requirement for graduation, and (c) behavior—appropriate interactions with adults and peers. In a school, “students are motivated when they believe that teachers treat them like people and care about them personally and educationally” (Rogers & Renard, 1999, p. 34). Author Stephen Covey wrote, “to develop positive relationships, we need to understand other people before we can expect them to understand us” (Covey, 1989, p. 11). The statements by Rogers, Renard, and Covey serve to stress the vital importance of relationships and how to effectively build them.

Educators and parents both realize that students who feel connected to the school community and culture, who participate in extra-curricular activities, and who have positive relationships with teachers have a higher probability of experiencing success in school.

Goodenow (1993) states,

belonging within a supportive web of relationships motivates young adolescents to make the effort and to take the intellectual risks that produce high-level learning. Young adolescents derive much of their academic motivation from their sense of supportiveness of others within the school environment. (p. 37)

The development of relationships is even more critical if the school setting is that of an alternative high school. Students who attend alternative schools often did not experience success at the traditional high school. A traditional high school is defined as “a secondary school offering the final years of high school study necessary for graduation, usually

including grades 10, 11, and 12 or grades 9, 10, 11, and 12” (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2008, p. 16). An alternative school is an autonomous school within a district and separate from the traditional high schools (NCES). Alternative schools have a small student population to allow for increased student-teacher interaction. The focus is on relationship building with students, developing a sense of belonging, and promoting the feeling of caring adults. The way in which students succeed in attendance, academics, and behavior varies from that of the traditional high school. The adult community has to be that of a high functioning team. All staff have to work as leaders, and the principal needs to model shared decision-making. Providing support and structure for students is a collaborative approach. Additionally, one key philosophy is that alternative schools always need to be a school of choice, not a dumping ground for students that a traditional high school would like to place. Thus, alternative schools need to have their own autonomy and serve as a stand alone school within the district.

Disengaged students are often at risk for dropping out of school because they have not had influential adult interaction or mentors who can assist them. Learning requires time and effort, and one of the best gauges of students’ effort and engagement in learning is the relationship they have with their teachers (Osterman, 2000). Manning and Baruth (1995) described students found in an alternative school as lacking motivation, lacking previous school success, not having experienced positive relationships with teachers, often being deficient in academic skills, sometimes lacking parent support, and having become alienated from the school system. The teachers in an alternative school were familiar with these characteristics described by Manning and Baruth (1995). For the past eleven years, I have been a teacher and building principal at an alternative high school. The most important

factor in the success of alternative school students was the building of positive relationships with at least one school adult, usually a teacher. Based on my experience, I believe the most critical aspect of working with our students is positive relationship building. It is the teacher-student relationship that empowers the student to experience success in a school culture. Pianta stated, “the importance of relationships between children and adults is hardly a debate—what is new is the recognition that schools play a major role in providing and regulating this form of relationship” (1999, p. 20). Students’ performance in the classroom and school could often be attributed to the caring and trusting relationships with a teacher.

The Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological, narratological, heuristic study was to understand the phenomenon of relationship building between teachers and students at an alternative high school. For this study, the phenomenon of relationship building was generally defined as the language, information, ideas, and feelings between a teacher and student that affect perception, understanding, and value between teachers and students.

I wanted to gain an understanding of how teachers in an alternative high school built positive relationships with students who had previously experienced little success at school and often felt marginalized. I hoped to gain an understanding of how that relationship becomes the tool to allow students to experience success in the classroom. A school’s ultimate purpose is to mold students that will be informed, engaged, and productive citizens for any community. Not all students share the experience of a successful high school career of academics and extra-curricular activities, friendships, or the culture of a traditional school setting. Over half a million students drop out of school each year (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). There are some students who drop out of school due to the lack of

experienced success, ownership of the school, or a non-acclimation to the setting (Jessor, Turbin, & Costa, 1998). Being deficient in course credits and not feeling connected to a caring adult at the school may lead some students to develop a sense of hopelessness (National Research Council, 2004). Thus, alternative schools fill a void and provide students a valuable option for their high school education.

Rogers and Renard (1999) wrote,

When we develop one-on-one relationships skills – becoming aware of and tending the emotional needs of students – we enter the realm of learning as well. If learning in school meets a student’s emotional needs, then they will more likely be engaged in learning. And subsequently, then school becomes a motivating place to be. (p. 34)

The authors also discussed “fostering positive feelings as a motivational strategy in the classroom” to create a meaningful learning context for students to experience success (Rogers & Renard, 1999, p. 34).

What is not often known is how a teacher is able to invest time, effort, care, and consideration into a relationship with a student who previously had no visible sign of success in school. Past research studies might suggest that the teachers have dynamic personalities, have attributes of a transformational leader, demonstrate care in their actions, provide consistency in the classroom with continual behavior accountability, and differentiate their instruction to fit a wide range of learners. Davidson and Phelan (cited in Stipek, 2006) demonstrated that a critical aspect in student success is the teacher-student relationship or the exchange of language. “When students have a secure relationship with their teachers, they are more comfortable taking risks that enhance learning—tackling challenging tasks, persisting when they run into difficulty, or asking questions when they are confused” (Stipek, 2006, p. 47). The gathering of lived experiences from teachers and students in an alternative

school allowed more insight and understanding into the process of relationship building and how that impacted students' success in attaining a high school education.

Problematizing the Issue as a Social Concern

A high school diploma is vital for socio-economic success in today's global economy. The effects of globalization are, and will continue to be, challenging for the changing U.S. economy. Currently, American companies are seeking opportunities to financially restructure themselves, most notably in the area of employee compensation. During the twentieth century, American workers made great gains in earnings, benefits, and salaries for blue collar, white collar, and factory workers. As the Industrial Revolution continued in the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century, the United States became the most industrialized nation in the world. During most of the twentieth century, American factory workers made comfortable gains and secured job longevity. However, near the end of the twentieth century, the U.S. economy was among many other advanced economies facing new global competition whose input and investment costs were lower.

The January 23, 2010 *Kansas City Star's* front page article focused on Ford Motor Company and the Claycomo Assembly Plant. Ford Motor Company is an example of an American company that is a global business that is in the process of restructuring their organization to remain competitive. The article (Heaster, 2010) noted Ford's investing in flexible line assembly plants, streamlining vehicle offerings, re-structuring worker compensation, introducing innovative new products, and maintaining long-term financial stability. Ford Motor Company began this restructuring in 2006. But in the age of global economies, companies are making the decision to move manufacturing facilities from the U.S. to countries in which they can pay the worker a fraction of the salary of the U.S.

employee. “Pressures of globalization, competition, technology, customer expectations, and workforce dynamics have prompted organizations worldwide to rethink and redesign structural patterns” (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 47).

The U.S. economy has changed from a heavy industrial economy, to a service economy, to our present day information and technology economy:

The shift from a production-intensive to an information-intensive economy is not helping to close the gap. There used to be far more jobs that involved making things. In the first three decades after World War II, high-paying work in developed nations was heavily concentrated in blue-collar work. These jobs generally required little formal training and few specialized skills, but they afforded pay and benefits to sustain a reasonably comfortable and stable lifestyle. No more. Blue-collar workers accounted for more than one-third of the U.S. workforce in the late 1970s; by the mid-1990s, the percentage was less than one-fifth and still declining. (Drucker, cited in Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 126)

With these changes, gone are the days of an individual’s devoting a lifetime to one occupation or employment at only one company. Individuals will more than likely be employed by more than one company and switch careers, perhaps more than once. Bolman and Deal stated, “trying to increase flexibility and employee skills simultaneously creates an increasingly vexing human resource dilemma. Should an organization seek flexibility and adaptability (through a downsized, outsourced, part-time workforce), or commitment and loyalty (through a long-termed commitment to people)?” (2003, p. 126).

These thoughts about the change in the U.S. economy led me to wonder about the students of today, specifically those who do not fit the mold of a traditional high school, have become disenfranchised from education, or have decided to leave school. Students that are disenfranchised feel as though they have do not fit within the system, lack motivation, and often lack the support to overcome challenges. With globalization and the U.S. economy now in the Information/Technology Age, the students who drop out of school have no certainty of

obtaining a good paying position at a factory to live in financial security. In addition to losing jobs to overseas nations' developing markets, U.S. corporations downsized to become globally competitive, and in the process cut more jobs. "Chrysler Corporation made 1.72 million cars in the United States [in 1995], the same as in 1988, but with 9,000 fewer workers" (Uchitelle, cited in Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 127). Bolman and Deal stated, "downsizing works best when a combination of new technology and smarter management produces significant productivity gains, making it possible for fewer people to do more" (2003, p. 127).

In today's society, if a student drops out of school, the probability is increased that a student will end up working in the fast food industry or as a laborer with low wages and little prospects for career movement. Additionally, in a global economy, all nations have to be very competitive. The movement to a global economy, combined with political needs, has made the American education system a high-stakes world of standardized testing, scores, and school improvement tied to funding and nationalized benchmarks. Thus, the once marginalized student must stay in school in order to have any probability of job success. School districts want to have a very low dropout rate and actively work to keep students in school due to the consequences associated with loss of state funding. With more Federal or State government legislation designed for increased school accountability, the annual progress reporting of schools with high numbers of student dropouts are scrutinized. Schools also receive state funds based on their average daily attendance. Additionally, students who only a couple of decades ago could have dropped out and secured a comfortable career in the industrial sector now realize that they too need an education and a high school diploma, in order to have any options in the real world. By the early 1980s, Americans had realized the

economy was changing. Additionally, in the early 1980s studies came out, including *A Nation At Risk*, that identified grave concerns about the education of U.S. students. Several points of focus included reducing dropout rates and identifying students who were at risk of dropping out of school (National Commission, 1983).

At-risk students are those students that are at risk of not graduating from high school. They have become alienated from the system, lack motivation, have most likely started out school with a low reading ability, and perhaps has never received support from a parent who knew how to help during the early school years. Marginalized students are those students who previously would have dropped out of school, yet secured a comfortable income job and career with longevity in an industrial setting. Success is defined in three categories: attendance, academics and behavior.

In order for the “at-risk” or marginalized students to succeed, the reality is that they need an alternative school environment that differs from that of a traditional high school. A successful alternative school, based on my 11 years of lived experiences, is one that can mold a disenfranchised, “at-risk” student into a motivated and successful student. Based on my lived experiences, in order for an alternative school to experience success with students and vice versa, positive relationships, which are the basis of success, must be built between the teacher and the student.

It is this relationship that serves as the key to a student’s deciding that he/she can once again experience success in school and become a part of a school culture. In an alternative school, there need to be attributes that support and enhance the students’ feeling of belonging. The majority of alternative students typically did not participate in extra-curricular activities or other school activities/functions at their traditional high school.

Students often viewed school as attending classes and school work. However, if students view school in a much larger realm and understand that learning experiences can take place outside of the school walls or in addition to the class hours, then there is an increased likelihood that they will achieve a sense of belonging.

One of the key attributes used by the school in this study is called Grounding. This is a 20-minute period, daily, during which all teachers lead a “check in” time for ten students. Each person states their name, emotional state, relates something positive that has happened in the last 24 hours, and answers a question of the day. The question of the day is coordinated by one teacher to achieve a uniform approach. This Grounding Group is relationship building in nature to provide the students a feeling of belonging. To further enhance connections to school, the school provides a monthly school-wide field trip or activity. We begin the school year with an all-school team building experience at the rope and obstacle challenge at the local liberal arts college. The focus is on forming teams, teambuilding, communication, problem solving, and establishing trust.

During other months of the year, educational field trips and other activities are offered to promote community involvement. Staff at this school also recognize students with positive referrals for their behavior. This is a simple process of any staff filling out a form, and the student receives a reward, usually candy. Our school has a Character Trait of the Month recognition for such virtues as self-discipline and honesty. This is promoted and highlighted by school announcements. Students demonstrating the Character Trait of the Month are recognized and receive a certificate by the sponsoring teacher, signed by the teacher and principal. There is a monthly pizza party for students with good attendance. Additionally, students with outstanding grades are recognized with a certificate from the

counselor. All of these strategies supporting attendance, behavior, and academics are highlighted with two all-school assemblies during each semester. The assemblies focus on students who have demonstrated above-average grades, perfect attendance, Character Traits of the Month, and positive referrals.

The assemblies are a rewarding school experience for our students and staff. Additionally, the school has a unique semester course called Discovery. The classes focus in on life skills for communication. The class encompasses units on anger management, conflict resolution, transactional analysis, and verbal and nonverbal communication. The course creates a common language for students in which provides students an increased ability for respectful conversations and life skills. Regardless of the many programming elements of the school, there were many students that struggled academically and a few students struggling with their behavior.

For a combination of reasons, the school over the previous years had become accustomed to high levels of in-school suspensions and out-of-school suspensions and students that had multiple failing grades. Within our collaborative staff, two teacher leaders emerged to lead the effort to provide behavioral support and academic intervention. Systemic and organizational changes were made, such as uniform classroom expectations and the implementation of a Recovery Room and the use of BIST (Behavior Intervention Support Team) that allowed our staff to be proactive to student misbehavior. The behavioral interventionist partnered with the handful of students that needed additional structure to allow ownership of their behavior to create a behavior plan for success.

The plans are revisited every two weeks and serve to allow the student to self-monitor and improve their behavior. All classroom teachers are required to keep note of re-directions

for behavior in their classroom every week. This information provides a bigger picture to the behavior interventionist of behavioral concerns from the teachers. The purpose of the Recovery Room is to assist with students prior to them getting into trouble as well as work with students returning from an in- or out-of-school suspension. In the Recovery Room, students take ownership of their behavior, making things right where they made the mistake, and create a plan to reduce the likelihood of a recurring problem. The school has scheduled student concerns staff meetings focused on what strategies are in place or need to be in place to support students.

To correlate with the behavior support, the next logical step is academic support. A teacher leader provides the focus with this element. Teachers who have students with one or more failing grades inform the academic support teacher, who meets with the students weekly or every two weeks. Teachers continue to provide weekly updates to the academic support teacher. The school has weekly staff meetings for academic support, focused on strategies that work or identifying additional strategies for support. The staff meetings are on Thursday, and then on Friday the teacher meets with the student. Information is communicated to the parents about how they can help as well. The academic support is now a refined process that, in its second year, is high-functioning. The school has significantly reduced the number of failing grades issued and has dramatically increased the number of passing letter grades.

Thus, within an alternative school elements of the school must be truly alternative to that of traditional high schools. In some cases, district administrators that are unfamiliar with alternative education try to apply a traditional lens or framework to the alternative school. However, by being different, alternative schools serve their communities more effectively.

Their purpose is to provide a high-quality education to students that did not experience success in the district's traditional high school.

This qualitative study on the relationship between disengaged or disenfranchised students and their teachers is relevant for all society. Students cannot afford to drop out of school, for statistically they will not find a job or occupation to meet their financial needs.

According to a recent news release from the Bureau of Labor Statistics:

Full-time workers age 25 and over without a high school diploma had median weekly earnings of \$448, compared with \$621 for high school graduates (no college) and \$1,145 for those holding at least a bachelor's degree. Among college graduates with advanced degrees (professional or master's degree and above), the highest earning 10 percent of male workers made \$3,260 or more per week, compared with \$2,252 or more for their female counterparts. (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009, n.p.)

Students who leave high school that are not prepared academically to enter the world affect all of society. Their lack of education impacts society through public expenditure on assistance, welfare, benefits, public health care, unemployment, and other public support that may be extended to citizens who are not self sufficient and productive within their community. (Dillon, 2009, n.p.)

Society is affected as well as business. Based on my experience in education, in today's high-tech age, employers seek individuals who are able to analyze and problem solve, have sound written and verbal communication skills, and are flexible in their work situations.

In the United States, the gap between wages paid to skilled workers and wages paid to unskilled workers rose by 18 percentage points between 1973 and 1995, and then leveled off. The fear is that trade is responsible for some of the gap, by benefiting skilled workers more than unskilled workers. (Frankel, 2000, p. 11)

Thus, for students who do not succeed in a traditional high school and are educated in an alternative high school, the relationship that is developed and fostered between the teacher and the disenfranchised student is critical for the attainment of success in school (Treslan,

2006). With success in school, the student has an improved likelihood of being a successful citizen in any community.

Research Questions

1. What do students and teachers perceive are characteristics that teachers, within an alternative high school setting, need to have to promote positive relationships with students?
2. How do students and teachers perceive that program elements, within an alternative school setting, impact the relationship between teachers and students and their connection to school?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is the eyes through which the writer views, observes, and perceives events and people. The theoretical framework molds and shapes our experiences with our existing beliefs, alters old beliefs, and serves as the guide for making decisions. How one conducts himself and how one models his character is also shaped by his own conceptual framework. Leaders use their leadership platform, as well as their core values and beliefs, to guide them in their decision making.

My mindset is shaped by a leader's attributes of honesty, value of people, open communication, input of staff, respect, courtesy, sincerity, and establishing trust. Effective leadership can succeed if the leader firmly believes in and models these attributes. In addition, on a daily basis my actions are guided by a conceptual framework consisting of leading by example, uniting individuals to strive for the same goal, communicating vision for our school, possessing the prioritization ability of long-term and short-term goals, possessing a working knowledge of organizational systems and organizational frameworks,

implementing change and innovations within organizational systems, as well as using a balance of common sense and practical judgment.

Also, a leader in any organization should possess additional conceptual frameworks. One must be able to create a culture, atmosphere, and environment that promote democratic ideas, creativity, leadership, initiatives, innovation, and reflection. An effective leader promotes all participants in the organization to be leaders and draws from their expertise and strengths to further the school. The concept of shared-leadership- giving power to others to be leaders - pays dividends for the entire organization. Thus, the core values and beliefs that I base my actions on affect our school.

This study centers on teachers' building relationship with students. Throughout this work and especially in the Review of Literature, some terms reoccur. Four essential terms are defined to allow the reader to understand their context or definition: relationship, disenfranchised, alternative, and learning organization.

I define the term relationship as the exchange of language, information, ideas, and feelings between two individuals that affect their perception, understanding, and value for each other. Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky reported that "human language is the basis for all human thought...and thought is a living process" (Prawat & Peterson, 1999, p. 211). Building relationships with students in any school is important.

For students that have been disenfranchised, building relationships with them is essential. I define disenfranchised as students who no longer feel connected to a school culture and no longer view themselves as stakeholders in school. Thus they seek to isolate or marginalize themselves to limit or remove themselves from interaction in a school. Students who are disenfranchised from a school community are also disengaged from the learning

process. They have no attachment to a school, some have no motivation to learn, and they will eventually drop out of school if no intervention is introduced. An alternative school could be an optimal intervention.

An alternative school is a school that is within a public school district but separated from the mainstream or traditional high school. As defined by the Department of Education, an alternative school should be autonomous, independent, and freestanding (NCES, 2002, p. 3). Drawing from my lived experiences, I define an alternative school as having small class size, which allows for a smaller student-teacher ratio. An alternative school is a socially equitable school, with rigorous curriculum, inclusive activities, and democratic opportunities for students to participate in school activities. The administrator promotes teachers as transformational leaders in the classroom and throughout the building.

Alternative schools need to be a “school of choice” in which the alternative school chooses students who are seeking to turn around their educational career and have the desire for improvement. Selecting students to attend a true alternative school is done in two phases.

The first step is to have high school guidance counselors make referrals of students who are struggling at the traditional high school. The referral criterion includes some of the previous information that would place students at risk of not graduating. The second phase includes conducting enrollment meetings between the potential student and the parent(s) with the alternative school’s principal or other staff. The interview meeting would serve to convey information about the alternative school, exchange information, and allow the student to have ownership in the decision. Students must have ownership of their education and a choice in attending the school. Students who are forced to attend an alternative school exercise all avenues to illustrate their unwillingness to take opportunities to be successful.

Alternative schools should not be “dumping grounds” for students who are perceived to be behavior issues or “bad students.” When students choose to attend an alternative school, the likelihood that they will be successful greatly increases.

A successful alternative school needs to be a learning organization. I define a learning organization as any organization that is continually engaged in growth activities and seeking improvement through challenging their organizational structure and daily systems functions. Peter Senge describes the learning organization as “a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality and how they can change it. It is an organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future” (Senge, 2000, p. 13). For there to be success at an alternative school, teachers need to be relationship builders; the adults need to understand the attributes of disenfranchised students; the alternative school must be a school of choice, not a dumping ground; and the school needs to be a learning organization.

Overview of Methodology

Utilizing a qualitative approach as a research paradigm, I chose a phenomenological study that incorporates heuristics and narratology to understand the lived experiences of teachers working with students in an alternative setting. The phenomenon being studied is the relationship between teachers and students.

Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world. Qualitative research implies a direct concern with experience as it is “lived” or “felt” or “undergone.” (Sherman & Webb, 1988, p. 7)

In discussing phenomenology, Patton said, “the essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experiences of different

people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon.” (1990, p. 7).

According to Patton, narratology, or narrative analysis, “extends the idea of text to include in-depth interview transcripts, life history narratives, historical memoirs, and creative nonfiction. Narrative studies are also influenced by phenomenology’s emphasis on understanding lived experiences and perceptions of experience” (2002, p. 115). My study of the personal narratives focus on the “lived experiences” of teachers and their experiences of working with disengaged students in an alternative high school setting. Patton also states that the “central idea of narrative analysis is that stories and narratives offer especially translucent windows into cultural and social meanings” (Patton, p. 116). I also draw upon my experiences in alternative education.

The aspect of heuristic inquiry, a form of phenomenological inquiry, allows my knowledge and experiences to aid in the study. In order to classify as heuristic inquiry, the researcher must have undergone the same experiences or have direct understanding to relate to the phenomenon. Additionally, the researcher must exhibit a passion equal to or greater than the passion of those who have shared the experience (Patton, 2002). Heuristics inquiry is focused on the meaning of the experience and examining the importance of that shared experience. This works well in the phenomenological study.

The focus is on relationship building that takes places between teachers and students. As Hinde (1987) described, “relationships are ephemeral, they are reflective in behavior but reside in patterns and history, structured by interactions and perceptions...and are processes as well as social structures” (p. 11). The powerful impact of the study derives from the lived experiences of the teachers. The importance of the phenomenological study is “one that

focuses on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience” (Patton, 2002, p. 107). “What people experience and how they interpret the world is important” (Patton, p. 107). It is important to understand the conceptual framework of the teachers. Having shared the lived experiences of the teachers, the researcher has gained an in-depth understanding of what people experience, how they experience it, and how they interpret the world.

Overview of Setting

The setting for this study was a suburban city located near a mid-sized Mid-west city of 450,000. The suburb has a citizen population of 30,000. A majority of the citizens are professionals. The school district had an enrollment of approximately 8,000 students in the Fall of 2007 with a steadily increasing school enrollment. The district’s enrollment surpassed 10,000 students in the Fall of 2008. The National Center for Educational Statistics noted that this community has a total population under the age of 18 of 9,987. Of that number, 9,171 are Caucasian, 282 are African American, 38 are Native American, 76 are Asian, 7 are Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 261 were listed as another race (NCES, 2008).

The alternative school has an enrollment of 75-85 students. The specific makeup is 77 Caucasian students, 5 African-American students, and 3 Latino students. The alternative school, reflective of the community, has a high percentage of Caucasian students. The suburban city is given a fictitious name of Moselle. For the purpose of this study, the alternative school is named Moselle Academy.

Overview of Data Sources

The data sources for this qualitative study were the student surveys, teacher surveys, and the teacher focus group. A short list of questions was utilized for conducting my

interviews (see appendix C for questions). The interviews began with the structure of following the questions, but developing into conversations. The open conversation rather than questions and answers were the key to gaining the “lived experiences” of the teachers’ stories. The interviews were recorded and transcribed into text. I then used the text of the interviews in open coding to identify developing themes and the various terms, phrases, and themes from the teachers.

A survey was used to collect data from teachers and students. The focus of the questions was on various program elements of the school. Seeking input from participants allowed additional insightful qualitative data on perception of support provided by the schools programs. All of the information was examined and broken down for analysis.

A third source of data was the teacher focus group. The purposeful selection of four teachers to participate in a semi-structured conversation provided the rich data of teachers’ lived experiences. The qualitative data collected from the teacher focus group was used to triangulate with the teacher survey and student survey information. Merriam states,

Data are collected through interviews, observations, or document analysis - an analysis that uses concepts from the theoretical framework of the study. The analysis usually results in the identification of re-occurring patterns that cut through the data in the delineation of a process. (1998, p. 11)

Triangulation of the data would then be essential. Using the three data sources to make observations and inferences provided me with a thick, rich description of how teachers build relationships with alternative students.

Overview of Limitations

I needed to be fully aware of the limitations of this study in order to guard against them. The limitations include my closeness to the topic, my passion for the students at the

school, my years of professional relationships with the participants, and the acknowledgement that I am the administrator of the building.

In qualitative studies, the researcher is the instrument of the research, and the research relationships are the means by which the research is accomplished. These relationships have an effect not only on the participants in the study, but also on you, as both the researcher in the human being, as well as the other parts of the research design. (Maxwell, 2005, p. 83)

Having influence on individuals from whom you are seeking to gain in-depth reflection and information from can be conflicting.

Read the important point that it is possible to have too much rapport, as well as too little, but I would add that it is the kind of rapport, as well as the amount, that is critical. A participant can be very engaged intellectually in an interview, not be revealing anything deeply personal, and for some studies this kind of relationship may be ideal. Conversely, someone may be very open about personal matters to a stranger whom they never expect to see again, but not be willing to engage in any critical reflection on this material. (Seidman, 1998, p. 101)

Overview of Validity and Reliability

When conducting research of any nature, a priority is to demonstrate that your findings are accurate, without bias, and can be tested for accuracy. Maxwell (2005) writes, “validity, as a component of your research design, consists of the strategies you use to identify and try to rule out these threats” (p. 106). Qualitative researchers battle against any item that would lead to an invalid conclusion. The goal is to rule out threats to your work. “The main emphasis of a qualitative proposal ought to be on how you will rule out specific plausible alternatives and threats to your interpretations and explanations” (Maxwell, p. 107).

Validity is the key to any design. A key question to be answered is, “How will we know that the conclusions are valid?” (Przeworski & Salomon, 1988, p. 101). The design, methodology, and triangulation of the data are key areas to provide validity. “The rigor of heuristic inquiry comes from systematic observation of and dialogues with self and others, as

well as in-depth interviewing of co-researchers” (Craig, 1978, p. 20). The use of multiple sources including interviews, observations, and document analysis seeks to provide a thick description of information. Additionally, triangulating the findings and the use of a knowledgeable and critical professional to critique and analyze the data serve to allow for varying opinions. Credibility also provides support. As the researcher, one needs to provide some information about himself, as well as his experience, training, and knowledge of the study site. Disclosure of the researcher’s information and voice provides valuable credibility to the study.

Overview of a Need for the Study

Having intelligent, informed, and productive citizens for any community is the goal of our school systems. Schools strive to educate all students; however, this is not always accomplished, due to the last 30 years’ steady rate of a half million dropout students per year from high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Prior to the last few decades, students that chose to drop out of high school always had the good prognosis of attaining a decent to excellent paying factory job with a good probability of fulfilling their personal aspirations as well as the community’s expectations. However, the effects of globalization, a global economy, and the evolution of the U.S. economy into Information and Technology, has left students with no assurance of a good paying factory position with benefits, retirement, and lifelong security.

The change in the U.S. economy with global competition has led to a change in the American education system. This change has been occurring during the last several decades, most notably in the areas of math and science because of performance-based evaluations, standard testing, and efforts to reduce the drop-out rate of students. The dropout rate is now

an issue that is being addressed in many ways, including the use of alternative schools as an option to traditional high schools for students who do not experience success in a large school setting.

In the state of Missouri, the Safe Schools Act of 1996 led to the establishment of Alternative Schools in many school districts. Alternative Schools vary greatly from district to district, but it is generally accepted that students that are at risk of dropping out are the most probable candidates for such schools. Alternative schools have worked to reduce the drop-out rates of school districts, due to an alternative approach and smaller student community that creates success for student graduations. For success to take place, teachers have to build meaningful relationships with the students. It is the teacher-student relationship that assists in the students' success at school.

Overview of Chapter 2 Review of Literature

The review of literature was conducted to shed light on topics relevant to alternative schools. The challenges faced by alternative schools are magnified due to the wide range of students' needs: academic, emotional, behavioral accountability, and support. The review of literature focuses on students of alternative schools, relationships, middle school philosophy, an administrator's school supervision and instructional leadership, and school leadership and change. I specifically selected these points of focus due to my years of experience in working with alternative high school students. From my own experience I recognize that students in alternative schools have many needs, and the struggle is to recognize the needs, but still have high standards for accountability. Positive relationships between staff and the students is vital to success. In the case of students who have had little success and no connection to a school culture, the relationship is the key to student achievement.

The focus of the review of literature displays the middle school philosophy of inclusive, collaborative, cross-curricular teaming, and academically relevant and rigorous curriculum applied to an alternative high school. The review of literature also focuses on the school leader's ability to build relationships through instructional leadership. The administrator as an instructional leader provides support, resources, and direction to teachers as the teachers serve as instructional leaders in the classroom. The focus is on the importance of instruction in school. The last part of the review of literature provides a view of how an effective school leader can change and reform a school to a democratic school.

Overview of Chapter 3 Methodology

This chapter describes the qualitative study and the tradition of Portraiture and Teacher Voice used in collecting the data. Discussion about the design and the aspects of the research are explored. Additionally, the participants and the procedures are discussed. The setting, a suburban school district's alternative high school, as well as topics related to alternative education and this qualitative study, are discussed.

Overview of Chapter 4 Data Analysis

This chapter analyzes the stories collected from the teachers in the alternative school regarding relationship building with students to engage them in a school culture that varies from the traditional high school setting, offering a potential for success.

Overview of Chapter 5 Conclusion

This chapter draws conclusions, findings, and recommendations from the qualitative data of the teachers' voice and portraiture. These findings will assist with future studies related to alternative education. Additionally, the findings and recommendations can be

generalized to be applicable to other alternative schools, at-risk students, or to regular education schools to enhance relationship building with students.

Conclusion

The foundation of that effective relationship can hinge on the two factors: the teacher and the student. Building an effective relationship does not happen instantly but gradually over time in the classroom and school environment. “With respect to interactive behaviors, patterns of behavior appear to be more important indicators of the quality of the relationship than do single instances of behavior” (Pianta, 1999, p. 76). Additionally, in a unique study that was completed in 1978 by Pedersen, a group of adults was asked to recall a relationship they had with a teacher that had left a significant impact on their lives. The focus of this study was on the impact of the relationships one high-quality classroom teacher built with students. The findings concluded that the relationship between the teacher and students allowed the students to “feel worthwhile, supported in their independence, motivated to achieve, and supported to interpret and cope with environmental demands” (Pianta, p. 87).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain an understanding of the importance of relationship building between teachers and students in an alternative high school setting. The phenomenon of relationship building is defined as the language, information, ideas, and feelings that occur between a teacher and student that affect understanding, perception and value between the teacher and student. Caring adults building relationships with students positively impacts the success of students. Learning from teachers in an alternative school through their lived experiences will assist in highlighting the importance of teacher building relationships with students in an alternative high school and using that relationship to lead the student to success at the school.

Students Meeting the Challenge

In the last two decades, educators have used the term “at-risk” to describe a particular group of students. The term at-risk is defined by Slavin, Madeen and Karweit (1989) as “referring only to academically at-risk learners, based on several factors, [at-risk students] are unlikely to graduate from high school” (p. 6). Historically, the term “at-risk” is believed to have been derived from the 1983 publication *A Nation At Risk* that stated the American education system was severely lagging behind other nations and the quality of education was low for American students. The term enveloped all students who were “low achievers, school drop outs, substance abusers, suicidal students and learners discriminated against due to their gender, culture, and exceptionality” (Manning & Baruth, 1995, p. 23). About a decade later, in the mid-1990s, the term “at-risk” was generally used to identify high school students who were at risk of not graduating high school.

Students who are at risk of not graduating high school do not wake up one day and suddenly find themselves in this position. One must consider that “every student is at risk for some reason [and the school district cannot wait] until a student is labeled as such to intervene; rather, [there must be a] plan for the success of all students” (Manning & Baruth, 1995, p. 6). High school students that are at risk may have become at risk during their high school career or possibly earlier during elementary or middle school. “Many developmental occurrences, changes in family structures, pressures and pitfalls of school, and societal pressures undoubtedly place children and adolescents at risk” (Manning & Baruth, p. 6). Students at risk of dropping out often have significant personal, family, and social barriers that interfere with the ability to go to school and do well (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998). These experiences in a student’s life may impact their educational career and are a factor in potential at-risk cases.

Students can be labeled “at risk” for many reasons. As Manning and Baruth (1995) discussed in their book *Students At Risk*, the reasons may include low academic achievement; teen pregnancy; tobacco, alcohol, and drug use; delinquency; gang activity; criminal behavior; poverty; low socioeconomic conditions; poor health conditions; and potential suicide (Manning & Baruth, 1995). Low academic achievement can be an identifiable factor that would raise concern about a student in an academic setting (Manning & Baruth). Not all students at alternative schools are low-performing students, but other factors have guided them to be at an alternative school.

Students that are low achievers can often attribute their low achievement to either lacking ability or motivation. At-risk high school students often relate their frustration with learning on their low reading levels. Oftentimes as an elementary student, they did not

receive the needed one-on-one time with an adult to properly cultivate the tools and desire for reading. With literacy levels lagging behind those of their classmates, the reluctant reader often hesitates to fully engage in classroom learning. When this continues either unnoticed or unaddressed by an adult, the result is a high school student who struggles as a reader, is a reluctant learner, and is a student who is often too embarrassed to admit that there is a struggle with literacy (Stipek, 2006).

The trajectory of a young person progressing in school begins in elementary grades, where students establish an interest in school and the academic and behavioral skills necessary to successfully proceed. During the middle school years, students' interest in school and academic skills may begin to lag, so that by the time students transition to high school, students who are at risk of dropping out may need intensive individual support or other supports to re-engage them in the purpose of education. Educators and policymakers need to consider how to implement intermediate strategies at increasing student engagement. (U.S. Department of Education, 2008, p. 4)

Low reading levels and low comprehension rates can lead to a struggling high school student, but another contributing factor to low achievement can be the level of motivation. The motivation, desire, and will to accomplish educational goals regardless of the resources, situation, or circumstances are the deciding factors in so many outcomes, on a daily level, and on the global spectrum. A high school student's lack of motivation to be academically successful may include factors such as low self-esteem, behavior problems, low academic achievement, rebellious behavior, absences, family issues, and social distractions (Fitzgerald, 1990). This is also the age that students have "failure to perceive the relevance of academic accomplishment of the work" (McLaughlin & Vacha, cited in Manning & Baruth, 1995, p. 46). Not realizing the importance of school can lead to students' deciding to drop out of high school.

Students Dropping Out of School

The reasons students decide to drop out of high school are numerous and unique to each individual, but are not uncommon collectively. Manning and Baruth (1995) used the findings from a study named *Young Adolescents At Risk* to identify students in the 8th grade that potentially will have dropped out by the 10th grade.

Students from single-parent families, who are over age for their peer group and frequently changed schools; Students whose parents did not participate in school activities, never asked them about school, and held low expectations for them; Students who repeated an earlier grade, had histories of poor grades in mathematics and reading, or who did little homework; Students who often came to school unprepared for school-work, cut classes frequently, and were frequently tardy or absent; Students considered passive, frequently disruptive, inattentive, and under achieving; Students from schools with large minority enrollments. (p. 46)

By recognizing the factors that lead to potential dropouts, secondary teachers can be proactive with interventions to diminish the number of students who leave high school. On average, the annual number of students dropping out of high school is one million. The rate has remained nearly the same for the last 30 years (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007). “The economic consequences of dropping out may continue to worsen as jobs for low-skilled workers dry up” (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003, p. 231).

Dropouts contribute only about half as much in taxes as do high school graduates (Rouse, 2005). Dropouts have greater dependency on government subsidies such as food stamps, housing assistance, and welfare payments (Waldfoegel, Garfinkel, & Kelly, 2007). They also are more likely to land in prison, have worse health outcomes, and experience lower life expectancies (Muennig, 2007). For society as a whole, helping young people stay in and complete high school is a worthwhile objective. Dropouts typically earn less than graduates: The average earnings difference is estimated to be \$9,000 a year and \$260,000

over the course of a lifetime (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2006). One way to deter students from dropping out would be for the student to have a relationship with at least one caring teacher.

The 2008 U.S. Department of Education publication *Dropout Prevention* calls for an adult advocate to establish and maintain a relationship with the student. This recommendation begins with, “personal and academic needs can be addressed through a meaningful and sustained personal relationship with a trained adult. The adult should be responsible for addressing academic and social needs, communicating with the families, and advocating for the student” (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2008, p. 17). The relationship with a caring adult can also deter juvenile delinquency and criminal behavior. These are not just family issues or concerns of a school, but societal issues as well. The friendships with peers, poor family dynamics, and the personality of the student contribute to struggles in the teen years.

Researchers also cite “poor parent-child relationship, lack of affection, under involvement, overly harsh discipline, family conflict and disorganization, and a parent with a criminal history” (Manning & Baruth, 1995, p. 52) as contributors to delinquency and criminal behavior. Educators serve to identify students of concern; unfortunately, the consequences of student behavior often lead to students in the judicial system. Students that enter the juvenile justice system may learn from their mistakes, as well as develop a positive relationship with a caring adult that could be key to breaking the cycle of delinquency.

In addition to delinquency, teen pregnancy and the abuse of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs are factors that contribute to placing teens at risk of not graduating. The experimentation, use, and abuse of illegal drugs have been observed in middle school grades

as well. Whether experimenting or using alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs, or other drugs on a regular basis, students can suffer health problems, loss of self-esteem, school failure, criminal records, and even death (Manning & Baruth, 1995). Teachers establishing caring relationships with students is a critical component in combating factors that challenge young adolescents.

Students could be considered at risk for a variety of health concerns. There are some students who have had a serious illness, automobile accident, cancer, or another health concern that may force them to be hospitalized for an extended period of time. In these circumstances, the health of the student takes priority over their educational needs. If the absence of formal attendance in school is prolonged, this may jeopardize their earned credits and lead to special circumstances and more individualized needs to regain their educational footing.

In addition to health concerns, educators need to be cognizant of teens with the indicators leading to suicide. Reasons teens may consider suicide include “failing classes, depression, lack of supportive friendships, anxiety, unhappiness, family instability, loss of a girl/boy friend, and unwanted pregnancy” (Manning & Baruth, 1995, p. 54).

Children from lower socio-economic families, homeless families, or family structures that do not fully promote education within the home often experience lower academic achievement (Manning & Baruth, 1995). One cannot assume that all lower socio-economic families have low achieving students, but the parents in lower socio-economic situations may have greater commitment to financial well-being of the family than to the educational needs of their children. A 2008 article entitled *Dropout Prevention* by the U.S. Department of Education states,

Students at risk of dropping out often have significant personal, family, and social barriers that interfere with the ability to go to school and do well. Research suggests that students who have ongoing relationships with adults feel a greater sense of school membership, attachment and involvement. Additional benefits of adult-student relationships include reduced risky behaviors, reduced absentee rates, improved grades, and improved communication and social skills. The adult advocate helps students overcome these barriers by assisting the student in addressing academic, personal, and emotional needs. The advocate can model positive and respectful behavior and offer guidance, stability, and assistance in making intelligent choices. (pp. 17-18)

Relationships

Increasing student engagement is critical to prevent dropping out. Engagement involves active participation in learning and schoolwork as well as in activities at school. Dropping out typically occurs during high school, but the disengagement process can begin much earlier and include academic, social, and behavioral aspects (National Research Council, 2004).

Engagement includes both behavioral and psychological components. Attendance, class participation, effort in doing schoolwork, and avoidance of disciplinary actions (notably suspensions) are behavioral indicators of engagement, while interest and enthusiasm, a sense of belonging, and identification with the school constitute psychological engagement. (Fredericks, Blumfeld, & Paris, 2004, p. 71)

Engagement of students is achieved through relationship building. The adults working with students need to build meaningful relationships to begin the process of connecting a student to the school.

The relationships that people form in the short-term and long-term serve to affect, shape, and change people both in positive and negative ways. Relationships define the world in which we live, work, and interact with individuals on a daily basis. Relationships in the classroom have an impact on achievement because “the brain does not naturally separate emotions from cognition, either anatomically or perceptually” (Rogers & Renard, 1999, p.

34). The basis of relationships is language that is the medium for the exchange of information, ideas, and feelings. Relationships increase the value of life and provide connection to individuals and groups. Teachers do this daily at school. How do teachers develop relationships? How are relationships used to promote learning in the classroom?

In any school, relationships are formed between teachers and students that serve as the foundation that allows the learning process to be enhanced and the connection to school strengthened. This is very true in an alternative school setting, where the learners have become disengaged from the learning process and the connections to a positive school culture are missing. Language and communication lead to successful relationship building in this setting. The work during the 1920s and 1930s of Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, served as a foundational piece in the development of the social constructivists' perspective in the United States (Prawat & Peterson, 1999) on the individual or social approach to student learning. Vygotsky's work centered on how language systems are used in human social interaction. He recognized that a child learns best through social interaction. Vygotsky reported that "human language is the basis for all human thought. Human thought development is determined by language, by the linguistic tools of thought. The relation between the thought and word is a living process" (Prawat & Peterson, p. 211). Vygotsky's work on development and learning through social interaction serves as a historical foundation for research and studies about relationships.

As discussed by Branco and Valsiner (2004),

considering teacher-student interactions, significant metacommunicative messages can be found, for example, in paralinguistic strategies of the speech of the teacher (such as tone of voice or rhythm), which may indicate trust, confidence, positive affect, or, on the opposite, lack of faith in the student's potential for development, as well as irritability. (2004, p. 115)

The building of the relationship takes time and effort from both individuals. As a relationship is forming, growing, and changing, the context of the relationship is related to the individuals and features of those individuals.

At the most basic level, relationships incorporate features of individuals. These include biological facts (gender) or biological processes, such as temperament, genetics, responsivity to stressors as well as developed features, such as personality, self-esteem, or intelligence. In this way, developmental history affects the interactions with others and, in turn, influences relationships. (Fonagy, Steele & Steele, 1991, p. 901)

This is the first of several features of relationships described by Pianta (1999). The second feature is feedback. This is the exchange of communication, ideas, and information between two or more individuals. A final feature of a relationship contains “asymmetries” (Pianta, 1999). This can be described as one or more of the individuals in the relationship being more developed than the others (parent-child, teacher-child) and thus having different levels of interaction, roles, and responsibilities over other participants in the relationship (Pianta, 1999). The relationships that develop, whether with parents, peers, or friends, all intertwine and impact others.

Pianta and Walsh (1996) expanded on the research of 1989 Sameroff and Emde in the context of dyadic systems for development into types and levels of cultures, sub-cultures, or communities that impact the development of a child. The system of Culture and Community includes the neighborhoods, churches, and schools of a child. The system of Small Social Groups includes the classroom, peers, and family. The Dyadic System includes those most immediate to the child, specifically, parent(s), teacher(s), and friend(s) (Sameroff & Emde, cited in Pianta & Walsh, 1996). Sameroff and Emde describe these three communities as a

“developmental agenda” or a timeline for a child developing in the first few years of life and understanding their experiences in various social groups.

These social groups provide boundaries for what is acceptable behavior according to the norms of the group. The school classrooms, family structure, peer groups, and church all serve to mold a growing child and reshape beliefs of older children. The environment contributes to the development, and

these groups are concerned with the regulation of the individual child’s behavior, and a large part of their activity toward the child is oriented toward the goal of producing individuals who adequately fulfill roles in the larger social structure (culture). (Pianta, 1999)

However, the most influential relationships affecting a child’s development is the one between a child and the parents.

A child should receive love; warmth; an emotional connection, and the basic human needs of food, clothing, and shelter from the parent(s). It is through this relationship that a child acquires language, perception of self, beliefs, expectations, appropriate behavior, morals, standards, ethics, encouragement, and support. To a degree, the child is a reflection of the parent, but the disposition, intelligence, and temperament of the child all have to be considered as factors in viewing a parent-child relationship (Pianta, 1999). The emotional connection between the parent and child is a critical factor. If a parent is distant and does not engage in the child’s daily activity, the connection may not be close. If the parent openly expresses love and interest and has positive daily interactions with the child, the quality of the “dyadic system” is different. The quality of the interaction, the amount of involvement (positive and negative), attention/love, and the type of communication are all contributing factors to the development and growth of the parent-child relationship (Hamilton & Howes,

1992). “With respect to interactive behaviors, patterns of behavior appear to be more important indicators of the quality of the relationship than do single instances of behavior” (Pianta, 1999, p. 76).

Pianta (1999) summarized that “child-parent and child-teacher relationships play important roles in developing skills in the areas of peer relations,” (p. 60) emotional development, self-regulation and in-school competencies, such as attention, motivation, problem solving, and self-esteem. Those patterns of behavior also include patterns developed by the influence of peers. “Like child-parent relationships, peer relationships become characterized over time by increasingly abstract and representational forms of exchange” (Pianta, 1999, p. 60). The social and emotional component of peer relationships are relevant factors for children as they develop and grow. Relationships with peers provide a key to the “small social groups” described earlier (Pianta & Walsh, 1996, cited in Pianta, 1999) as part of the culture or community that impacts developing children. The exchange of ideas with others through the social connection and the bonds of the emotional connection serve to enhance the developing child’s awareness in the much larger picture of life.

Research shows that it is the importance of a relationship with an adult at school that can be the pathway to success. Success in school can be attributed to many factors including intelligence of the student, motivation to learn, desire to succeed, fear of failure, the fun of learning, peer relationships, and the realization that education can provide more opportunities in today’s world. One critical factor that carries a great deal of importance is the teacher-student relationship. The development of the relationship depends on factors brought forth by the teacher and students. “Variables such a child’s temperament or a child’s beliefs about adults based on his or her past experiences (such as with parents)” (Pianta, 1999, p. 29)

directly influence the success of the student. “The importance of relationships between children and adults is hardly of debate—what is new is the recognition that schools play a major role in providing and regulating this form of relationship” (Pianta, p. 19). Students bring with them to the classroom a wide range of abilities, needs, desires, problems, and concerns. The consideration of each student’s intellectual ability and lack of motivation directly influence the teacher’s differentiation of classroom instruction and how he or she reaches all student needs. Rogers and Renard (1999) wrote,

when we develop one-on-one relationship skills – becoming aware of and tending to the emotional needs of students – we enter the realm of learning as well. If learning in school meets students’ emotional needs, then they will more likely be engaged in learning. Subsequently, school becomes a motivating place to be. (Rogers & Renard, 1999, p. 34)

Research suggests that students who have ongoing relationships with adults feel a great sense of school membership, attachment, and involvement (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko & Fernandez, 1989). “Evidence suggests that student engagement and learning are fostered by a school climate characterized by an ethic of caring and supportive relationships, respect, fairness, and trusts and teachers’ sense of shared responsibility and efficacy related to student learning” (National Research Council, 2004, p. 103). It is the relationship between the student and teacher that creates the avenue for student engagement and the learning process. Branco and Valsiner (2004) state,

analysis of the moments of convergence and divergence in the goal orientations of the teacher and the student is clearly of communicative importance. It reflects the relation between the two, aside from attaining cognitive or educational objectives. The affective nature of the relationship between teacher and pupil sets the stage for co-construction of the knowledge. (2004, p. 114)

The teacher may also bring factors to the classroom that impact the development of relationships. For example, teachers may have factors affecting relationships in the classroom such as their “training and knowledge, experience, current concerns or experiences (e.g., financial, family, marital), hobbies or interests, and so forth” (Pianta, 1999). As the adult in an asymmetrical relationship, it should be the teacher who focuses solely on the needs of the students. This is where individual leadership of the teacher comes into play. Effective teachers demonstrated a caring attitude and showed an interest in interpersonal conversations with their students (Wentzel, 1997).

A teacher has to exert effort to establish teacher-student interaction both inside and outside of the classroom. The outside events include school functions, athletic and academic events, and community activities. “The interactions between teachers and students are mutually influenced; for example “teachers’ communicative behaviors determine, and are determined by, student’s interpersonal exchanges” (Gayle, Preiss, Burrell, & Allen, 2006, p. 130). Conversations and exchanges outside of the classroom provide additional connections between teachers and students to allow the students a chance to broaden their understanding of the individual who is leading the class. “Conversations with students in both urban and suburban schools have convinced me that as long as teachers are providing the support students need, the students interpret teachers’ efforts to hold them accountable as evidence that they care” (Stipek, 2006, p. 47).

A high degree of personalization allows schools to focus intensely on why students are having difficulty; for example, teachers can more closely monitor student performance and behavior (U.S. Department of Education, 2008, p. 31). But the adults working with students set standards, expectations, and hold students accountable. “Being a caring and

supportive teacher means holding students accountable while providing the support they need to succeed” (Stipek, 2006, p. 46).

Making connections with the students has a profound impact on student success. Building relationships can be challenging and is an ongoing process that needs to begin on the first day of class and continue through to the last day of class. “Effective teachers were thought to empathize with students while maintaining control, setting standards, and allowing students the freedom to assume responsibility and learn” (Gayle et al., 2006, p. 130). It is the freedom and flexibility within the classroom that allows opportunities for student voice in the learning that takes place within the classroom. “Classroom social environments nurture those needs when they offer optimal challenge, interpersonal involvement, informational feedback, acknowledgement of feelings, and choice-making opportunities” (Deci, Ryan, & Williams, 1996, p. 171). This is all part of democratic opportunities in the learning environment. When students have a voice in their learning, they feel connected to the class and therefore experience an easier time building a relationship with the instructor, which then improves dialogue.

The idea that students want to engage in interpersonal classroom conversations was noted by Gayle and colleagues (2006), who observed that

more frequent and rewarding teacher interactions enhanced intellectual and social growth while increasing student retention rates. Taken together, these studies suggest that positive teacher-student interactions promote teaching and learning and set the tone for the likely out-of-class interactions. (2006, p. 131)

Rogers and Renard (1999) stated,

fostering positive feelings as a motivational strategy in the classroom requires creating a learning context and enables students to value the activities enough to want to learn and to achieve. Learning occurs only when what is being presented is

meaningful enough to the student that he or she decides to actively engage in the learning experience. (1999, p. 34)

These statements reinforce the importance of relationship building between teachers and their students and its impact on learning within a positive classroom environment.

When students see that the instructor is open-minded and non-threatening, then the interactions between the two are meaningful and relevant. This is accomplished by conducting class in a manner that demonstrates the teacher is also learning. The demeanor and personality of the teacher is reflected by the students and their behavior in the class. Knowing that each class or group of students is different is the common factor in creating Transformational Leadership. Transformational Leadership can be defined as “the actions of an individual acting in a group which has common interests, purposes, goals, and who influences the efforts of the group in the achievement of its goals” (Treslan, 2006, p. 58).

School Leadership

In the school setting, the leader of the school has to model and create a culture for transformational leadership. Attributes include shared-decision making, promoting teachers as building leaders, open communication, and empowering teachers by embracing them as leaders. The input and expertise of teachers and staff is valued and promoted. Thus, all staff members have more vested interest and ownership for the school’s success as an organization when Transformational Leadership is applied to the classroom:

this definition calls into focus the working relationship between effective teachers and their students. Such teachers are concerned with moving students beyond their self-interests and toward the good of the whole school. Here transformations would include raising students’ awareness levels, helping them search for self-fulfillment, understanding the need for change, and building trust. (Treslan, 2006, p. 59)

Building trust with students and establishing a relationship is all part of the process of connecting students to the school. Building trust with students then leads to

the academic self-efficacy of students [which] has a strong positive influence on their willingness to engage in complicated or difficult tasks. These authors suggest that motivation will increase if the instructor can move students toward taking responsibility for their learning. (Gayle et al., 2006, p. 137)

Once the teacher has been able to work with students enough to build a working relationship, the once disenfranchised student begins to react in the resurgence of personal confidence. They begin to perform in the classroom because the teacher has shown that they care. Once students begin to be engaged in the learning process in the classroom, with new confidence, they begin to feel a part of the school culture and school community.

The teacher uses the relationship to start the learning process and then students begin to figure out that instead of working for the teacher, they can accomplish something for themselves. As Rogers and Renard (1999) stated:

Students are motivated when they believe that teachers treat them like people and care about them personally and educationally. When teachers apply in the classroom their knowledge of human needs, amazing things happen. These teachers treat students with respect; allow for meaningful, significant choices; create valuable, fun, or interesting learning opportunities and foster relationships that help students see teachers as teachers and not as dictators, and judges, juries, or enemies. The teacher and the students collaborate for high quality learning, and inappropriate behavior becomes a non-issue. (p. 34)

Rogers and Renard (1999) also outlined six standards for relationship-centered teaching and two underlying principles as their framework. The first principle is “seeking first to understand” (Covey, 1989), in which one builds a working relationship with the student. “We must first understand the needs and the beliefs of our students as they are, not as we think they ought to be” (Rogers & Renard, 1999, p. 35). The second principle is to manage the learning context, not the learners. In this principle, the teacher works to maintain

a positive work environment, promote positive collaboration, and work on relationship building rather than focus on punitive means to controlling student behavior in the classroom.

Rogers and Renard also developed six standards to be used with relationship-centered teaching: Safe, Valuable, Successful, Involving, Caring, and Enabling (Rogers & Renard, 1999). The first standard, Safe (Safety), is a belief that having a safe classroom environment, free from threats, putdowns, and criticism, allows a student to take the academic risks within the classroom in order to gain high quality learning. Feeling physically and emotionally safe in the classroom is a necessity for opening up a student's ability for active thinking and active involvement. The second standard is Valuable (Value). This idea is that every person brings value and meaning to the learning experience. This is a standard that should be continually modeled and reinforced within the classroom environment.

The third standard is Successful (Success). Rogers and Reynard (1999) believe that in order for students to be successful, the curriculum has to be rigorous, and daily assessment of learning is important to monitor mastery. Additionally, differentiated instruction is essential in order to reach the wide variety of students in their preferred learning styles. The fourth concept is Involving (Involvement). The authors describe using collaborative ways to assess students in the classroom such as development of scoring guides and asking students to help design different aspects of units. Involvement of students within the classroom continues to reinforce the quality of learning, level of mastery, and collaborative class environment.

Standard five is Caring. Rogers and Renard (1999) discuss the importance of allowing teachers to give statements to students that are encouraging, caring, promote relationship building, display respect and trust, and nurture the classroom environment.

When students know that the adult in the classroom cares about them, then they are more likely to be actively involved. Participation and student learning are increased in large part due to the positive student-teacher relationship.

The final standard is Enabling. The authors discuss the context of providing tools, resources, strategies, relevant curriculum, differentiated instruction, and authentic assessment that can be used by students to achieve success in a classroom. The key is to work with students to find the resources needed for success in the classroom. Enabling in this context does not mean to find excuses for non-accomplishment, but rather to find pathways and opportunities to succeed in the class.

As Covey stated, “to develop positive relationships, we need to understand other people before we can expect them to understand us” (1989, p. 51). Whether with our spouse, family, friends, colleagues, or neighbors or between teachers and students, the relationships that we form and develop serve as the foundation for how we conduct our decisions, feelings, and daily interactions. Relationships can often determine success in something, and the lack of relationships can often lead to having no connection or attachment to something else. In our lives one of the most important attributes are the relationships that we have with those around us. Having positive and meaningful relationships with other people enriches our lives and helps us to become better and more caring individuals who seek to help and enrich the lives of others.

Middle School Philosophy Applied to an Alternative High School Setting

Moselle Academy is an alternative high school that has many aspects of a middle school incorporated and infused into the foundation. The Middle School Reform Movement began in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The middle school movement, which took full shape

in the 1980s, transformed the philosophy of how to teach young adolescents. “Because cognitive growth occurs gradually and irregularly, most middle level students require ongoing, concrete, and experimental learning in order to develop intellectually” (National Middle School Association, 2003, p. 25). By the late 1980s the reform movement was in full force, and school organizations across the nation were beginning to respond to it.

During the 1980s the metaphor of the school as a community of learners emerged, calling forth new images of learning. In a community of learners, both individual and collective growth is valued, as are the processes for achieving that growth. (Lambert, 1995, p. 15)

The reorganization coincided with the change in the U.S. economy. The U.S. had reached the end of the Industrial Age in the early 1970s and was transforming into a service and support economy. As in previous economic cycles, the change in the economy influenced changes in American education, which began to rethink approaches to learning. Understanding of psychology, brain research, and changes in teaching pedagogy resulted in changes in how teachers teach, assess, and even collaborate with other professionals.

From these movements stemmed the Middle School Reform. In *Reinventing the Middle School*, Beane states,

if middle schools were to provide more access to more knowledge for more children in a positive and nurturing climate, efforts would have to be made to emphasize collaborative learning, involve students in curriculum planning, celebrate cultural diversity, respond to diverse learning styles, and connect school to community life. (2001, p. xix)

That is all part of creating a school environment that is developmentally appropriate for young adolescents. This means creating a school that is physically safe, emotionally safe, and developmentally challenging to the growing mind of a young adolescent.

A physically safe environment should be a high priority of any school in any city. This is not always the case, however, and some schools in urban, suburban, and rural districts face this challenge every day. Emotional safety of students is a top priority of middle school philosophy. Adult educators and administrators at the middle school levels need to exhibit no tolerance for bullying behavior, putdowns, or sarcasm. Students are at an age when outside influence can have very positive and/or negative consequences. Positive reinforcement by caring adults can work to nurture teens who are accepting of their changing physical appearances and growing intellectual needs. Adults at the middle school level are keenly aware of the mood swings and abundant energy of these young adolescents. Any major variance in the mood or body language would be a sign of concern to the observing adult. Teachers can nurture students' emotional safety by promoting positive self-esteem to reinforce their success and achievements. Additionally, it is of great importance that social equity be transparent. Fair and equal opportunity for all students maintains and promotes the democratic practices. Fairness in the classroom and the entire school building provides opportunity for students to access academic and extracurricular venues. Developmentally appropriate academia and teaching methods are necessary for this particular age group when adopting middle school philosophy.

Developmentally appropriate concepts of the middle school philosophy include the curriculum and instruction offered to students and also relationship building, through teaming. Middle schools are organizationally different from most junior highs and nearly all high schools in how they manage the size of the student body. The large student body is broken into smaller and more manageable sizes through teams, houses, or sections. Placing a designated group of students under a select team of teachers of varying curriculum areas

allows for closer relationships to be established. With the middle school staff focused on the same group of students throughout a school year, meaningful relationships can be established with all students.

Research shows that effective teams lead to improved student achievement, increased parental contacts, an enhanced school climate, and positive student attitudes. Smaller teams of two or three teachers have proven to be especially effective in achieving these benefits. Furthermore, teaming has a positive impact on the professional lives of teachers, improving their sense of accomplishment. Whether organized formally as vertical teams or not, teachers of a particular subject have regular opportunities to meet together. (National Middle School Association, 2003, p. 29)

The working relationship serves to enhance the students' participation in academic activities in the classroom. Students who have an adult advocate and see that person on a daily basis will have an increased interest in school related activities. All students must have an adult they can relate to, talk with, and know is a personal advocate on their behalf.

Applying this to an alternative school will positively impact students' connections to the school. "Students tell us that it makes a difference to have a teacher who they believe cares about them" (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2001, p. 24).

Having solid relationships enhances the classroom instruction, student engagement, and student learning. For example, a teacher who is aware of students' hobbies or special interests, such as Civil War generals or science fiction novels, can use those interests to attach meaning to a student's foundation of information. In *Breaking Ranks in the Middle*, the authors state:

personalization definitions...converge on a few principles associated with providing students with opportunities to develop a sense of belonging to the school, a sense of ownership over the direction of one's learning, and the ability to recognize options and make choices based on one's own experience and understanding of the options. (NASSP, 2006, p. 129)

Having that connection can allow a teacher to differentiate assignments to enhance self exploration.

One of the main aspects of middle school philosophy is having an adult advocate to personally care for students. “The adult advocate helps students overcome these barriers by assisting the student in addressing academic, personal, and emotional needs. The advocate can model positive and respectful behavior and offer guidance, stability, and assistance in making intelligent choices” (U.S. Department of Education, 2008, p. 18). Adult advocacy relies on the conversations that take place between the adult and student in order to build a relationship. Adult advocates are critical to molding school engagement by providing students with opportunities to develop a sense of belonging at school by providing academic progress and behavioral accountability (Larson & Rumberger, 1995).

Applying Middle School Philosophy of advisory time or assigning an adult advocate for each student increases the student’s connection to school. “Personal and academic needs can be addressed through a meaningful and sustained personal relationship with a trained adult. The adult should be responsible for addressing academic and social needs, communicating with families, and advocating for the student” (U.S. Dept of Education, 2008, p. 17). Building into the school’s daily schedule time for advisory or a homeroom time enables teachers to build relationships with their students.

Building trust is critical for the development of the relationship between the student and the adult. With this in mind, advocates should not have caseloads larger than 15 students, and matches should take individual student needs into account so that the adult can effectively advocate on the student’s behalf and adapt activities according to the student’s interest and goals. (Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo & Hurley, 1998, p. 21)

In *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*, the call is for

each student to know that at least one adult in the school is closely concerned with his or her fate. The Personal Adult Advocate will be that person. The relationship between the student and the advocate should ensure that no youngster experiences the sense of isolation that frequently engulfs teenagers during this critical period of their lives. (NASSP, 2001, p. 31)

Additional benefits of adult-student relationships include reduced risky behaviors, reduced absentee rates, improved grades, and improved communication and social skills (Pringle, Anderson, Rubenstein & Russo, 1993).

Building strong relationships through teaming also encourages students to participate in extracurricular activities. Faculty that promotes self-exploration in the classroom also promotes interests outside the classroom. Thus, students in a middle school with this kind of programming will be more willing to try sports, clubs, plays, and academic clubs if they are viewed as exploratory options. Providing activities that are open to interested persons without the stigma of being “cut from the list or team” enhances students’ thinking, interests, and self-perception. Being able to explore the options allows students to gain experience in potential areas of undiscovered interest. Schools with “open” activities that are exploratory serve to gain the constructive interests and energies of students in after-school activities. Positive and engaging activities enhance the students’ view as a stakeholder in their school. Providing incentives at school for all students to be a part of, such as leadership opportunities in academic areas or rewards for improved performance, works to increase academic and student engagement (Wehlage et al., 1989).

The more they view themselves as members of “our school,” the more active students become. Students who are active in a variety of school-related functions are much more likely to have improved grades, increased self-esteem, growing self-perception, and a broader outlook on their roles in a community-centered school as well as the larger community. Sizer

(1996) wrote, “without difference, our culture and our economy would shrivel. Without citizens who feel that each has something special to offer, we would have a culture without validity” (Sizer, p. 7). Middle school philosophy promotes the use of teaming as a part of an inclusive environment.

Teaming places the adults’ collective focus on the needs of the student. In *Breaking Ranks*, the NASSP stated,

student-centered approaches that take advantage of research findings on learning involve youngsters more directly in their own education...seminars, cooperative learning, debates, field experiences, independent study. Researchers have demonstrated that levels of engagement increase and academic achievement rises in schools that use these various practices. (2001, p. 22)

Teaming serves to establish the working relationships that connect the students to the school, impact learning, and provide for increased participation in school functions.

“Teaming is a starting place for building a strong learning community with its sense of family, where students and teachers know one another well, feel safe and supported, and are encouraged to take intellectual risks” (National Middle School Association, 2003, p. 29).

Teaming at the middle school level serves to enhance student growth and learning. Teaming also enhances relationships between teachers and students to make sure that every student at the middle school level has an adult advocate that knows that student, cares about that student, and shares a connection with that student. The adult conversations need to be focused on student learning and achievement.

In order to cater instruction to all students’ learning needs, the middle school philosophy, through teaming teachers within content areas, allows the teacher-student relationship to become the foundation of student success. Teaming allows teachers to better understand each student’s learning styles, as well as interests, in order to enhance classroom

achievement. Teacher conversations must place emphasis on teaching and learning. Jackson and Davis (2000), in *Turning Points 2000*, stated,

the hallmark of an effective team is its ability to focus on sustained attention to coordinating the curriculum and improving teaching strategies. What an effective team does not do is spend an inordinate amount of time on behavior problems of a few students or on other issues that distract the team from the main business of the team: improving student learning. Teaming will not improve student achievement unless teams consistently focus on teaching and learning. (2000, p. 141)

Collaboration and teaming by a staff that is focused on student learning, student achievement, and student accountability share common goals. One of the common goals should be vision for the school and the seeking of continual improvement. This leads into Peter Senge's concepts of a learning organization.

The learning community is a place where people are striving for a common goal. When a school establishes a learning organization in which professionals are engaged in growth activities, it allows the organization to have greater success. In summary, the middle school philosophy promotes all stakeholders to have active participation in all aspects of the school. A model middle school is a community-based school that serves all stakeholders of the school to meet the academic, intellectual, emotional, psychological, and physical needs of young adolescents. Often this does not work at larger school buildings, such as large high schools. At large buildings the focus sometimes shifts to curriculum and subject content.

In the case of Moselle Academy, we have applied many attributes of the Middle School Philosophy. Before we could make changes, I led the staff to rethink some foundational beliefs. I asked all staff to be reflective on the question of school improvement. Collectively we examined what we could change organizationally, systemically, and individually to positively impact our school and students. After allowing all staff to reflect

for about two months, the ideas began to flow. All staff were provided an opportunity to become building leaders in some capacity. I feel that staff ownership in change would lead to a long-lasting positive impact for the school. During this one to two year time of change, I modeled shared-decision making and was the active listener to allow for open communication and staff ownership of change.

After meeting and then empowering nearly all staff to have building leadership in some capacity, the next step was to revisit the school's mission statement and philosophy. Before the next school year commenced, we had several staff retreat days during the summer that highlighted individual leadership, teaming building, and revisiting the school's mission statement. Revisiting the mission statement provided a renewed sense of direction. Additionally, we had all staff collaboration on our school improvement plan (SIP). A school improvement plan to which all staff contributed allows the adult staff to have ownership and accountability. Relationship building with students is the philosophy of the adult community school in working with our students. I continually highlighted the importance of relationship building throughout the school year. According to my 10 years of experience in an alternative setting, the key attribute to an alternative school is the ability to build positive relationships with students. Our school spent the entire fall semester engaged in meetings, professional development, and staff dialogue focused on relationship building with students. We shared research articles, professional articles, and books with the focus on relationship building.

Additionally, during the first year of my leadership at Moselle Academy, I placed focus on relationship building with the adult community. We had several all-staff lunches during which we shared stories of success about students or ourselves. We took time to

celebrate the small things that all too often go unnoticed. I have always taken time to write all staff personal thank you cards for something specific. I typically write three to four cards to each staff member per year. I challenged staff to do this as well. It has become a valued part of the adult community. We have a hospitality committee that organizes bi-monthly staff dinners. We continue to recognize our birthdays and other life celebrations. With our relationships built on trust, the staff is a high functioning team that demonstrates passion for educating our students.

During my first year as leader of the building, our staff implemented a variety of new approaches to improve our school's effectiveness. This was a collaborative approach that was the result of my challenge to all staff for school improvement. One main aspect was advisory time or grounding time. The concept is from the middle school philosophy of having daily time with the same group of students and teacher focused on academic advisory and support. Our approach is on building teacher-student relationships. We have grounding time every day for 22 minutes every day. During this time, all teachers ask the same question of the day of their group, check in with students to determine their emotion and something positive they experienced in the last 24 hours. Our school has monthly school-wide field trips and other activities to support our relationship building, to build student connections to our school through participation. Most of our students simply view school as going to class. Expanding their image of school to include activities and functions means they may feel more connection with the school. Thus, over time the student will have an improved probability of success through school activities.

The emphasis is on connecting students to our school. A unique item is a teacher-led class called Discovery. This is a semester long class designed to teach students verbal

communication skills, non-verbal communication, conflict resolution, problem-solving, transactional analysis, and other life skills centered on communication.

Implementation of this class was not an easy task. It required teacher support, a year-long curriculum process, and the expense of sending two staff to a national conference to receive the training. This class provides a common language in which the school, students and adults, have adult and accountable conversations.

The class also reinforces our school expectations. During the summer, our staff worked on our school-wide expectations. This was a process that took the entire school year. Step one was recognizing what we needed to examine. We began by establishing a unified process for student redirection within the classroom and the teachers exercising their autonomy with classroom management. The problem was students were being sent to the principal's office, but we did not have a way to support changing student behavior.

During the spring semester, a staff committee was empowered to examine this process and revisit our school's handbook. Examining our school expectations for behavior and the consequences coincided with another major change. I felt our school needed a Recovery Room. That may sound elementary for secondary students, but the need was there.

Of the 85 full-time students, on average 75 students met all expectations and were rarely or never disciplined. A handful of students were continually visiting the office. The idea was to get the root of the issue of the behavior. In a recovery room, the behavior interventionist works with the student to identify the issue, and the student takes ownership of the behavior. They discuss options for making better choices, and devise a plan for behavioral modification. As with any other process, the first year into something new has its challenges, obstacles, and a learning curve. During year one, we learned a lot about the

process of having a recovery room. By the start of year two, we had a collaborative and clear focus of school-wide classroom and common area expectations, ways for all staff to hold student accountable, and the recovery room staff now modeled the ideal scenario for supporting students with behavioral needs. The recovery room is not a consequence, but rather a place for support. Students in recovery room work on their class assignments, and teachers visit to maintain the relationship.

By the start of year two, our school had addressed the issue of a revolving door of sending students to the office for misbehavior. Teachers would have a redirect policy that would include with a conversation at the door/hall to identify the issue. The options were the safe seat, buddy room, or return to the classroom. If a student misbehaved and was sent from the room, the student would report to the recovery room. The staff person in the recovery room would then inform me if needed. The recovery room teachers compiled statistics on students that enter the recovery room for proactive visits, reactive visits, length of stay, reason, and how the concern was resolved. Additionally, our teachers kept behavioral tracking sheets to record the number of times they redirected students. These tracking sheets were used to forecast any overall trends or patterns of student behavior. It allowed the staff to be proactive rather than reactive. This information is then reviewed by the behavioral interventionist. Behavior Plans for success are created to assist students with challenges that we observe and experience. The support allows the student to modify and change the behavior in a positive way.

The focus is on collaboration and partnering with students with what they need. The change has evolved our staff meetings as well. In years past we would meet and identify students who were misbehaving and leave it to the principal for action. That was not

working. Last year we had student concerns meeting and continued to discuss students with ideas about how to address the issue. This was an improvement. However, this spring semester, we now have regular student concerns meetings with the focus on strategies for supporting the student. Most of the conversations are pro-active conversations with strategies rather than reactive conversations and continually re-identifying the problem.

Equally important to behavior support is academic support. With a concern for struggling students with failing grades at our school, one of the teachers led the drive with her building leadership. With two plan periods, the teacher would meet with students that we knew had multiple failing grades. The first year it worked well, but it needed improvement. The teacher developed an electronic referral system for teachers to make notes, and the program organized the information for her. I then added in strategic academic support staff meetings. The focus was on the strategies we were currently employing and identifying different academic strategies for the struggling students. Also, we considered what responsibilities the student or parents needed to take. This eventually led into two specific types of meetings: behavioral and academic. With clear focus, the meetings were more productive and had greater supportive impact for the students.

The referral process for students in the traditional high school to attend the alternative high school is vital to creating the opportunity for success. Unfortunately, for many years students were placed at the Academy by the high school administrator. Those students often felt it was a punishment and viewed the school in a very negative light and told others it was a school for “bad kids.”

They often would try to prove the adult wrong by not being successful by acting out and demonstrating open defiance. It was my observation that was proved time and again to

me as a teacher at the time: the student needs to have choice. Alternative schools ought not to be dumping grounds for traditional high schools.

The more effective approach was to have students referred to the school by their high school guidance counselor. Over time the guidance counselor would visit with their struggling students about the opportunity to attend the alternative school. Thus, when we received the referral list, the next step was to have personal meetings with all interested parties. The philosophy was that we are a school of choice. By interviewing them and first describing our school, we gave the student the opportunity to make the choice with their family. The student's ownership in the decision to be at our school increases his/her probability of success. The referral process is very time consuming, but the end result is a group of students that want to be at our school. That is a huge factor in being able to connect students to the school, build relationships with students, and maintain a culture and climate in which they are physically safe, emotionally safe, challenged academically, and have the opportunity to participate in school wide activities.

Additionally, during the last two years we have instituted positive student referrals and the Character Trait of the Month recognition. At the end of each semester, we have a school assembly focused on students that have demonstrated high performance or greatly improved performance for attendance, academics, Character Trait of the Month, and positive referral. Teachers are required to send positive postcards home to parents about their student as well as to call parents of students during their grounding time.

All of these organizational and systemic changes did not occur overnight. The process involved ongoing and critical dialogue. Challenges were seen as opportunity and through the adults' trusting relationships and shared vision for creating a model alternative

school, change has been positively impacting our school and students. The current spring semester, as a staff we can now place focus on instructional leadership in the classroom, teacher observations of peers, dialogue about student work, and strategic feedback for staff. Change is a process that takes patience and focus on the shared vision and collaborative goals meaningful to the entire school.

School Leadership and Change

The leadership of school administrators is critical to the effectiveness of any school. “If supervision is divorced from accountability, neither supervision nor accountability will get the support it needs to be effective” (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002, p. 5). School effectiveness can be judged by many outcomes; however, creating well-rounded and productive citizens for communities is the goal of most schools, and maintaining high standards requires leadership. School leaders have to be strong instructional leaders.

Leadership and supervision are both transforming arts, and supervision practices of a leader are continually changing. However, they should always allow teachers the opportunity for growth, reflection, leadership, and collegiality. When administrators display effective leadership, they are creating a foundation for a learning organization. Sergiovanni and Starratt (2002) stated, “leadership involves building, in partnership with teacher leaders, a critical mass of teachers who feel collectively empowered to engage in a slow but exciting work of transforming the school into an environment that promotes high-quality learners of all students” (p. 41). It is the learning organization, in which the entire staff is united in their efforts to achieve collective goals, that makes organizational success possible. School leaders need to be active, engaged, and proactive in maintaining relationship building by being a visible leader in the school building.

All leaders need a supervision platform on which to place their core values and beliefs about effective supervision of instruction. Sergiovanni and Starratt's (2002) writings on school supervision and instructional leadership have had positive impact on school leaders. These four essential points can serve to assist a school administrator in becoming a highly effective instructional and supervision leader:

1. Administrators need to be visible throughout the school building.
2. Administrators need to be relationship builders.
3. Administrators need to be committed to improving instruction by differentiating supervision of instruction and dialoguing with teachers about instruction.
4. Administrators need to remember that the platform is a work in progress and flexibility is essential as experience, growth, and new opportunities present themselves.

The heavy work load of administrators may keep them at the desk. However, for effective supervision to take place, the administrators need to be visible. Standard Two of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium states, "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth" (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996, p. 12). In order to promote the second standard, it is necessary for the principal to be away from the desk/office as much as possible during school hours. The administrator endures long hours, demanding schedules, and a long list of continual "fires" to put out. It is equally important, if not actually more important, to spend time being visible in the building. Administrator visibility will produce many positive attributes: communication and relationships will develop with students; office referrals will more than likely decrease due to administrators' presence

around the building; and students will begin to approach him/her with their views, ideas, and concerns. This will allow the administrator to be more attuned to the needs of the students.

The administrator's visibility in the building will filter through to the staff as well. Staff will perceive the administrator as proactive, concerned, and very engaged. Staff will be more receptive to new ideas the administrator may bring forth. Being visible and present brings greater accountability to staff, and the response is often an enhanced form of leadership. The teachers gain greater respect for the principal and will work harder in the classroom as teacher leaders.

An analogy could be made to the circumstances of soldiers. The officer who is continually among the soldiers, attending to their needs and experiencing their hardships, will be a more successful military officer due to the respect that is earned from being in the field among the soldiers, being accessible, and building meaningful relationships. Those relationships will carry trust and respect to bring the collective group to a higher performing level.

Beyond being visible, it is also important for an administrator to be an effective relationship builder. The professional relationships that are made, fostered, and encouraged to develop are key to the true effectiveness of classroom instruction. Collaboration among colleagues, teaming, and communication allow the relationship to develop. Lambert (1995) stated, "constructing a continuum of practices that encourages teachers' growth requires that... teachers must have the opportunity to discuss, think about, try out, and hone new practices" (Lambert, p. 107). A principal should lead the effort and use professional development as a community builder. The administration is thus responsible for the quality standards and the effort put into building a learning organization. The foundation for staff

development is established through dialogue. Lambert agreed when she stated, “In a constructivist conversation, each individual comes to understand the purpose of the conversations, since the relationship is one of reciprocity. It is the inquiring conversation that distinguishes a self-renewing school from a stagnant or dying one” (Lambert, p. 84).

Influencing the relationship building process requires a dynamic individual who is able to communicate effectively with a wide variety of personalities. Building relationships is also addressed in the ISLLC Standards Two and Four, with the focus of instructional programs and communication with stakeholders. The effectiveness of instruction in the classroom often depends upon the relationship that exists among the faculty. In *The Constructivist Leader*, Cooper stated,

shared stories help build trust and understanding as well as a common set of values and common vision for organizations...For school leaders, this sense of trust and the appreciation of individual ideas and uniqueness are fertile soil in which to begin the important work of organizational development. (1995, pp. 130-131)

Another quality necessary for being an effective school leader is the commitment to improve instruction by being the instructional leader. Being an instructional leader may sound like an intimidating task to tackle. This does not require all principals to be an expert in curriculum and instruction. From my experience, I feel administrators have a greater impact on the school when they bring clear understanding and experience in sound instructional pedagogy and practice. An administrator cannot be an expert in every content area, but needs to have sound instructional practices in order to be an instructional leader. Having sound practices allows one to enter any classroom and observe and evaluate the learning and instruction that is transpiring. Engaging in conversation with the teachers allows an administrator to use the teacher as a resource for additional information and

thereby expand their own instructional repertoire. It is also necessary for the administrator to have experience in the classroom and to have some educational understanding of instructional practices, in order to be an instructional leader. Teachers are quick to see the principal who has little or no support to provide them. “The job of the supervisor is to help teachers pinpoint the source of the developing difficulty,[and] bring in additional resource people when called for to work with the teachers” (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002, p. 4).

Supervision is the practice of actively working with instructors to discuss techniques and ways to find continuous improvement for classroom instruction. Also, it is an ongoing practice that involves formal and informal observation, dialogue with students, conversations with other stakeholders, and general awareness of the entire school community. An administrator cannot simply judge a teacher by one observation. Often the formal observation is only a hit or miss opportunity. Therefore, the administrator must take into account many factors that exist within the entire school community and make an assessment over time rather than from a half hour visit to one class. Administrators need to be seen visiting classrooms, monitoring hallways during passing periods, eating in the cafeteria during lunch shifts, and interacting with teachers and students as much as possible. Whether supervision is accomplished by blocking out time or building time into the daily schedule for visiting classrooms throughout the day, it should be a natural part of daily tasks. Having direct interaction and building working relationships with those involved with instruction and learning serves to establish effective supervision and instructional leadership throughout the organization. This example cannot be demonstrated to others when an administrator is isolated behind the desk.

Finally, the leader needs to demonstrate flexibility. This is the ability to change, reflect, and grow as one gains personal and professional experiences. Administrators need to revisit their supervision beliefs and incorporate changes as their career progresses; otherwise they may be bypassed due to their unwillingness to adapt to changes or progress. In a true learning organization or a professional learning community, professionals strive for continual improvement and are consistently engaged in growth activities. Thus, an administrator needs to demonstrate their reflection and growth by changing with the organization, while leading the organization and individuals within that community.

In summary, to be an effective leader in school supervision, the four key points can serve as direction. They are being visible, being able to build relationships, being committed to instructional leadership, and being able to reflect and change with growth. Sergiovanni and Starratt stated,

Supervision as moral activity, however, involves more than the supervisor's knowledge; it involves the supervisor's ability to engage teachers at a level of moral discourse that mirrors the moral responsibility that teachers model for their students. Ultimately, what teachers try to accomplish with their students is not simply the acquisition of knowledge, although that is central to their task; teachers also want the experience of knowing they have opened up students to an appreciation of life, an experience of themselves as connected to a world that is challenging and complex, filled with beauty and pain and joy. (2002, p. 69)

Leadership requires being able to lead by example. Transformational leaders encourage followers to pursue "goals that represent the values and the motivations – the wants and the needs, the aspirations and expectations – of both leaders and followers" (Burns, 1979, p. 19). A leader would not ask others to do something that he would not do himself. This places the leader in a position to know and understand the feelings of others. Leadership qualities can be seen in teachers, soldiers, or any type of employee, and they are

subsequently viewed with admiration and respect. The sincerity of the leader creates a bond or trust that fills the staff of the organization with a sense of duty to fulfill the objective to the best of their ability. Furthermore, the bond created will raise the level of purpose. For one to take the lead may depend on factors of capacity, achievement, responsibility, participation, status, and situation. Modeling effective leadership qualities creates an example for others to follow.

Leading by example is also done by sharing decision-making with staff, creating a culture of open dialogue and trust, and enabling staff to have building leadership. This open leadership shares ideas from the model of the Constructivist Leader. “Constructivist learning derives from the field of epistemological psychology and describes how people construct their reality and make sense of their world” (Walker & Lambert, 1995, p. 16).

Uniting individuals or groups for a common goal or a shared vision is essential for the direction of the organization. Discussing the existing philosophies and expanding challenges, creating goals, and discussing long-range planning are collaborative interactions that allow all participants to create solutions that reflect all voices and are the consensus of the group. In addition to being inventive with the solutions, one must also be able to present these results publicly to illustrate that success was accomplished.

“Full participation leads to acts of leadership; being fully engaged in meaning making activates one’s drive toward purpose and community” (Lambert, 1995, p. 50). Sharing leadership and seeking full participation creates a high sense of ownership in the outcome of organization. “Leadership is the factor that enables meaning to be constructed together in that it engages people in the essential reciprocal processes. Without value-driven, purposeful leadership, communities can become Balkanized, or focused on the self-serving purposes of

an individual” (Lambert, p. 44). While engaged in conversation, a leader should be able to express his/her thoughts in any situation, whether it is with one person or a large group. The leader plays the key role in establishing teacher collaboration and collective responsibility. This initiates professional dialogue and creates a professional community. “The primary role of the constructivist leader is to lead the conversations...each individual comes to understand the purpose of the talk, since the relationship is one of reciprocity” (Lambert, p. 84). A leader should be visionary, have mastery in organizational skills, effectively manage personnel, and develop strategic goals.

Communication with a leader should provide guidance, direction, and purpose. The administrator, as leader, needs to invoke words of direction, purpose, and meaning. Whether in a variety of settings such as a community functions, athletic events, hallway conversations, classroom observations, or at staff meetings, the leader should take the opportunity to embody purpose, direction, and meaning relating to the vision of the school. The leader should continue to embark on expression of the desired vision. Whether the vision of an organization is developed collaboratively or initiated by the leader and agreed to by the followers, it becomes the common ground, the shared vision that compels all involved. Vision comes alive only when it is shared (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Collaboration is essential for success in any organization.

Leaders are not only responsible for uniting people, but for striving to improve the culture. One would like to create a culture, atmosphere, or environment that promotes democracy, creativity, leadership, innovation, and reflection. “Culture is the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that have evolved over time as people

have worked together to solve problems and confront challenges” (Peterson & Deal, 1998, p. 28).

It is up to school leaders such as principals, teachers, and often parents that help to identify, shape, and maintain strong, positive, student-focused cultures. Without these supportive cultures, reforms will falter, staff morale and commitment will wither, and student learning will slip. (Peterson & Deal, p. 28)

A successful administrator pursues avenues to improve the culture on an ongoing basis. A list of cultural norms that affect school improvement are: collegiality, experimentation, high expectations, trust and confidence, tangible support, utilization of knowledge bases, appreciation and recognition, care/celebration/humor, involvement in decision-making, traditions, and honest/open communication (Saphier & King, 1985, p. 18). An administrative leader should incorporate these norms in their personnel and school policies towards continuous improvement.

Additionally, to further enhance cultural improvement, the democratic process in schools should always be present and encouraged. The democratic process can be increased by creating opportunities for active participation, reflective thinking, encouragement of individual responsibility, recognition of human dignity, and emphasizing relevance (Radz & Kubow, 1983). The culture is the basis for school improvement. From my experience, I began to re-culture Moselle Academy by having all staff write down any and all ideas on how to improve the school. I then spent an average of one hour in conversation with each staff. Following that, I challenged all staff to examine their leadership attributes that they bring to the organization. From doing this, all staff realized they had the capacity to be leaders in the building. I empowered each person that they would lead a particular area as a collective part of the greater organization. Additionally, during the first year, our staff

participated in meaningful relationship building activities focused on the staff's building trusting relationships, individual leadership, and human qualities. During this particular staff development day, each staff member led all staff in a teambuilding or relationship building exercise.

Being able to understand the culture and sub-cultures and being able to implement change and improvements to alter the culture are vital in the democratic process. Increasing the democratic process requires everyone to play an active role towards group consensus and feel that they have a viable stake in their school. Improving the culture usually means revisiting the core values of the school, checking with all stakeholders, and continually seeking consensus with participation before implementation begins. If these issues are not addressed, then potentially changes will be unsuccessful. When the change is unsuccessful, staff become more skeptical of future change.

Building and maintaining trust can be done with strategic listening. Leaders need to be accessible to the staff of the organization and maintain a true "open door" policy for listening to the needs of the staff. The daily actions and performance of the staff have a great bearing on the final output of the success of an operation and organizational demeanor. In addition to being available and approachable, a leader engaging in strategic listening needs to convey an appreciation for the message of those they are speaking with (Tate & Dunklee, 2005). During the first two years of my leadership of the building, I spent a large amount of time each week engaging in lengthy and focused conversations with individual staff members. The conversations were crucial, because they were with teachers who were building leaders engaged in a powerful task of implementing or supporting organizational changes.

These conversations combined with an empowering feeling among staff, that with patience the change progress would take place. Being able to speak the same language with all staff members of an organization has a direct correlation to the leader's perceived level of trust. Non-educators on the staff, such as custodians, maintenance persons, technology staff, and various supporting personnel, are more apt to increase their effectiveness for the school if they feel the principal personally knows them or takes the time to have a meaningful conversation. As a leader, "your ability to lead, and to succeed, generally hinges on your ability to listen, engage with understanding, and integrate action with a blended response" (Tate & Dunklee, 2005, p. 57). Winston Churchill once stated, "Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen" (Tate & Dunklee, p. 71).

Courage is an attribute for many aspects of leadership. The decisive leader has to possess the courage to stick to his/her convictions through times of challenge as well as success. Interpersonal and intrapersonal communication are vehicles to showcase the commitment and purpose to promote core values in education. Effective leaders are in control; manage; plan; guide; seek the input of others; and continually reprioritize, change, and adapt to seek success. Leaders with drive and initiative do not use the "laissez-faire" approach, but are hands-on "in the field" leaders.

Effective leadership requires critical thinking skills to master a variety of situations. A leader is always cognitive of the surroundings, individuals, tasks, and problems in their environment. This requires continual thought process and the mastery of multi-task thinking and situation handling. This is an area in which experience and natural process take charge to confront, situationally prioritize, and successfully meet the challenges in a professional

and efficient manner. This requires the leader to have full knowledge of available support services, personnel, management systems, time, and administrative support.

Utilization of resources is critical to the success of any organization. The same holds true for school. Waste, mismanagement, and ineffective practices leads to additional cost expenditures and may affect the financial availability for learning resources. A leader is a steward of the community's resources and needs to effectively utilize them using the critical thinking, mastery of organizational theory, and common sense.

Conclusion

In summary, the following paragraphs serve not as a conclusion but as a continuation for future growth. Effective and successful leadership is never stagnant or complete but needs to seek continuous improvements. I would describe leadership as creating a culture of shared vision, enabling staff/teachers to be building leaders, and establishing a dialogue and culture built on trusting relationships. All of this is geared towards the shared mission and vision of the school organization. "Leadership is an art embodying practically all that is finest in man, so that a catalogue of the qualities desirable in a leader would include everything we recognize as best in human nature" (U.S. Army, 1942, p. 494).

The weight of leadership can be great and the rewards of a learning organization that is a high-performing school can be tremendous for the entire staff and school. The success and effectiveness of an organization does not come from a manager, but from a leader. As Tate and Dunklee (2005) stated,

there are identifiable competencies and behaviors that distinguish an effective listener and leader from the manager or administrator. Leaders seek to influence or change the behavior of other people; managers work with existing behaviors and organize and maintain routine work efforts. Leaders influence, whereas managers implement and administer. Leaders motivate and managers facilitate. (Tate & Dunklee, p. 72)

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study, heuristic inquiry, with narratological focus of study, is to understand the phenomenon of relationship building between teachers and disengaged learners at an alternative high school. At this stage in the research, the phenomenon of relationship building is generally defined as the language, information, ideas, and feelings between a teacher and student that affect perception, understanding, and value between teachers and students.

In other words, I want to gain an understanding of how teachers in an alternative high school build relationships with students who had previously experienced little success at school. I want to see how that relationship becomes the tool that allows students to experience success in the classroom. A school's ultimate purpose is to enable students to become intelligent, informed, engaged, and productive citizens that will be an asset to any community. Not all students share the experience of a successful high school career of academics, extra-curricular activities, friendships, and the culture of a traditional school setting. Some students drop out of school due to the lack of experienced success and ownership of the school or non-acclimation to the setting. Thus, alternative schools fill a void and provide students a valuable option for their high school education.

Rogers, Ludington, and Graham (1998) (cited in Rogers & Renard, 1999) wrote,

When we develop one-on-one relationships skills – becoming aware of and tending to the emotional needs of students – we enter the realm of learning as well. If learning in school meets a student's emotional needs, then they will more likely be engaged in learning. And subsequently, then school becomes a motivating place to be. (p. 34)

Rogers and Renard (1999) also discuss “fostering positive feelings as a motivational strategy in the classroom” to create a meaningful learning context for students to experience success (p. 34).

Research Questions

The preliminary questions that guided this study are:

1. What do students and teachers perceive are characteristics that teachers, within an alternative high school setting, need to have to promote positive relationships with students?
2. How do students and teachers perceive that program elements, within an alternative school setting, impact the relationship between teachers and students and their connection to school?

Rationale for Qualitative Research

In this chapter I first provided the rationale for qualitative research and the theoretical traditions being used to guide the research. Secondly, I described the design of the study including setting, in-depth interviews, and the participants. Thirdly, I outlined techniques for gathering and managing the data gained from the in-depth interviews, documents, and observations followed by the process used to analyze, interpret, and find meaning. I concluded by discussing validity and reliability of the results, identifying limitations or challenges, and ensuring trust of the process.

Qualitative research was chosen for the purpose of capturing the teachers’ lived experiences in building relationships with students in an alternative high school. Qualitative research was selected because it would serve as the best tool for gathering teachers’ voice, teachers’ lived experiences, and individual reflection on the goal of gaining access to human experiences. Patton states,

a phenomenological study is one that focuses on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience. Heuristics is a form of phenomenological inquiry that brings to the fore the personal experience and insights of the researcher. (Patton, 2002, p. 107)

Because of my focus on the human experiences or lived experiences of teachers, a qualitative study is the most appropriate for this research design. Qualitative researchers “are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences that they have in the world” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Examining the meaning and everyday experiences of teachers in their natural setting, tapping into their expertise and reflections on how they build relationships with students who were disengaged from learning, and then seeking to understand how that relationship is used to impact learning is the focus of the narratology.

“To gather such data, one must undertake in-depth interviews with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest; that is, they have ‘lived experiences’ as opposed to secondhand experience” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Engaging the teacher in continuous and in-depth interviews provided an all encompassing insight into the teacher.

Patton states,

descriptions of experience and interpretations are so intertwined that they often become one. Interpretation is essential to understanding of an experience and the experience includes the interpretation. Thus phenomenologists focus on how to put together the phenomena they experience in such a way as to make sense of the world, and in so doing, develop a worldview. (Patton, p. 107)

The qualitative tradition used in this study is Phenomenology Study, a Heuristic Inquiry, supported by point of view of Narratology. The phenomenon to be studied is the relationship that is built between teachers and students. In discussing phenomenology, Patton said “the essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon

commonly experienced. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon” (Patton, 1990, p. 7).

Patton (2002) describes Narratology, or narrative analysis, as “extending the idea of text to include in-depth interview transcripts, life history narratives, historical memoirs, and creative nonfiction. Narrative studies are also influenced by phenomenology’s emphasis on understanding lived experiences and perceptions of experience” (Patton, p. 115). My focus on the personal narratives illuminates the “lived experiences” of teachers and their experiences of working with disengaged students in an alternative high school setting. The “central idea of narrative analysis is that stories and narratives offer especially translucent windows into cultural and social meanings” (Patton, p. 116). I also draw upon my experiences in alternative education.

The aspect of Heuristic Inquiry, a form of phenomenological inquiry, allows my knowledge and experiences to aid in this study. In order to classify as a Heuristic Inquiry, the researcher must have undergone the same experiences or must have direct understanding to relate to the phenomenon. Additionally, the researcher must exhibit a passion equal to or greater than the passion of those who have shared the experience (Douglas & Moustakas, cited in Patton, 2002). Heuristic inquiry is focused on the meaning of the experiences and examining the importance of that shared experience.

The focus is on relationship building that takes places between teachers and students in an alternative high school. The powerful impact of the study derives from the lived experiences of the teachers. What people experience and how they interpret the world is important (Patton, 2002) and plays into the importance of understanding the conceptual framework of the teachers and having shared the lived experiences as well. The researcher,

as a tool for the research, has an in-depth understanding of what people experience, how they experience it, and how they interpret the world.

Theoretical Traditions

The theoretical traditions for this qualitative study are a phenomenological study, a heuristics inquiry, through a focus of narratology. The phenomenology is the building of relationships between teachers and students. The heuristics inquiry was used as self as a researcher. I was the instrument of the research due to my direct knowledge and passion connected to the study, but did not use my voice in the research. The use of narratology allowed for the lived experiences of the teachers and used their voices to gain an understanding.

Van Manen (cited in Patton, 2002) stated, “Phenomenology asks for the very nature of a phenomenon, for that which makes a some-‘thing’ what it is – and without which it could not be what it is” (Van Manen, p. 482). The German philosopher, Edmund H. Husserl, was the first to use phenomenology as a philosophical tradition (Patton, 2002). By phenomenology, Husserl (1913) meant, “the study of how people describe things and experience them through their senses” (Patton, p. 105).

As the Post-Modernist Movement was taking place in the second half of the 20th century, qualitative traditions began to be less marginalized and gradually gained acceptance as a qualitative tradition. “Varying forms complicate the picture even more; transcendental, existential, and hermeneutic phenomenology offer different nuances of focus – the essential meanings of individual experience, the social construction of group reality, and the language and structure of communication, respectively” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 191).

For this particular qualitative study, the phenomenology is on relationships and how they impact learning. The key information is through teachers' experiences. "What these various phenomenological and phenomenographic approaches share in common is a focus on exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning" (Patton, 2002, p. 104). I am a part of that shared meaning. I have spent many years as a classroom teacher in this setting, I know the students, and I have a vested interest in the school.

Heuristics is one form of phenomenological inquiry that highlights the use of personal experience and the researcher's knowledge of the subject. Patton (2002) states,

There are two focusing or narrowing elements of heuristic inquiry within the larger framework of phenomenology. First, the researcher must have personal experience with an intense interest in the phenomenon under study. Second, others (co-researchers) who are part of the study must share an intensity of experience with the phenomenon. (Patton, p. 107)

Since I have an in-depth knowledge of the school and students, I have my own knowledge and experiences to draw from, and I was the instrument of the research using my own understanding. Patton (2002) asserts,

The uniqueness of heuristic inquiry is the extent to which it legitimizes and places at the fore these personal experiences, reflections, and insights of the researcher. The researcher, then, comes to understand the essence of the phenomenon through shared reflection and inquiry with co-researchers as they also intensively experience and reflect on the phenomenon in question. (p. 108)

Gathering the experiences of the teachers is critical to gaining insight into their ability to work with alternative students and building relationships with them. "Heuristic inquiry focuses on intense human experiences, intense from the point of view of the investigator and co-researchers. It is this combination of personal experience and intensity that yields an understanding of the essence of the phenomenon" (Patton, 2002, p. 107). These personal

experiences, knowledge, and understanding of relationship building with disengaged students are gathered through the form of narratology.

Narratology further extends the inquiry of heuristics to include in-depth interviews. Patton (2002) states, “Narratology, or narrative analysis, extends the idea of text to include in-depth interview transcripts, life history narratives, historical memoirs, and creative nonfiction” (Patton, p. 115). As the researcher, I used the in-depth and ongoing interviews to gain access to the teachers’ knowledge. The interviews served to provide the thick, rich description that I am seeking.

Narrative studies are also influenced by phenomenology’s emphasis on understanding the lived experience and perception of experience. Personal narratives, family stories, suicide notes, graffiti, literary nonfiction, and life histories reveal culture and social patterns through the lens of individual experiences. Rhetoric of all kinds can be fodder for narrative analysis, for example, the rhetoric of politicians or teachers. (Graham, 1993, p. 31)

Bochner (cited in Patton, 2002) stated that narratology

honors people’s stories as data that can stand on their own as few words of description and of experience, worthy as narrative documentary of experience or analyzed for connections between psychological, sociological, cultural, political, and dramatic dimensions of human experience. (p. 115)

Thus, this study is a qualitative phenomenological inquiry informed by the traditions of heuristics and narratology.

A Need for the Study

The goal of our school systems is to create intelligent, informed, and productive citizens that contribute to any community. Schools strive to educate all students; however, this goal is not always fulfilled. Prior to the last few decades, students who chose to drop out of high school had the prognosis of attaining a decent to excellent paying factory job with a

good probability of fulfilling their personal aspirations as well as the community's expectations.

Unionized workplaces are disproportionately affected by U.S. production shifts offshore. A study by Brofenbrenner and Luce in 2004 estimated that 53 percent of jobs shifting out of the United States to Mexico and 34 percent shifting to China were unionized. The loss of union jobs through offshoring means that jobs leaving the United States are more likely to be jobs with full health care and pension plans. In addition to being costly to workers, losing these types of jobs will be costly to some communities as this may result in a declining tax base and greater demands on social services. (Lee & Mather, 2009, p. 1)

However, the effects of a global economy have left drop-out students with no assurance of a good paying factory position with benefits, retirement, and lifelong security.

The change in the U.S. economy with global competition has led to a change in our American education system during the last several decades. The drop-out rate is now an issue that is being addressed by using alternative schools as an option to traditional high schools for students who do not experience success in a large school setting. In the state of Missouri, the Safe Schools Act of 1996 led to the establishment of Alternative Schools in many school districts.

Alternative Schools vary greatly from district to district, but it is generally accepted that students that are at risk of not being successful in school or dropping out of school are the most probable candidates for such schools. Without alternative schools, the drop-out rate of most high schools would be as significant as it was 25 years ago. For success to take place, teachers have to build meaningful relationships with the students. Students typically felt some degree of alienation from the traditional high school. Some of this is attributed to not feeling connected to the school and not having a good relationship with an adult. It is the

teacher-student relationship that becomes the tool that assists in leading to the student's success at school.

Building relationships with other individuals is an essential part of human interaction. The relationships that a person fosters and develops facilitate connections for the development of trust and commitment that enhance their relationship. In a school, "students are motivated when they believe that teachers treat them like people and care about them personally and educationally" (Rogers & Renard, 1999). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997, cited in Maxwell, 2005) argued that relationships that are "complex, fluid, symmetric, and reciprocal – that are shaped by both researchers and actors – reflect a more responsible ethical stance and are likely to yield deeper data" (p. 84).

Educators and parents both realize that students who feel connected to the school community and culture, who participate in extra-curricular activities, and who have positive relationships with teachers will have a higher probability of experiencing success in school. The development of relationships is even more critical if the school setting is an alternative high school. Students who attend alternative schools, more often than not, did not experience success at the traditional high school. Not having experienced success, their potential for graduation decreases when other factors roadblock their avenues to completing their high school career.

In other words, disengaged students are often at risk for dropping out of school because they have not had influential adult interaction or a mentor whom they can connect to or can help them experience success at school. Manning and Baruth (1995) describe students found in an alternative school as lacking motivation, lacking previous school success, not having experienced positive relationships with teachers, often being deficient in academic

skills, sometimes lacking parent support, and as a general statement having become alienated from the school system. The teachers in an alternative school are familiar with these characteristics described by Manning and Baruth.

I taught social studies for seven years and am in the fourth year of being the building's principal, so I am closely connected to the alternative school. As I fully understand, the most critical aspect of working with these students is through relationship building. It is the teacher-student relationship that allows the student to experience success in a school culture. Pianta indicates that "this relationship-based infrastructure is transferred to the classroom – in relationships with teachers and in the challenges of classroom adjustment" (Pianta, 1999, p. 17).

Setting

The setting for this study is a growing town, identified as a suburban town of the greater metropolitan city. It is located on the north side of a major river near a mid-sized Midwest city with a population of 450,000 citizens. The greater metropolitan area has a population of 1.9 million (City Data, 2009). The suburb has a citizen population of 30,000 (City-Data). The demographics are about 92.4% white or Caucasian, 2.7% Hispanic citizens, 2.6% African American, 1.6% two or more races, 1.1 % Native American, and 1.0% classified as other race (City-Data). A majority of the citizens are professionals. The median income in 2007 was \$63,529. It was \$52,745 in 2000 (City-Data). The town, while steadily experiencing expansion and development, maintains a small town feel and home town atmosphere. The historic square, county seat of government, historic attractions, liberal arts college, and thriving churches are all attributes of this community. The school district has a continual growth pattern of 400 new students each year during the past five years. In

September 2008, the school district reached enrollment of 10,000 students (D. Ackerman, personal communication, September 14, 2008). The alternative school has an enrollment of 75-85 students with a diverse student population including Caucasian, African-American, and Hispanic students as well as several students who are Asian or Native American. The suburban city was given a fictitious name of Moselle. For the purpose of this study, the alternative school was named Moselle Academy.

Participants and Selection of Sampling

Participants for this research study were students and teachers. Participation was completely voluntary. The students that volunteered were senior students age 17 and older. This was done at the end of the school year, during the last day of school when all course requirements were fulfilled. It was an early release day for the senior students; thus it was truly voluntary to take time to complete the survey. Students were not interviewed. Gathering their lived experiences or feelings through a 10-question survey (see Appendix B) gave the researcher data assisting in the research of teachers building relationships with students at an alternative school.

The other participants were teachers. There are nine teachers at the Moselle Academy. Participation was strictly voluntary. They received a letter of consent explaining the purpose of the study and that their participation was voluntary with no effect on their position as a teacher at our school. The teacher survey had 10 questions (see Appendix B). The survey from the teachers provided data of their lived experiences and feelings related to the focus of the study of relationship building with students in an alternative high school.

After the teachers returned their surveys, a focus group of four teachers was selected from voluntary participants. Purposeful selection of the four teachers for the focus group

was determined by the data-rich information provided on their returned survey. Patton (2002) wrote that the “purpose of purposeful sampling is to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (p. 46). The purposeful selection of four teachers for a focus group served to provide more in-depth rich descriptions of their lived experiences in an alternative school.

The group was interviewed in a semi-structured interview that turned into an in-depth flowing conversation pertaining to relationship building with students and how that relationship became the avenue to success for the student. A list of questions (see Appendix C) was used to commence the conversation, but then natural dialogue led the conversation. The conversation during this one- to three-hour dialogue was recorded. The participants were aware the conversation would be audio taped. The audio tape was transcribed into text. The text of the conversation was analyzed for coding of overriding themes, patterns or key phrases discussed by the teachers in relation to their lived experiences. Gathering perception and lived experiences from both students and teachers served to provide validity in elements of our school that created a sense of belonging and characteristics of teachers.

Design of the Study

The design of this qualitative study took many forms as it developed. Maxwell (2005) argued for “a qualitative approach that emphasizes the perspective of teachers and the understanding of particular settings, as having far more potential for informing educational practices” (p. 24). As outlined in the Literature Review, there are some elements that are closely linked to the success of alternative students. These included understanding the students, demonstrating instructional leadership, collaborating among staff, enriching school

culture, and nurturing understanding relationships. The teachers in this study related their experiences of building relationships with students in an alternative high school.

This research embraced the constructivists' approach. I accepted the information and continually constructed, reconstructed, and re-examined ideas, mental models, and information to formulate an accurate understanding. My theoretical traditions are phenomenological, heuristic, and narratology. The conceptual framework that I hold is that of promoting a democratic school, modeling instructional and constructivist leadership, promoting a professional learning community, and seeking input from others for shared decision making.

My access to the school and its teachers was open. I sought to re-culture the school with the implementation of ideals of a learning organization: having a school staff that was continually engaged in growth activities, reflected on practices, challenged mental models, and sought to challenge ourselves in order to meet the needs of our academically diverse student population with greater ease.

My access to the teachers was open. There were no gatekeepers of information that prohibited or denied my access to individuals, observations, or document analysis. I received approval from the district's superintendent for my research. I applied for and received permission from the school superintendent to conduct a research study. The District Consent for Permission to Conduct a Research Study described the purpose, rationale, section of teachers to be interviewed, and explained that the findings from this qualitative research on relationships between teachers and disengaged learners would be presented to him and the school board (see appendix A).

Data Sources

The data sources for this qualitative research study on teachers building relationships with disengaged learners were a student survey, a teacher survey, and a teacher focus group. Qualitative data (Patton, 2002) are a source for well grounded rich descriptions. In-depth interviews allowed trends and voice to emerge from the analysis of the interview. The purpose of the interview was well summarized by Lincoln and Guba (1985), who stated:

The purposes for doing an interview include, among others, obtaining here-and-now constructions of persons, events, activities, organizations, feelings, motivations, claims, concerns, entities; reconstructions of such entities as experienced in the past; projections of such entities as they are expected to be experienced in the future; verification, emendation, and extension of information (constructions, e constructions, or projections) obtaining from other sources, human and nonhuman (triangulation); and verification, emendation, and extension of constructions developed by the inquirer (member checking). (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 185)

The type of interview chosen was an Informal Conversational Interview. To begin the interview, a very brief list of questions was used to initiate conversation. The questions were on instructional practices or classroom climate. These initial questions allowed for open conversation to take place. Patton (2002) stated, “the persons being talked with may not even realize they are being interviewed” (Patton, p. 342). The teacher focus group interview session was approximately three hours in length. “The strength of the informal conversation method resides in the opportunities it offers for flexibility, spontaneity, and responsiveness to individual differences and situational changes” (Patton, p. 343). Patton pointed out that this format may take longer to collect the information than other formats. The teacher focus group session was recorded with an audio recording device. The interview was transcribed into written text. From this text, a line-by-line coding procedure was used to develop themes. Patton (2002) stated that “taking a constructionists’ perspective, they emphasized that an

interview was a social interaction with interviewers and interviewees sharing in constructing a story and its meanings” (p. 405).

The selection of teachers for the interviews was made with some criteria. The alternative school has a teaching staff of nine teachers, three para-professionals, one counselor, one social worker, one building secretary, and one administrator. Of the nine teachers, four were selected for the in-depth interviews. Nearly all of the staff members had been a part of our school for more than ten years. Four of the teachers had been at our building less than ten years. Purposeful selection of the four teachers was done by the researcher. Two teachers emerged as the building teacher leaders and led the building in academic support and the other in behavior support. One teacher was selected due to her experience in other alternative schools. The fourth teacher was selected because of the continually low D and F rate in her classes.

Triangulation

Patton (2002) gave an illustration for understanding triangulation by relating the word to its original use in land surveying. One can be fully aware of one’s location on a line. However, if one is able to use two additional points to plot against the one point, then a precise location can be determined instead of a close estimate. Denzin (cited in Patton, 2002) identified four types of triangulation including data, investigator, theory, and methodological triangulation.

Triangulating one’s data against each other can begin with the interviews. Maxwell (2005) stated,

...interviewing is often an efficient and valid way of understanding someone’s perspective. Observation can enable you to draw inferences about this perception that

you couldn't obtain by relying exclusively on interview data. This is particularly important for getting at tacit understandings and "theory-in-use." (p. 94).

This statement speaks to the idea of understanding that you may collect rich data from the interviews, but they need to be used with other sources to provide validity.

Maxwell (2005) stated,

your data collection strategies will probably go through a period of focusing and revision, even in a careful design study, to enable them to better provide the data you need to answer your research questions and to answer any plausible validity threats to these answers. (p. 94)

Locating and eliminating inconsistencies through the use of triangulation strengthens the study. Keeping in mind the focus is qualitative, Douglass and Moustakas stated, "Heuristics is concerned with meanings, not measurements; with essence, not appearance; with quality, not quantity; with experience, not behavior" (cited in Patton, 2002, p. 107).

Data Analysis

The initial opening process in data analysis is reading the transcripts of the interviews. A line-by-line analysis of the text was done with open coding. During open coding the researcher is using a strategy to "fracture the data and re-arrange them into categories that facilitate comparisonor concepts" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 96). This part can be very time consuming. The hours of interview recorded and transcribed were then combed through thoroughly. Open coding allows for themes to emerge from the interviews.

All of the emerging themes can be categorized into many areas. Maxwell (2005) describes "organizational, substantive, and theoretical" as main categories for the themes. After "fracturing" the data with open coding, the next step is piecing it back together. Axial coding is "a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories" (p. xx).

What begins as a mass amount of data soon takes shape with emerging themes. L. Caruthers (personal communication, April 7, 2008.) gave the analogy of observing a collection of all kinds of clothes at a rummage sale. It first appears there are mountains of clothes with what may look like little organization. But at closer examination, there are in fact piles of men's, women's, and children's clothes, with each category having many subcategories.

A code book was utilized in order to effectively categorize the developing themes. "Developing some manageable classification or coding scheme is the first step of analysis" (Patton, 2002, p. 463). Patton states also that "content analysis, then, involves, identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns in the data" (p. 463). Handling and managing all of this information is done through organization. A manual system was used to assist with the organization and access of the data. Manual handling of the data allowed the researcher to have total immersion in the information. A specific place in the home of the researcher was set aside to work, reflect, and write. The data will be stored for many years. The researcher's laptop computer was used. Information was stored only on thumb drives and accessible only to the researcher. Pseudo names were assigned to the teachers interviewed.

Limitations

The limitations are many. I need to be fully aware of the limitations of this study in order to guard against them. The limitations included my closeness to the topic, my passion for the students at the school, and my years of professional relationships with the participants. Additionally, I am the administrator of the building and need to be aware of this as a limitation.

In qualitative studies, the researcher is the instrument of the research, and the research relationships are the means by which the research is accomplished. These relationships have an effect not only on the participants in the study, but also on you, as both the researcher in the human being, as well as the other parts of the research design. (Maxwell, 2005, p. 83)

Having influence on individuals from whom you are seeking to gain in depth reflection and information can be conflicting.

Read the important point that it is possible to have too much rapport, as well as too little, but I would add that it is the kind of rapport, as well as the amount, that is critical. A participant can be very engaged intellectually in an interview, not be revealing anything deeply personal, and for some studies this kind of relationship may be ideal. Conversely, someone may be very open about personal matters to a stranger whom they never expect to see again, but not be willing to engage in any critical reflection on this material. (Seidman, cited in Maxwell, 2005, p. 83)

Validity and Reliability

When conducting research of any nature, a priority is to demonstrate that findings are accurate, without bias, and can be tested for accuracy. Maxwell (2005) writes that “validity, as a component of your research design, consists of the strategies you use to identify and try to rule out these threats” (p. 106). Qualitative researchers battle against any item that would lead to an invalid conclusion. The goal is to rule out threats to your work. “The main emphasis of a qualitative proposal ought to be on how you will rule out specific plausible alternatives and threats to your interpretations and explanations” (Maxwell, p. 107).

Validity is the key to any design. A key question to be answered is, “How will we know that the conclusions are valid?” (Przeworski & Salomon, 1988). The design, methodology, and triangulation of the data are key areas to provide validity. “The rigor of heuristic inquiry comes from systematic observation of and dialogues with self and others, as well as in-depth interviewing of co-researchers” (Patton, 2002, p. 108). The use of multiple sources including data from the student surveys, teacher surveys, and the teacher focus group

provided a thick description of information. Additionally, triangulating the findings and the use of a knowledgeable and critical professional to critique and analyze the data serve to allow for varying opinions. Credibility also provides support. As the researcher, one needs to provide some information about himself, his experience, training, and knowledge of the study site. Disclosure of the researcher's information and voice provides valuable credibility to the study.

Conclusion

This research is phenomenological and heuristic because it represents thick rich descriptions of the lived experiences of teachers in an alternative high school regarding the phenomenon of building relationships with disengaged students. It is phenomenological, heuristic, and narratological in tradition because (a) it seeks to understand the phenomenon of relationship building with disengaged learners in an alternative high school setting, through the lived experiences of teachers; (b) it brings to the fore my personal experiences and insights as a practitioner with shared knowledge and intensity of the phenomenon; and (c) it uses in-depth interviews to highlight the voice and experiences of the teachers.

Once the gathering of research data has concluded and the coding and analysis of information transpires, processing the data is critical. The "process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to their categories, validating their relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development" (Strauss & Corbin, cited in Patton, 2002, p. 454) is all part of the process of gathering the information and then analyzing the findings. The voice of the teachers and their lived experiences pertaining to building relationships with students at an alternative high school were gathered.

The results of this study will illuminate the importance of relationship building with students and then how that relationship can be the vehicle to guide students to experience success at school. It is hoped that this research will be used to honor and value the passion, experience, and lived experiences of teachers educating students at an alternative high school.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study illuminates how teachers in an alternative high school build relationships with students in their school. The students of this school previously experienced little success at their traditional high school. The phenomenon is relationship building. Relationship building occurs between the adults and students and is generally defined as the language, information, ideas, and feelings between a teacher and student that affect perception, understanding, and value between teachers and students.

In order to understand the phenomenon, the approach is through a phenomenological study, heuristic inquiry, and narratological focus. Alternative schools bridge the gap for students' not experiencing success at a traditional high school. A school's ultimate purpose is to enable students to become intelligent, informed, engaged, and productive citizens. Not all high school students share the experience of a successful career of academics, extra-curricular activities, friendships, and the culture of a comprehensive school setting. Some students drop out of school due to the lack of experienced success and ownership of the school or a non-acclimation to the setting. One of the keys to success of students is a relationship with a caring adult at the school.

Research Questions

The questions that guided this study were:

1. What do students and teachers perceive are characteristics that teachers, within an alternative high school setting, need to have to promote positive relationships with students?
2. How do students and teachers perceive that program elements, within an

alternative school setting, impact the relationship between teachers and students and their connection to school?

Rationale for Qualitative Research

Qualitative research was chosen for the purpose of capturing the teachers' lived experiences in building relationships with students in an alternative high school. Qualitative research was selected because it would serve as the best tool for gathering teachers' voice, teachers' lived experiences, and teachers' individual reflection on the goal of gaining access to human experiences. Patton states,,

a phenomenological study is one that focuses on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience. Heuristics is a form of phenomenological inquiry that brings to the fore the personal experience and insights of the researcher. (2002, p. 107)

Because of my focus on the human experiences or lived experiences of teachers, a qualitative study is the most appropriate for this research design. Qualitative researchers "are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences that they have in the world" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6).

The qualitative traditions that were used to engage this study were Phenomenology Study, a Heuristic Inquiry, supported by point of view of Narratology. The phenomenon studied was the relationship that is built between teachers and students. "Qualitative research implies a direct concern with experience as it is 'lived' or 'felt' or 'undergone'" (Sherman & Webb, 1988, p. 7). My focus on the personal narratives illuminated the "lived experiences" of teachers and their experiences of working with disengaged students in an alternative high school setting. The "central idea of narrative analysis is that stories and narratives offer

especially translucent windows into cultural and social meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 116). I also drew upon my experiences in alternative education.

Douglas and Moustakas (cited in Patton, 2002) state, “Heuristic inquiry emphasizes connectedness and relationship, leads to essential meanings and personal significance, and concludes with creating synthesis” (p. 108). Heuristic inquiry is focused on the meaning of the experiences and examining the importance of that shared experience. In order to classify under a Heuristic Inquiry, the researcher must have undergone the same experiences or must have direct understanding of the phenomenon. Additionally, the researcher must exhibit a passion equal to or greater than the passion of those who have shared the experience (Patton). The aspect of Heuristic Inquiry, a form of phenomenological inquiry, allowed my knowledge, experiences, and passion to aid in this study.

The focus is on relationship building that takes place between teachers and students in an alternative high school. The setting is a suburban town of one Mid-western city which has been assigned the pseudo-name of Moselle. The alternative school is known as Moselle Academy. The volunteer participants for the focus group have received pseudo-names. All other volunteer participants’ names have been removed to protect their identity. The powerful impact of the study derives from the lived experiences of the teachers. What people experience and how they interpret the world is important (Patton, 2002). The researcher, having shared the teachers’ experiences, had an in-depth understanding of what people experience, how they experience it, and how they interpret the world.

Data Sources and Participants

For this study, data were collected from three data sources. Those sources are a student survey, a teacher survey, and a teacher focus group. Data were collected from

teachers and students through a 10-question survey whose purpose was to gather data related to the school. A school is an organization. Organizations have their own cultures, climates, and feeling about daily functioning and operations. In order to examine relationship building between teachers and their students in an alternative high school, one has to take into context the climate of the school that the students attend. The climate of an organization can positively or negatively affect the organization and its daily operations and mission.

Student Survey

The 10-question survey given to students and teaching staff served to collect lived experiences pertaining to the school. The questions directly pertain to various aspects of the school's programming. Students of 12th grade status who were age 17 or older were given the opportunity to participate. Thirty students were given the opportunity to participate, and 18 students participated. This process was conducted at the end of the school year as the senior students were finishing their finals and had finalized all other aspects of academics and school-related business. The researcher was extremely careful not to use one minute of the student's academic time for this research study. Thus, it worked out that on the seniors' last day of school, with part of the school day remaining, students could volunteer to do the survey. With all school work complete, there was absolutely no distraction or the feeling of obligation to complete the survey. Students were asked if they would like to participate in a research study. Participation was completely voluntary. If they replied in a positive manner, each student was given the Student Permission Form Consent/Assent for Participation. After providing students time to read the information, the researcher then verbally discussed the form in more detail. Students' consent to participate forms were kept on file by the researcher. Students were given adequate time to fill out the survey. Some surveys were

filled out in classrooms, school common areas, and waiting areas; some were taken home and brought back to the researcher, or mailed back to the school's address in care of the researcher. The 18 student participants were all graduates in the upcoming school district graduation ceremony. Only one of the students had attended the school for less than two semesters. More than half attended the Academy for three or more semesters. The 18 students serve as a representative cross-section of the greater whole of Moselle Academy's student population. The student participants were male and female, Caucasian and African-American. The students were originally referred to attend Moselle Academy as being at risk of not graduating for a variety of reasons. Those reasons correlate with the previous chapters' discussions of various reasons students gradually become at risk of not graduating.

Teacher Survey

For the teacher survey, the identical 10 questions used for the students were asked of the teachers. Again, the researcher was very aware of using instructional time or "clock" time for the purpose of gathering data for this research. On the last day of the school year, our staff has an all-staff luncheon following the dismissal of the students for the year. At the end of this luncheon, the researcher used two to three minutes to give an overview of the Teacher Permission Consent Form and the purpose of the 10 questions and their completely voluntary participation. The researcher dispensed the Teacher Consent Forms to the teachers. A deadline for the voluntary participation was established as prior to the Independence Day weekend. This date correlated with the ending of summer school, so that the data collected would be closely correlated to the information that had already been collected from the student volunteers. Of the nine teachers at Moselle Academy, six volunteered to participate. The other three teachers had previous engagements out of town for

a prolonged period during the summer time and could not meet the July 4th voluntary participation deadline for teachers.

Teacher Focus Group

The third data source was a teacher focus group. Four of the nine teachers were purposely selected by the researcher for their participation in a focus group. The focus group's purpose was to extract a greater depth of knowledge and lived experience from four teachers in the school. These four teachers were collaborative individuals and instructional leaders, and they have a superior understanding of alternative education. I selected the four individuals for very specific qualities. One teacher has had previous experience in other school districts in creating alternative educational programs. She is extremely professional and collaborative, and focuses on solutions in all aspects of her being. One teacher was selected because she issues the fewest D and F letter grades in her classes. She is a very high-quality, instructionally sound classroom teacher. All of her students learn, master, and retain their knowledge from this teacher.

The two remaining teachers were purposely selected because of their leadership in the building. Four years prior when I became the principal of the school, I challenged all staff to be building leaders. These two teachers emerged from the staff as reflective thinkers, constructivist leaders, and agents of positive change. Both teachers always approach challenges considering what students need and what students deserve, how this impacts student achievement, and what is best for the student. These four female veteran teachers all have masters degrees, have experience greater than five years, are recognized by their peers for their success in working in an alternative setting, and are superior instructional leaders. When approached regarding participation in the focus group, all four teachers responded

positively. It took four months to confirm a date to meet at the school on a Saturday morning. Each teacher actively pursued the voluntary participation in the focus group.

Discussion and Findings

Bogdan and Biklen (cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994) divided codes into distinct categories, creating manageable units that helped the researcher discover patterns. The findings in this research are presented through a phenomenological analysis using a heuristic lens. I immersed myself in the data from the students and teachers, which enabled me to reflect on and make meaning of their experiences. From the immersion in the data, coding of the information, and reflection with the heuristic inquiry lens, the data developed into themes. “Imaginative variation enables the researcher to derive structural themes from the textual description that have been obtained through phenomenological reduction” (Moustakas, cited in Patton, 2002, p. 486). As I read through the student and teacher information, themes began to develop within the participants’ responses.

Data analysis was informed by the work of Miles and Huberman (1994). They describe the process of analyzing data as descriptive codes in which the researcher observes “the emergence of themes where the researcher pulls together a lot of material into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis... the researcher’s role is to gain a holistic overview of the logic” (p. 6). Deep analysis is done with the data collected through the heuristic inquiry lens that guides the researcher to findings from the lived experiences of the participants.

Survey Data of Students and Teachers

The 10-question survey to student participants allowed input on various programming elements in the school’s structure and organizational functioning. Examining students’

feelings, experiences, and thoughts provided rich information on the school's ability to assist teachers in relationship building with students. In this chapter, the researcher presents the information collected as well as the emergent over-arching themes observed from the participants' comments. For the reader's understanding, Grounding Time is modeled upon the National Middle School Association's concept of Advisory: "An integral component of a successful middle school, this program is designed to develop authentic adult-student relationships wherein every student is well-known by an adult in the school" (Thompson, 2007, p. 10).

The first question was: *Please describe how Grounding Time has influenced your learning and relationships with students.* The theme that emerged from the student and teacher data pertaining to Grounding Time was:

- Connecting students to school through relationship-building

Student responses were transcribed as they appeared. Only names were omitted or changed. The student responses were:

"Grounding time has influenced my learning by giving me a positive start to my day and helped me to connect with other students and teachers."

"Grounding time has influenced me by helping me create stronger bonds with other students at the school."

"I have attended this school for two years and found the grounding process to be odd and new to me. I bonded more with my teachers and peers in grounding than I would have in class and thought it was a positive way to connect with my teacher."

"It has given me a chance to get closer to my teacher and classmates I have made a bond with them and learned a lot about them and from them."

"Grounding Time helps everyone get to know each other and if the teacher knows more about you, chances are you will build a strong relationship."

“I love grounding time. It gave you a chance to get to know the teachers better and not just seen them as teachers, but as human beings. For me, I can focus better on school since I have grounding to talk about things that are bothering me, etc.”

“Grounding was good for getting to know people more. It influenced my relationship with the teachers a lot.”

The teacher responses were typed from the survey form to this text as they appeared.

The teacher responses were:

“Grounding has improved my relationships with my students by providing a safe place to openly talk about subjects that are not discussed in a normal classroom situation. My students are very honest about my failings and reflect my best points as well. This grounds me and gives me a base from which to grow as a teacher. I learn things about them that might not normally be discussed. This trust bond allows me to have a deeper relationship with my students. When I need to say something they don’t want to hear, I can, without the student feeling “picked on” or that the comment is personal.”

“Has given me a greater insight to the students’ personal and academic lives, which in turn helps me communicate more effectively with them, their families, and our staff.”

The emerging theme from students and teachers reflected the findings of other researchers on Advisory in schools.

In an advisory program, an advisor (usually a teacher) meets with a small group of students on a regular basis for the primary purpose of helping students develop trusting relationships with an adult and close social bonds with a small group of classmates. (Knowles & Brown, 2000, p. 152)

Other researchers also noted that “Advisories are support groups for students. in some schools they are referred to as ‘family groups’ because they provide the unconditional acceptance to their members that are provided by a caring family” (MacLaury, cited in Niska & Thompson, 2007, n. p.).

The student participants reported that they feel a greater sense of belongingness to the school as a result of Advisory time. This structured time fosters a peer support mechanism by which students feel supported by other students. Over a period of time, a semester or year, the daily advisory time creates that sense of peer support.

In any school, when students feel a sense of support and belonging, the potential for their positive participation and success increases. The authors of *Turning Points 2000* note, “When advisory is well implemented it can be effective in developing relationships that support learning. The effectiveness of the advisory depends on trust, forged through continuity in relationships over time” (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 143). Additionally, “strong advisory programs help students gain emotional strength, self-knowledge, and social skills through peer interaction and the acceptance and personal affirmation of trusted adults” (Fenwick, 1996, p. 31). The teachers report likewise to the meaningfulness of grounding for its aspects of relationship building with the students.

One teacher participant wrote,

grounding time has given me the opportunity to know the students as people, not just students. I know what bothers them and interest them. It helps me know when to make allowances and how to motivate them. I can be more patient and understanding if needed. On the other hand I can hold them accountable more easily.

This statement illustrates the theme of belongingness and caring. When students perceive that one or more adults in the school know them and understand them, then the power of a teacher/student relationship has great potential for success. One teacher stated that the “insight to the students...helps me communicate more effectively with them.” Teachers report that it is through these relationships that trust is enhanced and the students’ connection to a caring adult at the school is broadened. Grounding Time, or Advisory Time

is an effective mechanism for students to have peer support and the feeling that an adult cares about them.

The second question on the survey was: *Please describe how the monthly school-wide field trips have influenced your learning and relationships with students.* From the data collected in the student and teacher surveys, the over-arching theme that emerged from the participants was:

- Student involvement in school activities builds bonds with teachers and connects students to the school.

The student responses were:

“The monthly school-wide field trips or activity has influenced my learning how to understand others and how to have teamwork with others.”

“School field trips were great and educational. It showed teachers really care.”

“It made us bond more/learning wise”

“The monthly field trips has help me learn more about diversity in todays [sic] society and throughout history.”

“The monthly field trips helped me get closer to the teachers because it gave me a chance to interact and get to know the teachers more.”

“It made things a more hands on experience and gave more activities a realistic and comfortable experience”

“The field trips are the same way. They help us relax and have some fun at school, which strengthens the bond with teachers.”

“It gave me a chance to bond with the teachers and to learn about why they became a teacher.”

The teacher responses are as followed:

“Field trips have allowed me to visit with students in an informal setting. Learning is fun and I am able to model the excitement of learning something new—and I celebrate another students experiences.”

“The field trips and activities have generated greater friendships among the students (thus the increase in safety) and improved my relationships. Students get to see me in a different environment and allow for more meaningful conversations.”

“This is another opportunity to interact with the students as people. They see us as people as well. It’s a less formal learning environment, one in which the teachers are also learning. Since we teachers enjoy learning, that sends a message about the intrinsic value of learning.”

The emergent theme found in the information was that student involvement in school activities builds bonds with teachers and connects students to the school. This finding correlates with the review of literature. The students that attend Moselle Academy often had not previously participated in extra-curricular activities, groups, clubs, or organizations. While attending their large traditional high school, students felt no connection to the culture and did not feel a sense of belongingness to join in additional activities. Providing some basic form of school-related activity can provide a sense of belongingness. Within our small school structure of 85 students, a school leader can provide school-wide monthly field trips that large schools cannot logistically implement.

Field trips provide a variety of experiences such as learning outside the building, volunteering in the community, or experiencing a cultural or team-building activity; all of which enhanced students’ feeling about school. The school’s field trips are typically a half-day event. Some months we may do a half-day school activity at the school building. The students stay within their Grounding Groups and experience the event as a small group. The common experiences and bonds of the group allow connections to form and develop. Within

the small group there is greater accountability for expectations and dialogue about the event. The event strengthens the ties between the individuals. The students report that they feel positively influenced from the field trip or event in their understanding of themselves and others. Students state that the experiences and learning outside of the building gives them a chance to know the teachers and other students.

The teachers' reports correlate to that of the students and of the literature – that student involvement builds bonds and connects students to the school. One teacher wrote, “field trips have allowed me to visit with students in an informal setting. Learning is fun and I am able to model the excitement of learning something new.” Another teacher wrote, “students get to see me in a different environment and allow for more meaningful conversations.” School is more than just attending class and doing assignments. When students have experiences with and at school that are meaningful, the bond to school grows. This bond develops relational trust to the adult(s). The expansion of the relationship then in turn can impact the potential success of the student. Learning and academic success is very important for schools. Providing opportunities for student participation is an avenue to connecting students to the school.

The third question on the survey was: *Please describe how the monthly Character Trait of the Month and Positive Referrals has influenced your learning and relationships with students.* The emergent theme from the student and teacher responses was:

- Positive student recognition builds confidence and resiliency.

The student comments were:

“Character trait and positive referrals have influenced me by trying to be the best person I can be and positive referrals help to make me feel good.”

“It gave me more reasons to try harder.”

“These are always great. When you are chosen, it motivates you to keep moving and succeeding.”

“It makes me want to get an award.”

“It has helped me by trying harder to get the prize at the end of the month.”

“The monthly character trait assembly positively reinforced my relationships with my teachers because I realized they cared enough to recognize me for something, i.e. a reward.”

“It shows how to build a strong and positive attitude when a teacher awards you. It makes you want to be a better student.”

“They made me more confident about myself, and the teachers made me succeed.”

“I think if students have something to look forward to get rewards they will try harder because students feel there is nothing to try for.”

The teacher responses were:

“Students who receive an award for a positive trait or received a positive referral are often students who lack self-esteem. Many of the Academy students have never received praise at school so hold these awards in great regard. Talking to them after they have received an award I find that they have bonded with staff. They feel they are valuable and have something positive to add. This good feeling is often a way to break through to the students during difficult times. I have learned that community is the place where real tangible learning can occur.”

“Helps the staff focus on the positive aspects of our students and allows for recognition that our students would not normally get”

“The Character Trait of the Month is a good tool for helping teachers focus on the positive. It gives us a specific tool for acknowledging positive behaviors. As we try to shape the behaviors of our students, it is as vital to teach the appropriate behaviors as it is to teach them what not to do.”

Nearly all of our students had previously not been recognized in a positive manner. The monthly character traits are district-wide. Some of the traits include respect, perseverance, honesty, and integrity. Staff nominate students for the monthly character trait. All students nominated are recognized at a school assembly. They receive a certificate from the organizing teacher. Positive referrals can be dispensed at any time by any adult. Our positive referrals are in the form of an official looking certificate size paper with our school initials. The teacher fills in the note communicating the reason for the positive referral. The notes are displayed on a hallway bulletin board.

The Character Trait of the Month and Positive Referrals influence learning and relationships by building confidence and resiliency. From reviewing the information provided by the student participants, key words can be found. Some of those key words include: trying to do my best, to try harder, it motivates you, want to do better, trying harder, more confident. These key words illustrate the students' experiences of their perception and self worth are increased with confidence and resiliency. Resiliency is a key attribute to students in an alternative school setting. Even though there may be one or many reasons to quit school, they choose not to quit. Overcoming the challenges in spite of obstacles demonstrates character.

At the end of the month certificates are handed out to the students and we start over for the next month. This process is a quick and simple way to recognize students as teachers observe positive attributes. One teacher wrote, "positive referrals allow me to recognize students for being good role models and helping others." Another teacher reported, "it also proved ways to give kudos to students who wouldn't normally be able to be recognized in a traditional setting." The adults catching students being good is a natural way to build

confidence and reinforce the positive behaviors of students. Positive referrals and character traits of the month are keys to building confidence and resiliency in students.

The fourth question on the survey was: *Please describe how the Discovery Class has influenced your learning and relationships with students.* The emergent theme derived from the student and staff information was: the interpersonal communications course provides a skill for effective and appropriate communication with other people.

The Discovery Program: Essential Skills for Teachers and Students was designed by Eric Larsen and William M. Timpson focused on at-risk students through the framework of instructional innovation and improvement. The Discovery class is a semester-long course taught by a classroom teacher for a half credit towards graduation. The course is exclusive to the alternative school and is a district-approved course curriculum. The classroom teacher received specific training at a national conference to be certified to teach the course. The course focuses on using appropriate dialogue, the use of I statements, conflict resolution, transactional analysis, problem-solving, and understanding inter and intra personal communication.

The Discovery Program “is a unique blend of innovative theories and proven practices tailored for at-risk students. This program combines a deep concern for students with practical skills and achievable outcomes” (Larsen & Timpson, 2001, p. 2). One of the co-authors designed the curriculum from his experiences of working in inner city schools of Cleveland, Ohio. Larsen and Timpson experienced students who were angry, unskilled, who had little hope, and who were labeled and discarded as un-teachable. They designed the curriculum on learning theory taking into account social class and his experiences of inner-city students. The course has been of support to schools or districts that have students with

apathy, low academic achievement, poor attendance, or acting out behaviors in the classroom.

The student responses were:

“Discovery Class helped me to have a positive attitude and to tell me how to handle day to day situations.”

“It has taught me how to manage my skills and to be the adult in a stressful situation.”

“Discovery helped the different classes bond with each other, and taught us valuable social skills.”

“Discovery helps you with life skills it teaches you how to handle your anger to have better relationships with people.”

The teacher responses were:

“It has provided a common language for building use and allows us to talk with kids in a means that typically de-escalates the situation.”

“Has provided a foundation on which we can build, in regard to social and behavioral skills.”

“The Discovery Class had been great. Student who took Discovery were more willing (because they understood) to take a BIST classroom direction, improving the safety in the classroom. Students don’t like disruptive students (even if they are one sometimes). The more I worked with the Discovery students, the more we both came to an understanding of appropriate classroom learning. [Student name] is a good example – hated being re-directed, in time Discovery and BIST, he became happier and had fewer temper tantrums”

The information provided from the student and teacher participants for the Discovery class taught at Moselle Academy positively impacts students’ learning and relationships by providing life skills in effective and appropriate communication. The main objectives of the course are:

- To develop a strong sense of community and to establish positive support systems for all students
- To teach, practice, and provide feedback on positive social skills
- To reinforce the culture of the classroom/school and ensure that all students realize what is expected of them and what they can expect from the staff

The students made comments such as, “manage my skills, how to properly behave, taught us social skills, and skills to handle your anger and relationships with others.” The students are referencing the six curriculum units of the course. Those units are: effective groups, anger management, communication skills, assertiveness training, problem solving, and conflict resolution (Larsen & Timpson, 2001). These are daily life skills for their interactions and communication with peers and adults. The teachers report, in addition, about the key aspect of building a community in the school. The course works to establish a common language of consistency and respectful communication. One teacher stated, “It is great to have a common language to address behaviors.” A second teacher made the comment, “provided a foundation on which we can build, in regard to social and behavioral skills.” The course works in collaboration with our advisory or grounding time each day, monthly field trips, and the building-wide behavioral expectations for creating a framework of providing skills and opportunity for success. “The more I worked with the Discovery students, the more we both came to an understanding of appropriate classroom learning,” stated a teacher.

The fifth question on the survey was: *Please describe how the Positive School Assembly has influenced your learning and relationships with students.* The emergent theme observed from the student and teacher data was:

- Positive school assemblies foster a feeling of caring with students.

For any organization, the creation of a culture that cultivates a sense of belonging, a feeling of greater than just one individual, and a place of recognizing people for their hard work all can work to create a seedbed for positive place. In any school, students need to be recognized for positive behavior and accomplishments.

The student responses to the question, *Please describe how the Positive School Assembly has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers* included:

“Being able to trust teachers.”

“Positive school assembly influenced me because it shows you who is doing the right things in school. Its [sic] even better to be the one getting the award it’s a great feeling.”

“The positive school assemblies make you feel like you’re actually being paid attention to by the teachers.”

“The assemblies helped because it was a chance to praise everyone for their achievements”

“Positive school assemblies has influenced my learning and relationships with teachers to help others and honor others”

“The positive school assembly helped me to realize our teachers really do care enough to take time out to nominate us or do things for us like the senior slide show.

“I think the assemblys [sic] are awesome because they recognize kids strengthes [sic] and make them feel special.”

The teacher responses were:

“The positive school assemblies are a necessary part of the coming together of the students and staff. I have been humbled by the sheer joy I see in students who receive a small certificate from me. It takes so little time to say “you did a good job,” yet we don’t hear it often enough. “Thank you” or “congratulations” are easy to say, but

hold great emotion. That you see, really see, a student gives them great power and self-esteem. They reflect this back and challenge staff to be better.”

“Students who are recognized for good work tend to like to live up to their reputations. When all students see their accomplishments I think it helps their feeling of worth – thus an improvement in learning (because they know they can). It gives the teacher another thing to compliment the student on, or encourage them to strive for. It is hard to measure but it is an important factor.”

“Everybody needs praise, so the kids like these assemblies, whether they’re too cool to admit it or not. We, as teachers, need the time to remember good things are happening here. Sometimes it just seems like hard work.”

The findings from the student and teacher participants demonstrated that the positive school assemblies foster a feeling of caring in the students. Key words from student responses include: honor others, praise everyone, teachers really do care, being paid attention to by the teachers, recognize kids’ strengths, and make them feel special. These key phrases illustrate that the students gain an internal feeling of caring as a result of the positive school assemblies.

Our school typically has three positive school assemblies each semester in a large group instruction room. The students sit together in their grounding groups. They last about 20 to 30 minutes. They consist of student recognition of the students selected for the character trait of the month, students with excellent attendance, and students with above average grades. A staff person is selected by the principal to organize the assembly. They conduct the introduction and closing. The guidance counselor honors the students with 3.0 grade point average or higher, the social worker recognizes students with perfect or very good average daily attendance, and the behavior interventionists teacher recognizes students for the character trait of the month.

The teachers' responses correlated with the literature. One teacher stated, "Assemblies are a necessary part of the coming together of the students and staff." A second teacher wrote, "As teachers we need the time to remember good things are happening here....recognize our kids for the good things and reinforce the positive mindset of our building." Recognizing our students works to reinforce the positive attributes that we strive to model for students.

Positive assemblies relate back to students and their learning. "When all students see their accomplishments I think it helps their feeling of worth—thus an improvement in learning (because they know they can). It is hard to measure but it is an important factor," stated one teacher participant. Positive school assemblies at Moselle Academy positively impact students and their relationships with teachers because they foster the feeling of caring.

The sixth question of the survey was: *Please describe how Academic Support has influenced your learning and relationships with students.* The emergent theme from the student and teacher surveys was:

- Individualized teacher support improves the likelihood of student success.

The student responses were:

"Academy [sic] Support helped by being able to pass classes with the best grades possible."

"These teachers are amazing. They make me feel like they really care about me passing."

"The Academic Support at the Academy is excellent. Even though I had every teacher, even when I didn't, they were still checking up on me."

"Academic support has helped me achieve my goals in class."

“Because all the teachers helped with your work when you were having trouble”

“The one on one with the teachers without it I would not have been successful. They will help you get through the hard times and the bad.”

“The 1 on 1 as well as the teacher determination helped greatly.”

The teacher responses were:

“Often we have found that behavior issues are really academic issues so having an Academic support system built in is very helpful. Many of our students come to us with gaps in their knowledge base. The Academic support team can address issues one to one in ways that I cannot always do in class. Working with other staff to help a student provides a greater net so fewer issues slip past. My goal is to have the student leave my class feeling that school may be hard, but it is doable.”

“Academic Support seemed like the missing link to improve student relationships. Students get very defensive when they know they are failing and it is hard to connect with them. With an additional teacher working with them (one teacher just doesn’t have the time) they are more willing to try harder to succeed and I can have another opportunity to positively interact with them – in partnership with another teacher.”

The emergent theme displayed by students and staff reflects that of the review of literature. Student key phrases included: being able to pass the classes, really care about me, helped achieve my goals, and would not have been successful. Academic support is a natural part of helping where there may be a weakness. One teacher wrote, “we have found that behavior issues are really academic issues, so having academic support system built in is very helpful. Many of our students come to us with gaps in their knowledge base.” A second teacher wrote, “academic support seemed like the missing link to improve student relationships.” For a small school, the idea is to work smarter not harder.

During the past few years, the approach to providing academic support for struggling students became a more collaborative and building-wide effort. I designated one teacher to meet with students who had multiple letter grades of D and F. She would approach the

conversation in a collaborative and supportive manner. The teacher identifies the challenge, determines who can provide assistance, and what the student, parents, and other teachers can do to assist. “When students see me really trying to help them they respond in kind and usually form a working relationship,” wrote one teacher participant. The simple process of one teacher spending a Friday afternoon engaged in problem-solving conversations with students who are struggling with grades has been very successful. Concurrently with academic support, the classroom teacher also supports the student. Increasingly, over the past three years, the school has significantly reduced D and F letter grades.

Implementing academic support complemented our re-introduction to BIST. BIST is Behavior Interventions Support Team and is an approach to student misbehavior. This approach emerged through empowerment of teacher leadership. Within the small school, several teachers have become leaders in the building. Constructivists have goals, outcomes, and a repertoire of change strategies that focus talent and resources toward a common purpose (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

Full participation leads to acts of leadership; being fully engaged in meaning making activities focuses one’s drive toward purpose and community. One cannot help but lead; one is compelled to do so by the self-directed drive toward self-renewal and interdependency. (Jackson & Davis, p. 122)

“Expectations for success are transmitted through the relationships a student has with adults and peers. When students care about what others think about them and expect from them, they feel a personal stake in meeting those expectations” (Arhar, cited in Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 122).

Kramer (1992) asserts that students who feel

that no one knows or cares what they are capable of doing, who believe that they are viewed by others as incapable of high-level achievement, will lower their

expectations of themselves to “fit” what they sense is the prevailing view of their own incompetence. (p. 29)

Yet “research has shown that the degree to which students are engaged and motivated at school depends to a great extent on the quality of the relationships they experience there” (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 123). Supportive relationships are necessary, although not sufficient without high-quality curriculum and teaching, to foster high performance among young adolescents (Jackson & Davis).

The seventh question on the student survey was: *Please describe how the Behavior Support has influenced your learning and relationships with students.* The emergent theme from the student and teacher data pertaining to Behavior Support was:

- Individualized teacher support improves student success

The student responses were:

“Behavior Support helped me by calming me down when I get angry.”

“The ways they handle the behavior is very different and affective [sic].”

“I like the help when I am upset and they understand me”

“Behavioral support like the recovery room really helps students because it teaches them how to calm down and learn how to deal with people.”

“Behavior support has helped me by controlling my anger in class/business environments”

The teacher responses were:

“The behavior support team is a great asset to the students and the staff. The behavior team can take a very frustrated student and give him/her the time to cool off and calm down. When the student is ready, they can talk out the issues and look for solutions. Often by the time the students come back to me to process, a plan is in place and it takes very little time to get through the issues. This not only lets me help

the student with the issue, it allows me to help the rest of the class while the student is calming down. Letting a student know that while their behavior is an issue, we still care about them and want them to feel safe is a great way to give the student what he/she needs without disrupting the learning of others. This helps both students and staff own their personal behaviors and plan on how to correct the issue(s).”

“Although it may seem strange that the more a student faces discipline the stronger the relations, it is true when discipline is truly ‘training’ rather than a punishment.”

“Behavior support provides structured guidance to the student and they understand better why teachers react the way they do. They understand their role in misbehavior and can improve. It is a win for the teacher and student, and my ability to connect with the student has improved. Learning how to do it correctly makes it positive.”

For the student and teacher participants, the findings indicated that individualized support in the area of behavior improved potential for student success. Student phrases included: they understand me, helped me control my anger, helped me calm down, and how to deal with people in situations. Providing a skill and support for changing a behavior rather than punishment or punitive consequences gives the student an avenue for success. One teacher wrote, “letting a student know that while their behavior is an issue, we still care about them and want them to feel safe is a great way to give the student what he/she needs without disrupting others.” Another comment by a teacher shows that it can be a long process of changing behavior: “discipline is truly ‘training’ rather than a punishment and the more a student faces discipline the stronger the relationship can be.”

For behavior support, the challenge was to create a systemic approach to being proactive with student discipline. During my first year as principal, students were sent to the office with frequency. The reason for the office referral varied widely. Teachers needed to have collaborative guidelines for re-directions in the classroom, rationale to ask a student to leave the class, and a procedure to effectively provide support for a student to return to the

classroom. That need was behavior support. The answer was the implementation of a recovery room. The recovery room is an alternative to students being sent to the principal's office which provides support for what may be a missing skill.

The recovery room is a solutions-oriented approach to providing support for students experiencing teacher re-directions or being sent from the classroom. Once a teacher issued a second re-direction in the classroom, the recovery room was the only option for the student. In the recovery room, an adult addresses the reason for the student being asked to leave the classroom. In order for a student to return to that classroom the next day, an accountable conversation needs to take place to make things right.

The recovery room staff tracks detailed statistics of the visits, such as proactive visits, reactive visits, teacher, challenge/issue, time out of the classroom, and so on. This information then leads to additional behavior support. Students who have visited the recovery room or principal's office multiple times may need a behavior plan for success. Additionally, the teachers keep a chart of the re-directions given during each month. This information serves as accurate predictors or forecasts of students and behavior concerns. The recovery room staff person can then engage in a proactive conversation based on observations. Students who frequent the principal's office or recovery room may be placed on a behavior plan for success.

Of the 85 students, there may be five to seven students on behavioral plans for success during the school year. Prior to the implementation of a highly success recovery room and behavior support intervention, students were often given in-school suspension or out-of school suspension. Students would simply return to school and replicate the behavior, and the suspension cycle would continue. With the internal structure of the recovery room,

consistent re-direction policy, and a teacher who also works as a behavior interventionist, the needs of students are being properly administered. Our approach to student behavior is more proactive. Additionally, the school now has the tool to outlast the student behavior and, more importantly, to begin to change student misbehavior.

The eighth question on the survey was: *Success looks different for everyone. What does success at school look like to you?* The theme that emerged from the data focused on multiple descriptors: passing grades, achievement, involvement, positive feelings, caring, learning life skills, trying, and graduation. Success can be viewed differently depending on the experiences of the individual.

The data collected from the students were:

“Success to me is getting what needs to be finished, feeling good about yourself, and completing things.”

“When you and your teacher work together.”

“Success looks like passing grades and trying to do your best at everything.”

“I think that success at school means coming to an alternative school and getting As and Bs cause [sic] I failed last year.”

“Success at school, for me, is coming to school and actually trying my best instead of just going through the motions. It also means having a good support system through teachers, friends, and other faculty.”

“Success at school is teachers impacting students’ lives in positive ways and helping them to learn valuable life skills.”

“Without this school I would not have graduated from high school. It helped get me back on my feet and finish up school. Success is I am proud of what I have been through and what I have accomplished.”

“Getting good grades, having a positive attitude, being successful, and caring about your future.”

The responses from the teachers were:

“Success for me is helping each student feel safe, valued and successful in her/her own right. I had a past graduate come up to me and say, ‘I will never go to college but I have a good job and a beautiful daughter and life is good. Thank you for helping me to see that.’ No teacher could ask for more.”

“For several students being able to follow the 3 BIST Life Goals is HUGE success. For others, it’s earning credits so they can graduate. And still for others, being successful means having a trusted adult in their life, making better choices, and becoming a mature young adult.”

“Success for me looks like students making progress. I do not so much care about grades as hope. If students know they understand more than they did coming in, if they know they can relate to the material and enjoy the process then my class has been a success. I want to keep being challenged by my students to find new ways of presenting the material. I want to see the “got it” look on their faces and see their joy in understanding what I am teaching.”

The theme that emerged from the data focused on multiple descriptors: passing grades, achievement, involvement, positive feelings, caring, learning life skills, trying, and graduation all reflect the very wide definition of student success at school. When referring to school Pre-K through 12th grade, the success would be defined as graduation. Graduation is the conclusion that represents completion of one stage of a young person’s life and passage into their post-secondary education, workforce, military, and other educational or occupational preparedness. Secondary school graduation is not always a foregone conclusion to all students in attendance. For an alternative school, the challenges are even greater. As previously discussed in chapter two, students have many challenges. Success can be defined differently for each student. One student wrote, “success at school is teachers impacting

students' lives in positive ways and helping them learn valuable life skills.” A second student made the statement, “success is getting good grades, having a positive attitude, being successful, and caring about the future.”

Success can also continually be redefined as the student having positive experiences. Success for some students can be attending school, receiving help from a teacher, not being sent out of the classroom, making good choices, or following directions. For students in Moselle Academy, the reasons for their attendance at the school correlate with the findings in the review of literature. Some of those reasons for being at risk of not graduating may be: struggling reader, struggling learner, poor attendance, making poor choices, lack of family involvement, social-economic challenges, personal health conditions, academically behind in credits, lack of connection to comprehensive high school, and lack of an adult advocate.

Moselle Academy has defined success in three areas: attendance, academics, and behavior. Depending upon the student's previous success or lack of it, success is viewed through the lens of the individual. The adult community in an alternative setting has to model the approach that the students are here to turn over a new leaf. The non-success of the student at the traditional high school does not need to follow here. The small-school environment provides the unique opportunity for a fresh start in their high school career. Continually being punitive or engaging in conversation that is dictatorial or abrasive only serves to reinforce student alienation from the school.

Unfortunately, there are many schools across the nation that possess staff that are still of a punitive reaction framework and dialogue of alienation with students that do not conform to all rules and procedures. Schools do reflect the world. However, it's the collective hard work of all staff to counter-balance by continually seeking re-definition of

success for each student. “For several students being able to follow the three BIST Life Goals is HUGE success. For others, it’s earning credits so they can graduate. And still for others, being successful means having a trusted adult in their life, making better choices, and becoming a mature young adult,” wrote one teacher participant.

The ninth question on the survey was: *How has our school played a role in success for students?* The themes that emerged from the volunteer student and teacher participants can be categorized as:

- The Academy helped students succeed.

The student data reads as follows:

“It gave me extra support and understanding that I needed.”

“Your school has helped me graduate on time.”

“You guys were always there to help when I was having a rough day and helped me get through it.”

“Our school has helped me be successful because they actually pay attention and know when I’m stressed and when I’m struggling.”

“I was very sick and almost died this school was there to help me. Without it I would be nothing.”

“It has helped me a lot and made me try to do better and made my grades very impressive because there is something to try for.”

“The Academy has helped me with a lot of my success. It’s not just about learning the stuff, it’s how we learn and making sure we understand.”

“Helped my grades and relationships with people”

The teacher responses from the surveys were:

“Our school works to improve learning for all of our students with high expectations and tremendous support. They get to see success in their life academically, sometimes for the first time.”

“We care for the “whole” student, not just their academics. We provide opportunities and the support to be successful. We give them a trusted adult to connect to.”

“I think we do a lot to help students feel good about themselves. Because we care so much and don’t give up on them, they believe they are worth loving.”

The student and teacher participants reported comparable answers that the school has helped students succeed. Again, success can be defined individually, varying with the experiences of the person. Common phrases reported by the students included: gave me extra support and understanding I needed, I graduated, they pay attention to you and know when you are stressed, helped me in every way possible, and helped me with my grades. Through a lens of reflection, when individuals feel they have been helped and supported, which results in their reporting success, the researcher categorizes this as caring.

Caring for someone or a group of people demonstrates your commitment to their needs. The teacher responses attributed the success with comments such as, “we give them a trusted adult to connect to, because we care so much and don’t give up on them, they can believe they are worth loving.” Defining success can be simple. Success can be attendance, academics, and behavior. Achieving success can be very challenging. Most of the students are struggling learners. A small handful of the students have acting out behaviors that get in the way of their learning. Most students have their own “story” about why success was not possible at the larger traditional high school.

The start of the process is caring adults that work on building relationships with students. It is a process that starts and never ends. It is the collective effort of all of the adults. One teacher wrote, “our school works to improve learning for all of our students with

high expectations and tremendous support. They get to see success in their life academically, sometimes for the first time.” In May 2010 the Moselle Academy graduated 19 students from high school. This equaled a previous year of 19 graduates. The school has experienced statistically significant increases in the letter grades issued by the classroom teachers. The Fall semester letter grades can be regarded as success (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Letter Grades Issued in Teacher-Led Courses at Moselle Academy

Letter Grade	A	B	C	D	F
Fall 2006	29	38	64	23	77
Fall 2007	45	81	72	27	36
Fall 2008	44	58	65	23	43
Fall 2009	85	97	84	23	56
Fall 2010	110	106	120	26	124

The high number of letter grade Fs in the Fall of 2010 is a reflection of the change in the state law, which raised the age to drop out 16 to 17. This change resulted in students on our roster who had stopped attending school but were officially unable to drop out receiving Fs for the current semester. The past several Fall semesters reveal an increase in passing letter grades and letter grades overall. The beginning of the semester student population averages between 80 to 85 students in each semester/year. One main factor to account for the difference in the latest two years are the academic and behavioral intervention provided

to the students. This added support has noticeably decreased the numbers of students dropping out of the school.

The tenth question from the survey was: *What characteristics would you identify in high-quality teachers?* The common themes were: Caring, helpful, compassion, support, patience, understanding, nice/kind/friendly, people orient/humorous, listener/respect/empathy.

The student data collected from the surveys noted:

“Caring, understanding, patient”

“Motivation, responsibility, caring, and compassion”

“Respect, outgoing, good listener, helper, someone who uses their blessings to be a blessing”

“Sense of humor, understanding, confident, friendly, smart, out-going, and knows when to be serious and when to have fun”

“Honesty, compassion, empathy, respect, kindness”

“They are really nice, and caring. Give up a lot of their time for students.”

“Friendly, humrous [sic], supportive, people oriented”

“Helpful, kind, and trustworthy”

“Building relationships w/ you and caring about what happens, smart, nice, patience, and persistence”

The teacher responses from the data collection were:

“High-quality teachers:

- 1) Love their students so they can connect with them
- 2) Have high expectations
- 3) Are consistent
- 4) Have techniques that encourage learning (not just providing information required)
- 5) Love to teach! (Students can tell!)”

“Flexible,
One who adapts the materials to the learners and helps them make real world connections.
team player
continual learner
positive attitude
easily approached
who shares knowledge, expertise, etc., freely with others
one who builds up rather than destroys
listener and a do-er”

Based on the teacher responses, one of the aspects was centered on adult as a professional and as an individual. One teacher commented, “Integrity, patience, commitment, respect and perseverance.” A second teacher wrote, “Loyalty, professionalism, humor, grace, accountability, and leadership.” For teachers, teams provide the kind of collaborative work group that is increasingly viewed as vital to organizational productivity across a wide range of professions. Peter Senge, “one of the nation’s leading experts on organizational behavior, calls workplace teams essential to enable professionals to learn together and to take advantage of collective thought that goes beyond what any one individual understands” (Senge, cited in Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 128). Increased professional contact and dialogue fosters joint learning and problem solving and enable teachers on teams to develop “high teaching efficacy” – the belief that they can have a positive effect on student performance regardless of the student’s abilities, family background, or academic history (Erb & Stevenson, cited in Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 128).

Based on the student responses, a common phrase used was caring. Caring for students and creating a school environment in which students feel that there is at least one caring adult in the school assists in the creation of a bond that when fostered, leads to

relationship building. A student wrote, “the Academy has helped me with a lot of my success. It’s not just about learning the stuff, it’s how we learn and making sure we understand.” That student statement indicates that students recognize that academics and learning is a high priority for the teachers.

Caring is crucial to the full development of young adolescents. They need to see themselves as valued members of a group that offers mutual support and trusting relationships. They need to be praised and rewarded for earning success. They need to become socially competent individuals with the skills required to cope successfully in everyday life. They need to have hope for a promising future and the competencies required to take advantages of the opportunities society offers. (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development., 1989, p. 25)

Adults who work with youth and at-risk youth know that it is the approach to the conversation that allows for a connection. From the connection and continual demonstration of a feeling of caring, the adult needs to always be fostering the relationship with the student, even when the student is acting out or disengaging from the relationship.

Every student should be well-known by at least one adult. Students should be able to rely on that adult to help learn from their experiences, comprehend physical changes and changing relations with family and peers, act on their behalf to marshal every school and community resources needed for the student to succeed, and to help fashion a promising vision of the future. (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, p. 40)

Creating a school culture of support and a climate of caring adults working to build relationships with students can lead to profound positive impact on student success. Students clearly report that when they feel a sense of caring, they identify a high-quality teacher. Teachers self-report caring is important as well as being professional.

Teacher Focus Group

The third group of qualitative data collected by volunteer participants in the research study was from a teacher focus group. The focus group consisted of four teachers from the

school. The four teachers were purposely selected from the teaching staff because of their experiences, expertise, and building leadership. The use of purposeful sampling “is a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). Weiss (cited in Patton, 2002), in discussing purposeful sampling, said, “many people are uniquely able to be informative because they are experts in an area or were privileged witnesses to an event” (p. 88). The focus group participated in an interview.

The interview was conducted in a classroom in a group format with all four teacher volunteers. The interview took place on a Saturday morning, allowing the participants to express their thoughts more freely. It also allowed a free-flowing conversation to take place among the four teachers with no unnatural stopping by the researcher. The teachers were each assigned a pseudo name. Pseudo names were chosen from the index of a Civil War book, placed in a box, and then randomly paired with the teacher’s actual name. The interview time was scheduled for three hours.

The interview was divided into three sections: teacher educational philosophy, relationship building with students in an alternative high school, and discussion of the survey questions related to the programming opportunities of the school. Each section lasted roughly 45 minutes with a 15-minute break time between the sessions. The phenomenological approach focuses on the essence or essences of a shared experience, as Patton would describe. The “experiences of people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon” (Patton, 2002, p. 106).

The studied phenomenon was relationship building with students in an alternative high school. Within the Phenomenological Tradition, the use of Heuristic Inquiry is a form

of questioning that focuses on the personal experiences or lived experiences. The heuristic inquiry also allows the researcher to do internal search and self-reflection on the understanding of the phenomenon (Moustakas, cited in Patton, 2002). The free-flowing conversation among teachers with expertise allowed for a deep and rich collection of data from the “lived experiences” of the teachers from teaching in an alternative high school.

The essence of the resulting information can be placed into three emerging themes regarding Relationship Building:

- Adults relating to the student on a human level with interactions that have relevance
key words included: trust, caring, genuine, positive comments, appreciation, encouragement, sincere and concern
- Adults being advocates for academic and behavior expectations
key themes: establishing clear boundaries, modeling appropriate behavior, not accepting failure, spending individual time assisting, and staying in the relationship even when the student acts out or disengages
- Engagement of students with opportunities provided by the school
key themes: advisory (grounding time), school-wide field trips and activities, academic support, behavior support, Discovery Course, positive student referrals and positive school assemblies.

Teacher Focus Group Findings and Discussion

Adults Relating to Students

As stated by the teachers in the focus group, relationship building begins with knowing and understanding a person. As quoted earlier in the Review of Literature, “to

develop positive relationships, we need to understand other people before we can expect them to understand us” (Covey, 1989, p. 51). The teachers overwhelmingly emphasized the need to relate to a student and to understand him as a person. Listening to students and demonstrating that one cares about a student begins the process. Caring can be the initial interaction or connection for the relationship to begin. Caring correlates with the research of *Breaking Ranks* (NASSP, 2001) that reported that students feel it makes a difference when teachers care.

Mrs. Wallace: [Student name], when he first came to us, his body language, he was humped over, he would never look you in the eye, he didn't have that confidence in him. Sometimes when I would go out and get a soda, particularly if I was going out to get them for the teachers, I would get him a Dr Pepper. He asked “what's this for?” He got the biggest grin. That's just one tool in my repertoire. Next year I was having students fill out a questionnaire and responding to the question, “When did a teacher help you?” He said ‘One time a teacher gave me a Dr. Pepper.’ That nearly brought tears to my eyes. To me that was 89 cents. To him it made a difference.

The teachers made the strong correlation with connecting and relating to positively impact student success. This correlates with the research of Gayle et al. (2006) in which they concluded effective teachers empathize with students while setting standards that eventually allow the student to assume responsibility and learn. Relating to a student is a continuous process. The teachers documented their experiences of always seeking to further relate to the student. This is a daily activity of giving concern, support, encouragement, and appreciation. The relationship is often a one-way relationship until the student engages by participating in assignments, accepting assistance, raising their hand, asking questions, and engaging in classroom activity. Once the student engages, they often allow themselves to accept learning challenges in the classroom. This high degree of personalization facilitates the adult's focus more on the challenges the student may be having as well.

Mrs. Wallace: I agree that all students can learn. It's a matter of finding the switch that turns that natural curiosity on; most of our kids are at risk. A lot of them have had negative experiences in education. They want to push us away before we push them away so to speak. That has happened to a lot of our kids in the past. By being able to get to know them and their individuality, help get them excited about learning before they will even be willing to take a risk. It's hard for them to risk looking or even feeling stupid in front of their peers. It confirms that negative image they have of themselves. Kids in alternative settings all come with different stories, from different socio-economic backgrounds. Because we're in a smaller setting we get the chance to get to know them as a person and not just a student. We can develop a relationship of mutual respect. They become willing to take a risk. They are not afraid of us "coming down on them," embarrassing them, because they trust that we have their best interests at heart. So I think they are able to take that risk of failure. To have help for that relationship. If it weren't for establishing that relationship of trust.

Through caring for students, teachers can build the relationship through the positive comments on student work and positive classroom reinforcement. The teachers noted the demonstration of giving notes of appreciation and words of encouragement as ways to further demonstrate the teachers' process of building a relationship. Teachers, as caring individuals, demonstrate a caring attitude and illustrate an interest in interpersonal conversations with their students (Wentzel, cited in Gayle et al., 2006). Following is one example from the teacher transcript in which Mrs. Murray uses her experience in relationship building to partner with a struggling student in her class.

Mrs. Breckinridge: That was a great compromise. There is some leeway for your phone to be out, but there is a consequence. But it's good to avoid power struggles if you're going to build a relationship. Look at the big picture.

Mrs. Murray: Well, the tickets that we give out (for positive behaviors) some kids get more tickets. Well, some kids need more encouragement than others. That's why they get more tickets. Of course, with the greeting, how you doing, how was your weekend? They may say fine, but sometimes their actions are not matching their words.

You say, "Stop what you're doing. Go see the social worker or guidance counselor. You can ask them, "Who would you like to talk with right now?"

They say, “Oh, you can see right through me.”

We don’t know if they’re hungry or if they had a break-up or something is going on, there’s a death in the family. These are young kids trying to take on adult responsibilities, and it’s tough. We can’t treat everyone the same. We just have to meet them at their own level.

Mrs. Breckinridge: So, in other words, you don’t be the same for all the students. You’re consistent with that one student. You have a relationship that’s going to be strong, and I have this expectation and we’re going to do everything you need for you to have a good day.

Mrs. Wallace: I had [student name] in drawing. At the end of the day, he looked kind of faded. You know how they kind of wear their emotions on their sleeves. I was keeping an eye on him. I got the other kids working, but I could tell he just was not himself.

I laid my hand lightly on his shoulder and said to him, “[Student name], are you OK? Have you been drawing your artwork?”

He said, “No my artwork is crap. I can’t figure this out.” He was upset, and he had his artwork turned over.

I asked him, “Can I see what you’ve done so far?”

He said, “I’m just not getting it.”

I said, “Honey, that’s why I’m here.” I pulled up a chair and very quietly, while everybody was working, I said, “Here, let me show you how I would get started.” I sat down with him, talked with him individually and showed him how to do it. He received that really well and he worked then for the rest of the class period. I could tell he was getting frustrated; something was going on. I wanted to keep him from shutting down. As you get to know the student a little better, you know whether they need black and white or more of that soft approach.

Adults as Advocates

The teachers of the focus group, through their lived experiences, illustrated a theme of advocating for student expectations with academic and behavior accountability. With the process of continuously building relationships with the students, the adult then can apply the relationship to leading the student to success. Success is unique for individual students. A

caring adult can advocate and partner with the student in what the student may need for academic or behavior support. The research from the U.S. Department of Education entitled *Dropout Prevention* found that adult advocates assist in addressing academic, personal, and emotional needs and can model appropriate behavior (2008).

Mrs. Moore: The essential element in a relationship is trust. Trust is a hard thing. Kids have experienced things that have made them not trust adults. We have experienced things that make us not trust the adults we're around or even some of the kids because of some of things we have learned about them. But we have to start somewhere. For some of them I have an automatic connection. For others I have to work harder, but you have to have a willingness. You can't come to the conclusion, "oh, it's not going to happen." You just have to say, "At some point this kid and I ... I will stand up for you, and I will stand up to you because I want what's best for you. We may not always agree, and there are days when you are going to be very unhappy with me. You may never like me, but did you get what you need out of this class? That's my primary concern. After you work through all this, "the walls," with consistency. It's got to be consistency. Kids respect structure. They don't like it; don't get me wrong. Structure is something some of our kids are not used to. Some of our kids have been taking care of themselves for a long time. Then they come here and all of a sudden are saying we are taking this position and we are not going to back down off of it. These are the tools – Recovery, Discovery, and the one to one stuff we do with the kids. We're going to give you good tools so you can rise up to that challenge. It's worth it. One thing I've learned over the years is that it is hard for kids who have spent their lives with people who do not value education...

Adult advocates are essential in developing a sense of belonging for students with accountability (Larson & Rumberger, 1995). The teachers stated that failure for the students is not an option. The teachers frequently asked the rhetorical questions, What does the student need and what do they deserve? Using these questions, teachers can choose to be punitive or supportive with their viewpoints of the student. The teachers in the focus group found that in place of punishment or punitive measures, the need was for focusing on the missing skill of the student. Staying in the relationship was a more solutions-oriented approach to solving the problem. The teachers noted when students act out with behavior or struggle with grades, simply giving a consequence or assigning a zero on the assignment

does not meet the student needs. The student may deserve it, but such punitive action will not assist in breaking the cycle of the struggling student. Thus, failure is simply not an option for the four teachers with their experiences.

The answer is more personalized time, more structure, skill building, creating a plan for success, and planning for the need of the student rather than reacting to the misbehavior or failing grade. Thus, an individualized approach with the students emerges from the teachers' experiences, seeing and accepting the students for how they are and approaching success from the vehicle of the established relationship. The teachers made note of being consistent with high expectations, but the consistency may vary from student to student. Teachers reflected that when a student acts out, refuses to accept assistance, or makes mistakes, their experiences were centered on the ability to not take the behavior personally but continue to stay in the relationship with the student.

Mrs. Wallace: On the Recovery side, as a behaviorist, we talk about holding them accountable, having them look at themselves, I tell them, "This is hard." It *is* hard, not just for teenagers. It's hard for *adults* to take an honest look at ourselves, at our behaviors and say, "OK, what do I need to change?" But it's a very necessary thing. But coming back to the consistency, I think that's the key for a lot of our young people in alternative education, that they have not had a group of adults who have been consistent every time. When I went to conferences this week, we would talk about this. They would say, "If you are consistent over time, that's when you're going to build a trust. It's when you are inconsistent that they don't know when they can trust. When are you going call them on something; when are you not going to call them on something? But if you are consistent and call them on it every time, they are going to come to know that you are a reliable, dependable adult that they can trust. For some it just takes longer than others.

Maintaining consistency with the student equates to being vested in the relationship. The teachers' observations correlated with the research findings of Rogers and Renard (1999) and Gayle and colleagues (2006) centered on teacher-student interactions correlating positively to student learning. The teachers' findings pertaining to the importance of the

relationship correlates with the Branco and Valsiner (2004) findings in which the nature of the relationship between student and teacher sets the stage for construction of knowledge. Students with ongoing relationships with adults are more attached to the school and involved (Wehlage et al., 1989), and school is more likely to be a motivating place with engagement (Rogers & Renard, 1999).

Mrs. Moore: And we're coming in here and we're all about education. And I'm going, "If you've got to get addicted to something, get addicted to knowledge!...If you're going to be pushing, push learning." And they be going like, "What!?" But you've got to catch them off guard. As much energy we put into other things, we need to put into what we're doing right here. They have to know you believe they can be successful, that you are not going to give up on them. They're so used to pushing back when you're trying to pull them, kind of oppose what you're doing in the classroom, because it's not comfortable. It's such a small population that we see a lot of things that were overlooked in the bigger school. We see when the kids are being passive or intentionally not learning. Everything you do is magnified in a small setting like this. That means it takes courage to see yourself, and our kids are being forced to see themselves the same way we are seeing them. It takes time for their vision to catch up with our vision.

Engagement of Students with Opportunities at School

Students that attend Moselle Academy often did not participate in extra-curricular groups, clubs, activities, organizations, or athletics. Some students' perception of school can be very limited or even negative without being connected with a caring adult and without participating in school activities. Thus, it is essential to have a school organizational framework that provides activities for students' participation and opportunities for students to feel a sense of support and belonging. The teachers in the focus group spoke positively about the programs provided by the school.

Mrs. Wallace: When we were able to go to the Tucker Leadership Lab a couple of weeks ago, my first year was not a positive experience. They did not mesh; people sabotaged the activities. I was not looking forward to going. It ended up I was really glad to I got to go. I was able to step out of a leadership role and learn from the Tucker leader, how she was able to turn things around, be patient. In a positive way,

she would say, “No, that’s not an option,” and keep them moving forward. If there were activities in which I was not able to participate, it was fun to see them encourage each other to overcome obstacles. I did not feel like I could swing, so I was watching. At first they were picking on one another, but then they started pulling together, and they got Mr. Cordell to swing on the rope. One time Joe swung on the rope, and they didn’t catch him right or something. He ended up swinging way out and ended up wrapping his legs around somebody who was there, so they all bumped off. I was dying laughing. It was great, funny. Nobody got mad when it happened. It was just funny and positive. Then we went to the teeter totter and were able to be successful on it right away, so it boosted their confidence. Our ability to provide them the opportunity to go on field trips like the National Archives, that was informational, but how many of them would have gone on their own? When we go to the Nelson, for many of kids, their families would not take them to that. These experiences take them out of their comfort zone. The one that has had the most impact on me personally, Dialog in the Dark, was the most overwhelming, life-altering experience. We take our sight for granted. To be really be submersed in that was overwhelming.

The school-wide field trips or monthly activities serve as a tool for students to experience learning outside of school, enhance peer and adult relationships, and connect students to school. The use of positive student referrals and the positive school assemblies illuminate the students’ positive character traits, good grades and great attendance. Teachers noted the effectiveness of recognizing students for positive behavior, which correlates to their connection to the school and success. The teachers’ lived experiences correlate with the research of Fredricks et al. (2004), which found that engagement included behavioral and psychological components that related in a positive manner and served to create a sense of belonging to the school. Implementation of the academic support and behavior support has been a key tool to effect change. Students who are struggling academically need support. If the skill is missing or additional time is needed for learning, adults adjusting for personalized time and assistance creates a sense of structure for the student. This holds true for the students that need support in behavior. This can be following directions at school and

accepting re-direction. The Discovery class curriculum teaches students life skills and, often, the missing skills of effective and appropriate interpersonal communication skills.

Mrs. Moore: Discovery class, we've gone and taught the tools. A few days ago, I was talking with some students who had not had the class, the opportunity to learn those communication skills. Some people don't know how to deal with their anger. Some of them get into the not OK child mode, the critical parent mode. Some of us, even as adults, get into the not OK child mode, the critical parent mode. My favorite mode is the OK child mode, but I can't stay there and do my job. However, in my job, I'm the logical adult, but the kids may perceive me as the critical parent, and that's not where you want to be, but sometimes it's like that. We know we have some kids who spend WAY too much time in the OK child mode. We need to teach them that there is a time and a place. I like being aware of what's being taught in that class, and we can reinforce it: "now you've been taught how to do so-and-so, so you need to apply it."

Supporting students allows for success and change rather than being punitive. The findings in this study correlated with the findings of the U.S. Department of Education (2008) with engaging students in supporting students. If learning meets a need of a student, they are more likely to be engaged in learning (Rogers & Renard, 1999).

In a school the creation of a culture such as small groups creates a sense of community that in turn develops a much larger picture of life for the student. The teachers' findings correlated with the research of Pianta and Walsh (cited in Pianta, 1999) of peer relationships positively impacting developing children. The use of the middle school concept of advisory serves to create such a structure in a school organization. Advisory is daily time spent with adult advocates supporting students with relationship building. Over time, relationships form with peers, the adult builds trust and relationships with the students, and the structure creates a feeling of connection to the school (National Middle School Association, 2003).

Advisory time at Moselle Academy is called Grounding Time. The teachers' experiences of grounding positively impacting the students and school correlates with the findings of all the research of middle school philosophy.

Mrs. Moore: Some of the experiences in our grounding group have been awesome. Boys, by end of semester, were really encouraging each other. At the same time they would ignore certain behaviors as if they didn't exist and went on about their business. They had made an adjustment to having kids with challenging behaviors in the grounding group, rather than being impatient with them as they had done previously. And the kids with the challenging behaviors, they saw how the others look at them, that constant peer pressure, they saw that others did not want them to waste their time with the off-task behavior; they were able to build some strength in themselves to control their behaviors.

The experiences of the teacher focus group also matched the research findings of the National Research Council's 2004 study that documented that student engagement and learning is fostered by a school characterized by an ethic of caring and supporting relationships, respect, fairness, trust, and shared responsibility for student learning. Fostering positive feelings in the classroom enables the student to want to achieve and learn, which leads to active engagement (Rogers & Renard, 1999). These key descriptors describe the aspects of the philosophy of the alternative school. Thus, the findings of the teacher focus group were that small school environments can create a place of successful learning for students that previously did not experience success.

Mrs. Breckinridge: I think you have hit on a really good point about an alternative school. I think most of them have one overriding factor, regardless of socioeconomic background, male, female, age. They all have this awful feeling. The majority of students I meet, the trauma of school, that feeling of failure is so huge in life, they don't want to fail, and they act out in a way they control.

I think that's one of the reasons alternative environment works so well, that one on one that builds that relationships and take the walls down, acceptance of failure takes the walls down; some of them will be OK with failing now and then.

Mrs. Breckinridge: Even if we have to use the State's version of success, graduation rate, if we look at what they were before the alternative school, we have improved the academic success as looked at by the State. All of those things have correlation to field trips, to grounding, to the BIST program, etc. We get the intrinsic improvements that we love to see and very tangible results.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the teachers and students that provided input through the 10-question survey and the teacher focus group provided significant findings related to their lived experiences. Building relationships is a continual process. It begins with building relational trust between the teacher and student. The process begins by continually being engaged with the student by showing concern, care, encouragement, and sincerity with the student as an individual. Serving as an advocate for the student with academic support, behavior support, not accepting failure and maintaining clear boundaries and high expectations at school serve to model to the student the adult is in the relationship for the long term. This also includes staying in the relationship while a student may act out or disengage from the relationship.

For the teacher-student relationship to build and develop, a school atmosphere needs to be conducive to fostering feelings that demonstrate the school is a place of safety, academic challenge, and adults that care. Students feel a sense of belonging and ownership in the school. Thus, a school needs to provide opportunities for student participation and support. The students and teachers concurred that activities such as Advisory, school-wide field trips, academic support, behavior support, positive student referrals, positive school assemblies and Discovery Class are all opportunities that provide the student with positive feelings, school ownership, and a sense of belongingness.

The findings in this study centered on teachers building relationship with their students in an alternative high school revealed three overarching themes of (a) adults relating

to their students on a human level with interactions that have relevance; (b) adults being advocates for academic and behavior expectations; and (c) engagement of students with opportunities provided by the school. This information was collected by use of three data sources: a student survey, a teacher survey, and a teacher focus group.

The lasting impact is that I will always take the time to build a relationship with every person around me and all individuals that I encounter as part of my daily work and life. People may know little about me personally, due to my preference to be an active listener in a conversation. Taking the time to listen and engage in conversation is a key to the start of fostering trust and the kindling of a relationship. One may never know the importance or long-term impact of the power of relationships; therefore you continually should be actively building relationships with all individuals around you in the course of your interactions with others.

The emotional connections and social interactions with the people around you is what impacts the level of engagement in the organization and the learning.

All learning is colored by social interactions and the groups of which one is a part...It is through interactions with others that individuals learn whether they are capable of doing something exceptionally well, whether they are likeable, have a sense of humor, are especially creative in a given area. (Caine, Caine, McClintic, & Klimek, 2008, p. 59)

My own understanding and experiences of relationship building influenced my desire to conduct this research study. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. What do students and teachers perceive are characteristics that teachers, within an alternative high school setting, need to have to promote positive relationships with students?

2. How do students and teachers perceive that program elements, within an alternative school setting, impact the relationship between teachers and students and their connection to school?

The answer to the two research questions are centered on the ability of the adults to build relationships with the students at school. It is through these relationships that the student feels there is a caring adult at the school, trust builds, confidence is re-established, and the development of self-efficacy spurs the student to be open to challenges in academic growth. Without adults who are responsive to the needs of the students, who are passionate about education of the whole child, and are collaborative to create a school climate that is caring and supportive, then the students at this alternative high school would not be successful at school. It is through the relationship that the adult has the vehicle to create behavioral change and academic success. Teachers in alternative schools have to be able to teach to the whole child, not just content.

For the first question: What do students and teachers perceive are characteristics that teachers, within an alternative high school setting, need to have to promote positive relationships with students? From the collected information from the student and teacher participants, the findings overwhelming pointed to adults who are caring, helpful, compassionate, supportive, patient, understanding, nice/kind/friendly, people oriented/humorous, listener/respect/empathy. Students understand the role of the classroom teacher is that of authority. Individuals in positions of authority can easily alienate those in subordinate roles if they do not possess or demonstrate the attributes referenced in this study.

Therefore, on a daily basis the teacher has to be a high-quality classroom instructor with mastery of their content area, but perhaps of greater importance, the teacher must be a

person who understands people and can be responsive to the individuality of each learner. Students noted their feeling of connection to the adult that is engaged in building relationships with the students. Teachers also describe the importance of clear boundaries, high standards, and maintaining the relationship, especially when the student is disengaging from the relationship. For students that previously did not experience success in traditional high school, their information speaks clearly to the importance of a caring adult who builds relationships.

For the second research question: How do students and teachers perceive that program elements within an alternative setting impact the relationship between teachers and students and their connection to school? Students described that the various program elements of the school work positively impacted their learning at school and relationships with teachers. Learning or success at school is not a simple task of arriving at school and attending class. Reflecting on the fact that students in an alternative setting often did not participate in any additional activities, their perspective of school was narrow and often negative. Teaching and learning is not completed in isolation. Students need to have rigorous and academically appropriate curriculum and instruction. Additionally, students need to be engaged in activities to expand their perception of school and their framework of the role of school and their potential role in society.

Thus, the various program elements of Moselle Academy of Grounding Time, monthly school field trips, character traits, positive referrals, Discovery class, positive school assemblies, academic support and behavior support work to positively impact students' connection to school. Resoundingly, the students identified the various program elements as positively impacting their learning and relationships with teachers. Unequivocally, students

and teacher emphasized the importance of caring adults in a school that has various program elements that are the vehicle to defining student success, through relationship building, at one alternative high school. Those relationships may develop then or years later. In the teacher focus group, one teacher made note of former students returning to express thanks and appreciation. Her statement was:

Mrs. Wallace: That's kind of my driving force now. It's kind of weird when you're in Price Chopper, when they're running up and acting a fool trying to get your attention. Even if it's someone who has dropped out, you know you have planted seeds that somehow sometime sooner or later they'll come to bloom.

CHAPTER 5

SUCCESS WITH STUDENTS THROUGH RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Introduction Story

Recently I had a conversation with a friend. She and her husband have a son in the first grade. The parents report that the son is losing interest in school, stating that school is boring, asking to stay home from school, when at school is asking to be sent to the nurse's office. With a recent vocabulary test, the teacher did the assessment by her desk. The young boy purposely did badly, so he could be assigned to work at the teacher assistant's table. This young boy told his mother, "my teacher does not even know my favorite color and I don't think she cares about me." This story illustrates the problem that can exist at any grade level. The lack of a teacher-student relationship impacts the student's desire to be in the class and engage in learning.

Unfortunately, many more similar stories happen each day throughout school everywhere. The relationship that a student has with a teacher or an adult at school should have a positive impact. Connecting students to school through relationship building would seem to make sense from any perspective or point of view. However, for various reasons, this does not always happen. Factors including student choices, family supportiveness, and school culture can all be figured into the equation. Additionally and, most importantly, the effectiveness of the teacher is often the known variable in building a positive teacher-student relationship with the child.

When I attended high school, I was not an at-risk learner. I attended a rural high school in the 1980s and very early 1990s. I was an honor roll student, participated in extra-curricular activities, had positive interactions with adults and peers, and was supported by my

family. During my four years of high school, I had perfect attendance and zero tardies to class. However, I did observe both relationship building by some great teachers and student alienation by some “old school” teachers. I can recall an example of relationship building. One day the assistant principal brought an 11th grader to my 9th grade science class. He visited with the teacher in the hall. Sitting by the door, I can recall hearing the assistant principal explain to the teacher that “other teachers have thrown in the towel and want him removed from classes. I brought him to you, because you are able to build relationships with students other teachers cannot reach.” Hearing this, I was curious to see what the teacher could do.

From my observations I recall her working very hard with this 11th grader, giving him support, talking with him before class, re-directing him in positive ways, and so on. However, it did not take long to realize this boy was a behavior challenge in other classes and in school. After a few weeks, he dropped out of school. As a 9th grader, I wondered what he would do without a diploma. A few months later, I saw him in a soda delivery truck. Apparently he had gotten a job as a route driver with the local distributor of soda. One day, during this same 9th grade science class, this “drop out” walked by with his two wheeler delivering soda to the vending machines. He stopped by the door. The teacher went over to say hello. I could hear him thank the science teacher for being a teacher that did not give up on him. They hugged. I remember thinking, this teacher must have really meant something to him. He took the time to stop by and thank her, and she hugged him. To me that was a caring teacher who demonstrated the ability to build a relationship with a student, provide meaning, and establish trust. This student did drop out, but what if there had been other teachers like her?

From my 12 years of experience as a social studies teacher and administrator, I have witnessed both student alienation and relationship-building. The commonality was the adult of the school. The activity is relationship building. This is an ongoing process. There is a beginning, but no real end. I have observed some adults who have superior ability to build relationships. I feel that I was able to learn the process of relationship building from my father and grandfather. From a multi-generation farm family, near a small town, my grandfather used his ability as a relationship builder to help the local school and church community. He was a school board member for 25 years, a leader in the Presbyterian Church, and a member of civic organizations. Individuals visited the farm multiple times a week to talk about school, church or business related issues. Human interaction, dialogue, and trusting relationships were the key to those conversations. This was passed to my father, who observed this during his childhood in the 1930s and 1940s. My father was also a farmer and also worked in town as a shift foreman at a local factory for several decades. My father used the art of relationship building with his workers to create a place of productivity, reduce on-the-job problems, and use a collaborative focus to work as a team. He also demonstrated the ability to know and understand a person that allowed him to build trust and show a feeling of caring. Employees under his leadership felt they had more ownership in their jobs. He demonstrated what we now would call now Transformational Leadership.

Learning the importance of direct and positive human interaction by observing my father, I was able to apply this kind of relationship building and leadership in my first job after I graduated from college. I became the director of a ground transportation company of 70 employees and a fleet of 120 vehicles. Knowing that trust is the basis for a relationship, I established trust with my employees. Relationships then followed. The drivers served as

ambassadors for the company while they drove customers. The relationship building allowed me to have organizational trust, which expanded our operations and drew on the strengths of the drivers. I highly value my five years of experience with the company for the experience in business, organizational change, leadership, and organizational structures. Bolman and Deal (2003) have identified the four structures of an organization as the Structural Frame, the Human Resource Frame, the Political Frame, and the Symbolic Frame. Whether in business or in education, the key to success is in the ability to build relationships. As a teacher in an alternative school, the students' success often depends on the teachers' ability to build relationships.

Economic Change, Society, and Education

Relationships are critical to student success. Relationships equate to connection with, sense of belonging to, caring for and trust. More than ever, it seems that positive teacher-student relationships are needed for student success at school. Over the past few decades, schools have changed, correlating to a change in the economy. School and education change when the economy and markets change.

“Education serves not only students and their families, but also social, political, and economic needs of our nation, and so it is influenced by many sources outside the educational sphere” (Walker & Lambert, 1995, p. 2). During the Colonial time period, education assisted citizens for religious purposes, citizenship, and conformity to the government. From the American Revolution until the Industrial Age, education provided citizens with a basic education, ideals of democracy and government, and good citizenship. During the time of the Industrial Revolution, workers were needed for the factories. Citizens were educated with basic schooling and ideals of good citizenry. By the turn of the 19th

century, the United States was the most industrialized nation of the world. Skilled workers were needed more than unskilled workers. By the early 20th century, jobs could be found in large sprawling cities across America. People moved from rural places to urban centers to fill the factory positions. American companies became international corporations, spreading American economic sphere of influence to other markets. Factories needed workers that were hardworking, able to follow orders, and with a basic education of reading and writing.

During this time, compulsory education was standard through the eighth grade. Thus, most individuals dropped out after completion of the eighth grade. Many citizens would begin their life with the 8th grade education. Other citizens were tracked for post-secondary education and attended high school. After the Second World War, the United States experienced nearly two decades with little to no global economic or consumer competition. Following the War, the Allies and Axis nations and their economies had been destroyed or severely weakened. Being the most industrialized nation since the turn of the twentieth century and now in a period of little competition, U.S. companies entered a time of complacency, not only in manufacturing quality, but in education as well as other areas. However, the war-torn nations' economies revitalized in the 1960s, and the U.S. found itself in a globally competitive market place. Currently, in the Post-Industrial Age of our Information and Technology Age, the markets are globally competitive and the need is for highly skilled workers. These highly skilled workers also need to be highly educated, with skills in communication, ability to work in groups/teams, and problem-solving thinking. Thus, over the past few decades, schools have slowly evolved to meet our capitalist needs. American corporations also changed. With more technology and more highly skilled workers, fewer people can produce more. Thus, companies downsized. In order to be

globally competitive, companies and corporations need to keep long-term costs down and be efficient. Gone are the days of a person dropping out of school to obtain a career-long job at a factory with comfortable salary, retirement, health insurance, and pensions. Citizens may work at many jobs at several companies over their lifetimes. Numerous career changes have become commonplace. Thus, education, including learning to learn, is a high priority. Thus, the role of alternative high school in providing quality education to all students, including the students that did not experience success in the larger traditional or comprehensive high schools, is vital.

Alternative Education

Most of today's workers will no longer have a life-long position with one company. A high school drop-out has a much more difficult time maintaining a steady income and earning power. Dropping out of high school offers few options for students. However, as previously discussed, not all students experience success in a traditional high school or, as they are currently referred to, a comprehensive high school. One viable option for success is the alternative schools. Alternative schools bridge the gap and provide an avenue for potential success with post-secondary education for high school students. Alternative schools in the Midwest began in the late 1970s and 1980s. By the 1990s, alternative schools were commonly found in the urban areas of large metropolitan cities. By the mid-1990s, alternative schools were found in most urban and suburban school districts. Alternative schools vary from district to district.

Alternative schools are demonstrating success with students that previously had not experienced success in their large high schools. More often than not, the students did not have a relationship with one caring adult at the large school previously attended. Students

report that they did not feel the support they needed; that if they were absent, no one noticed; and they felt that teachers did not have the time to address their needs. Often at large schools, students that are struggling learners with no behavior issues can fall through the cracks of the school. Students that are marginalized become at risk of not graduating.

For alternative schools, the small school environment, smaller student-teacher class ratio, and the feeling that adults care and support students can make a huge difference. Relationship building through Advisory, school-wide field trips/activities, and positive recognition are all key components to students feeling connected and having a sense of belonging. Providing students with much needed support in academic skills, behavior support and planning, and skills for life is possible in the smaller setting. Alternative schools need to provide a school culture that is safe and academically challenging, with opportunities to participate, giving students a sense of ownership of the school and the feeling of at least one caring adult as an advocate. This happens through the adults of the school and their ability to build relationships with students. A relationship from a caring adult needs to be established, supported, and maintained in order to give the student opportunity for success at school. It is the relationship that serves as the guide to success.

Relationships and Student Engagement

As discussed throughout this research study, positive teacher-student relationships positively impact students' success at school. Success is defined differently, depending on the student's previous experiences. If schools are looked at as communities, that involves relationships. Good human communities are based on trust. Caring relationships promote behaviors that enhance the philosophy of the school. As a rule, students respond positively when they feel respected and are shown care. Students and all individuals want to feel

valued and cared for. The relationship between student and teacher impacts students' feelings.

When students make a lasting connection with at least one caring adult, academic and personal outcomes improve. A significant adult who provides support and direction during difficult times is an important factor in helping students avoid academic failure and a variety of other problems. (Galassi, Gullledge, & Cox, cited in Jackson & Davis, p. 143)

The relationships are the vehicle to transcend obstacles road-blocking learning. Students bring with them old assumptions and experiences of not experiencing success. We have discovered, not surprisingly, that these assumptions can only be broken within the context of trust, relationships, and self-discovery. Without this trusting and supportive environment, teachers would encounter defensiveness from struggling learners (Lambert, 1995).

Recommendations for Policy Change

This school year, I have had the opportunity to spend time visiting with representatives from neighboring school districts that are seeking to begin an alternative high school. In one of those conversations that lasted for about two hours, the representative asked me for the best way to actually get started designing an alternative school. My reply to her was to establish a clear mission, vision, and philosophy for alternative education for the district leaders, stakeholders, and the community. Understanding and recognizing the purpose of alternative education, with the stakeholders having ownership for the school's purpose, is the best possible way to begin. From there, it is essential to have a leader with the philosophy, understanding, and experience to guide a school. The teachers, too, have to be high-quality staff who have ability in relationship building and who are passionate about students and learning. Alternative schools that become dumping grounds for the senior high

school(s) or schools unsupported by the district's central office will take years of hard work under long-term leadership to turn around the framework of understanding.

From my observations and lived experiences in alternative education as a teacher and principal, recommendations that can be transposed from alternative schools to any school include three aspects: people, the school, and the organization. Alternative schools need caring adults; adult/advocates; teachers that build relationships; teachers who are well-trained, highly motivated, and responsive to student needs; teachers with high levels of professionalism; support staff that understand the importance of relationship building; and a building-wide adult culture in which relationships are based on trust. Students recognize if the climate of the school is caring and supportive of their needs. The school needs to be a small school environment, have a grounding/advisory time, common language, building-wide structures, activities for student engagement, positive student recognition, instruction that is rigorous and relevant, accountability of student behavior that in a supportive way, behavior support for student change, and academic support for struggling learners. Academic support is the key to the success of the students. Often student behavior and attendance is directly related back to their academics. Providing continuity of support for their learning is a must. Also, providing an internal structure within the school, such as a recovery room, is a key component to outlasting the student behavior and changing behavior.

From an organizational point of view, additional factors related to alternative education need to be considered, such as:

1. Alternative schools need to be schools of choice;
2. Alternative schools should be supported by district leaders;
3. Building leadership should have experience in alternative education;

4. Alternative schools should have high-quality teachers with high levels of professionalism; and

5. Alternative schools should be autonomous to effectively serve the at-risk students within that school district.

Implications, the Need for Further Research, and Conclusion

Learning from the experiences of other individuals is a human character trait that is most admirable. As an individual, observing, learning, listening, and reflecting on the lived experiences of other individuals can be a meaningful and powerful experience. The lived experiences of the teachers of the focus group illustrated their superior ability to build relationships with students in an alternative high school and use that relationship as a vehicle to guide the student to success. The findings of the teachers of the focus group correlate with the decades of research on teacher-student relationships and how they positively impact students' learning and success at school. They stand as the core of the teaching staff at their school. Their leadership is recognized.

The implications of this research study reinforce the work of other researchers. The stories of the focus group teachers can highlight the success of one alternative school. The school now can serve as a model for change in organization to be a reflection of alternative educational philosophy. Application of the lessons learned can be shared with all schools including alternative schools, comprehensive high schools, middle and junior high schools, and elementary schools. The over-arching theme is adults building relationships with their students. That should be taking place in all schools in all nations. The findings do not reveal any new concepts, but instead confirm current findings and expand the body of knowledge already established. From the teacher focus group, the emergent themes were adults relating

to the student on a human level with interactions that have relevance, adults being advocates for academic and behavior expectations, and engagement of students with opportunities provided by the school.

Alternative education is becoming more commonly accepted as an essential aspect of American education. As a result of success with students and the hard work of leaders and teachers in alternative schools, communities and school district leaders are embracing the philosophy of alternative schools with the support they need. Success for all students with a high-quality education, with high-quality teachers, in a school that is safe needs to be available to all students. Having teachers who care, who build trust, who build relationships with students and adults, and are instructional leaders will have positive impact on student success. Educators and adults who are professional and committed to the organization through solutions-based conversations are the anchors to a teaching staff. The teachers of this focus group illuminated their passion and sense of dedication to their students in an alternative high school.

Alternative education is a reflection of change. The need for all citizens to be prepared for post-secondary education calls for alternative education. It creates the balance and fills the voids left by traditional schools and comprehensive high schools. Change has occurred in the past decade, with alternative education transforming itself from marginalized schools to essential schools serving a vital role within the school district. Their work is being recognized more and more by their districts' leaders, through the success of the school. Administrators in alternative schools have advocated for alternative education more than their staffs will ever know. The success can be shared by all. The success of the school is through the success of its students. Alternative Schools can be, should be, and are essential

to any school district. All students deserve a high-quality education. All school districts deserve a high-performing alternative school. Moselle Academy now serves as such a school, for their district, community, and students. It has taken many years of hard work to transform one alternative school. It continues to be an ever-changing and improving school.

In closing, the lasting impact is that I will always take the time to build a relationship with every person around me and all individuals that I encounter as part of my daily work and life. Taking the time to listen and engage in conversation is key to fostering trust and the kindling of a relationship. One may never know the importance or long-term impact of the power of a relationship; therefore you continually should be actively building relationships with all individuals around you in the course of your interactions with others.

I leave the reader with a quote from one of the teachers from the teacher focus group. She is one of the two original teachers from the school's first year in 1996. She stated:

Mrs. Moore: As I look back over the years. We started with three classrooms and twenty students. We have grown to where we are now. Look at what we've done right and what we've done wrong. I am just amazed at the transition and growth. We are part of watching our children grow. We plant a seed. Somebody else may come along and water it, but we believe in what we do.

APPENDIX A
LETTERS OF APPROVAL
CONSENT/ASSENT FORMS

District Consent for Permission to Conduct a Research Study

A Qualitative Study of Relationship Building Between Alternative High School Students and Their Teachers

Principal Investigator:

Robert Cordell: University of Missouri- Kansas City, School of Education
Department of Urban Leadership and Educational Policy Studies

Consent for Permission

I am requesting permission to conduct a research project in your District. The study will examine relationship building through the teachers' lived experiences and student perception. The research project a phenomenological, narratological, heuristic study is to understand the phenomenon of relationship building between teachers and students in an alternative high school in a suburban school district. The project will gain an understanding of how teachers in an alternative high school build positive relationships with students how had previously experienced little success at school, often felt marginalized, and gain an understanding of how that relationship becomes the tool to allow students to experience success in the classroom. Relationship Building also entails examining aspects of the school that create a sense of belongingness to the school.

Who will Participate

An estimated ten to twenty students, ages fifteen through nineteen, that are full-time students at the school will participate. Their participation will be by filling out a ten question questionnaire. The questionnaire's purpose is to gather qualitative information from students on various program elements of our school. The program elements of the school are a part of the school environment that creates a sense of feeling and belongingness to school. The teacher participation will include the teaching staff of nine teachers. The same questions will be administered to them for collection of qualitative information. Of the teachers, a group of three will be purposefully selected for in-depth interviews. The in-depth interview may last from two to three hours with the purpose of gaining a rich description of their lived experiences pertaining to relationship building with students in an alternative school.

Purpose

The project will gain an understanding of how teachers in an alternative high school build positive relationships with students how had previously experienced little success at school, often felt marginalized, and gain an understanding of how that relationship becomes the tool to allow students to experience success in the classroom.

The research questions for this study are: What do students and teachers perceive are characteristics that teachers, within an alternative high school setting, need to have to promote positive relationships with students? How do students and teachers perceive that program elements, within an alternative school setting, impact the relationship between teachers and students and their connection to school?

Description of Procedures

For student participants, a letter of consent will be sent to the parents for approval to participate by filling out the ten question questionnaire. Students that have a signed consent

to participate by their parents will be allowed to fill out the questionnaire. This is the only participation needed or required by the student participants. The survey should not take more than thirty minutes. The questions that will be asked are;

1. Please describe how Grounding Time has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
2. Please describe how the monthly school-wide field trip or activity has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
3. Please describe how the monthly Character Trait of the Month and Positive Referrals has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
4. Please describe how the Discovery Class has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
5. Please describe how the Positive School Assembly has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
6. Please describe how Academic Support has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
7. Please describe how Behavior Support has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
8. Success looks different for everyone. What does success at school look like to you?
9. How has our school played a role in your success?
10. What characteristics would you list in high-quality teachers?

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary at all times. Participants may choose not to participate or to withdraw their participation at any time. Deciding not to participate or choosing to leave the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits. If participants decide to leave the study, the information they have already provided in the questionnaire will be retained by the principal investigator in a safely filed area.

Fees and Expenses

There are no monetary costs to the District or Participants.

Compensation

There will not be compensation for participation in this study.

Risks and Inconveniences

No physical or psychological/emotional risks are associated with this study.

Benefits

Benefits from this study for the participants may include the personal reflections and or connections made through sharing of their lived experiences and perspectives on relationship building between teachers and students. This study will benefit other teachers, educators, and administrators on alternative education and the role of relationship building with students as well as a school environment that promotes a sense of belonging.

Alternative to Study Participation

The alternative is to not to grant permission to conduct this study.

Confidentiality

Data collected will include qualitative information in written form from the ten question questionnaire, teacher questionnaire, classroom observations, and teacher interview transcripts. These stories, interviews, and observational data will be confidential and anonymity will be maintained. Individual names will not be used, the school’s name will not be used, and the district’s name will not be used. While every effort will be made to keep confidential all of the information, it cannot be absolutely guaranteed. Individuals from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Institutional Review Board, Research Protections Program, Federal regulatory agencies, or my UMKC Doctoral Committee may look at records related to this study for quality improvement and regulatory functions. Original qualitative information, interview transcripts, and observation notes will be archived by the principal investigator.

In Case of Injury

The University of Missouri-Kansas City appreciates the participation of people who help it carry out its function of developing knowledge through research. If you have any questions about the study please call Robert Cordell, the investigator, at (816)

Questions

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact the principal investigator:
Robert Cordell- University of Missouri-Kansas City, School of Education
Department of Urban Leadership and Educational Policy Studies
Phone: (816) or (816)

Authorization

Your signature is indication that you have granted permission for the primary investigator to conduct this research study in your District.

Superintendent’s Signature: _____

Superintendent’s Name: Mr. Date: _____

Principal Investigator Signature: _____

Principal Investigator’s Name: Robert Cordell Date: _____

Building Consent for Permission to Conduct a Research Study

A Qualitative Study of Relationship Building Between Alternative High School Students and Their Teachers

Principal Investigator:

Robert Cordell: University of Missouri- Kansas City, School of Education
Department of Urban Leadership and Educational Policy Studies

Consent for Permission

I am requesting permission to conduct a research project in the alternative school. The study will examine relationship building through the teachers' lived experiences and student perception. The research project a phenomenological, narratological, heuristic study is to understand the phenomenon of relationship building between teachers and students in an alternative high school in a suburban school district. The project will gain an understanding of how teachers in an alternative high school build positive relationships with students how had previously experienced little success at school, often felt marginalized, and gain an understanding of how that relationship becomes the tool to allow students to experience success in the classroom. Relationship Building also entails examining aspects of the school that create a sense of belongingness to the school.

Who will Participate

An estimated ten to twenty students, ages fifteen through nineteen, that are full-time students at the school will participate. Their participation will be by filling out a ten question questionnaire. The questionnaire's purpose is to gather qualitative information from students on various program elements of our school. The program elements of the school are a part of the school environment that creates a sense of feeling and belongingness to school. The teacher participation will include the teaching staff of nine teachers. The same questions will be administered to them for collection of qualitative information. Of the teachers, a group of three will be purposefully selected for in-depth interviews. The in-depth interview may last from two to three hours with the purpose of gaining a rich description of their lived experiences pertaining to relationship building with students in an alternative school.

Purpose

The project will gain an understanding of how teachers in an alternative high school build positive relationships with students how had previously experienced little success at school, often felt marginalized, and gain an understanding of how that relationship becomes the tool to allow students to experience success in the classroom.

The research questions for this study are: What do students and teachers perceive are characteristics that teachers, within an alternative high school setting, need to have to promote positive relationships with students? How do students and teachers perceive that program elements, within an alternative school setting, impact the relationship between teachers and students and their connection to school?

Description of Procedures

For student participants, a letter of consent will be sent to the parents for approval to participate by filling out the ten question questionnaire. Students that have a signed consent

to participate by their parents will be allowed to fill out the questionnaire. This is the only participation needed or required by the student participants. The survey should not take more than thirty minutes. The questions that will be asked are;

1. Please describe how Grounding Time has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
2. Please describe how the monthly school-wide field trip or activity has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
3. Please describe how the monthly Character Trait of the Month and Positive Referrals has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
4. Please describe how the Discovery Class has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
5. Please describe how the Positive School Assembly has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
6. Please describe how Academic Support has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
7. Please describe how Behavior Support has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
8. Success looks different for everyone. What does success at school look like to you?
9. How has our school played a role in your success?
10. What characteristics would you list in high-quality teachers?

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary at all times. Participants may choose not to participate or to withdraw their participation at any time. Deciding not to participate or choosing to leave the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits. If participants decide to leave the study, the information they have already provided in the questionnaire will be retained by the principal investigator in a safely filed area.

Fees and Expenses

There are no monetary costs to the District or Participants.

Compensation

There will not be compensation for participation in this study.

Risks and Inconveniences

No physical or psychological/emotional risks are associated with this study.

Benefits

Benefits from this study for the participants may include the personal reflections and or connections made through sharing of their lived experiences and perspectives on relationship building between teachers and students. This study will benefit other teachers, educators, and administrators on alternative education and the role of relationship building with students as well as a school environment that promotes a sense of belonging.

Alternative to Study Participation

The alternative is to not to grant permission to conduct this study.

Parent or Student Permission Form
Student Consent/ Assent for Participation in a Research Study
A Qualitative Study of Relationship Building Between Alternative High School
Students and Their Teachers

Principal Investigator:

Mr. Robert Cordell: University of Missouri- Kansas City, School of Education
Department of Urban Leadership and Educational Policy Studies

Consent and or Assent for Permission to Participate

Students are invited to participate in a research study to examine relationship building between teachers and students in an alternative high school in a Midwest suburban school district. The study will examine relationship building through the students enrolled at the alternative school.

The Purpose

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how teachers in an alternative high school build positive relationships with students and gain an understanding of how that relationship becomes the tool to allow students to experience success in the classroom. Relationship Building also entails examining aspects of the school that create a sense of belongingness to the school.

The research questions for this study are: What do students and teachers perceive are characteristics that teachers, within an alternative high school setting, need to have to promote positive relationships with students? How do students and teachers perceive that program elements, within an alternative school setting, impact the relationship between teachers and students and their connection to school?

Who will Participate

Any of the eighty full-time students attending the school are eligible to participate. A signed consent form with your parent signature or the student assent to participate by student signature is the only requirement. **Student participation will be by filling out a ten question questionnaire.** The questionnaire's purpose is to gather information from students on various program elements of the school. The program elements of the school are a part of the school environment that creates a sense of feeling and belongingness to school. Again, the only participation needed is through the ten question questionnaire.

Description of Procedures

For student participants, a letter of consent will be sent to the parents for approval to participate or student assent to participate by their signature. Students that have a signed consent/ assent to participate will be asked to fill out the questionnaire. **This is the only participation needed or required by the student participants.** The survey should not take more than thirty minutes. The questions that will be asked are;

1. Please describe how Grounding Time (homeroom time focused on relationship building) has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
2. Please describe how the monthly school-wide field trip or activity has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?

3. Please describe how the monthly Character Trait of the Month and Positive Referrals has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
4. Please describe how the Discovery Class has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
5. Please describe how the Positive School Assembly has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
6. Please describe how Academic Support has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
7. Please describe how Behavior Support has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
8. Success looks different for everyone. What does success at school look like to you?
9. How has our school played a role in your success?
10. What characteristics would you list in high-quality teachers?

After consent/ assent form to participate is received, a survey with the above questions will be given to the student. The surveys will be returned to Mr. Cordell.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary at all times. Participants may choose not to participate or to withdraw their participation at any time. Deciding not to participate or to withdraw will result in no negative outcomes and no penalties. If participants decide to leave the study, the information they have already provided in the questionnaire will be retained by the principal investigator for data analysis.

Fees and Expenses

There are no monetary costs to you.

Compensation

You will not be compensated for participation in this study.

Risks and Inconveniences

No physical or psychological/emotional risks are associated with this study.

Benefits

Benefits from this study for the participants may include the personal reflections and or connections made through sharing of their lived experiences and perspectives on relationship building between teachers and students. This study will benefit other teachers, educators, and administrators on alternative education and the role of relationship building with students as well as a school environment that promotes a sense of belonging.

Alternative to Study Participation

The alternative is to not participate.

Confidentiality

All data collected will remain confidential and anonymous. No names will be attached to any information. Students will be asked not to place their name on the sheet. There is no connection between this survey and any class grade. Students' names will not be used, the school name will not be used, and the district's name will not be used. This information will

be stored by the principal investigator, this includes the questionnaire results. Data will be confidential and anonymity will be maintained. The information will be stored in a locked file cabinet for seven years following the conclusion of the research.

While every effort will be made to keep confidential all of the information, it cannot be absolutely guaranteed. Individuals from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Institutional Review Board, Research Protections Program, Federal regulatory agencies, or my UMKC Doctoral Committee may look at records related to this study for quality improvement and regulatory functions.

In Case of Injury

The University of Missouri-Kansas City appreciates the participation of people who help it carry out its function of developing knowledge through research. If you have any questions about the study please call Robert Cordell, the investigator, at (816)

Although it is not the University's policy to compensate or provide medical treatment for persons who participate in studies, if you think you have been injured as a result of participating in this study, please call the IRB Administrator of UMKC's Social Sciences Institutional Review Board at (816) 235-1764.

Questions

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact the principal investigator:

Mr. Robert Cordell- University of Missouri-Kansas City, School of Education

Department of Urban Leadership and Educational Policy Studies

Phone: (816)

Fax: (816)

Authorization

Your signature is indication that you have volunteered to participate in this research study. For student participation, either signature from the parent of consent or student signature of assent is necessary.

Student Signature: _____

Parent Signature: _____

Student Printed Name _____

Date: _____

Principal Investigator's Name: Mr. Robert Cordell

Teacher Permission Form
Consent for Participation in a Research Study
A Qualitative Study of Relationship Building Between Alternative High School
Students and Their Teachers
Principal Investigator:
Mr. Robert Cordell: University of Missouri- Kansas City, School of Education
Department of Urban Leadership and Educational Policy Studies

Consent for Permission to Participate

Teachers are invited to participate in a research study to examine relationship building between teachers and students in an alternative high school in a Midwest suburban school district. The study will examine relationship building through the students enrolled at the alternative school.

Purpose

The goal is to gain an understanding on how various program elements of our school and a positive teacher-student relationship helped you at school. The research project *A Qualitative Study of Relationship Building Between Alternative High School Students and Their Teachers* will gain an understanding of how teachers in an alternative high school build positive relationships with students and gain an understanding of how that relationship becomes the tool to allow students to experience success in the classroom. Relationship Building also entails examining aspects of the school that create a sense of belongingness to the school.

The research questions for this study are: What do students and teachers perceive are characteristics that, within an alternative high school setting, need to have to promote positive relationships with students? How do students and teachers perceive that program elements, within an alternative school setting, impact the relationship between teachers and students and their connection to school?

Who will Participate

All Classroom teachers of the school are eligible to participate. A potential of nine classrooms teachers of the school may be participating. A signed consent form with the teacher's signature is the only requirement.

Description of Procedures

For participants, teachers that have a signed consent to participate will be allowed to fill out the questionnaire. The survey should not take more than thirty to sixty minutes. The questions that will be asked are;

1. Please describe how Grounding Time has influenced your learning and relationships with students?
2. Please describe how the monthly school-wide field trip or activity has influenced your learning and relationships with students?
3. Please describe how the monthly Character Trait of the Month and Positive Referrals has influenced your learning and relationships with students?

4. Please describe how the Discovery Class has influenced your learning and relationships with students?
5. Please describe how the Positive School Assembly has influenced your learning and relationships with students?
6. Please describe how Academic Support has influenced your learning and relationships with students?
7. Please describe how Behavior Support has influenced your learning and relationships with students?
8. Success looks different for everyone. What does success at school look like to you (for the students)?
9. How has our school played a role in success for students?
10. What are characteristics would you identify in high-quality teachers?

For the teacher participants, of the nine potential classroom teachers, a small focus group will be selected to participate in an in-depth interview. The in-depth interview will be two to three hours in length and its purpose will be to gather a thick rich description of how teachers go about the process of building relationships with students, using relationships for attaining student success, and the process of creating an environment that promotes success for students. This interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. This interview will be analyzed by the investigator for common threads or themes that teachers engage in for relationship building with students. The interview will be semi-structured to commence, and then allow to process into a free-flowing open dialogue for gathering lived experience of teachers in an alternative high school.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary at all times. Participants may choose not to participate or to withdraw their participation at any time. Deciding not to participate or to withdraw will result in no negative outcomes and no penalties. If participants decide to leave the study, the information they have already provided in the questionnaire will be retained by the principal investigator for data analysis. There are no employment consequences if you decide to participate or if you decide not to participate.

Fees and Expenses

There are no monetary costs to you.

Compensation

You will not be compensated for participation in this study.

Risks and Inconveniences

No physical or psychological/emotional risks are associated with this study.

Benefits

Benefits from this study for the participants may include the personal reflections and or connections made through sharing of their lived experiences and perspectives on relationship building between teachers and students. This study will benefit other teachers, educators, and administrators on alternative education and the role of relationship building with students as well as a school environment that promotes a sense of belonging.

Alternative to Study Participation

The alternative is to not participate.

Confidentiality

All data collected will remain confidential and anonymous. There will be no names attached to any information. The teachers' names will not be used, the school's name will not be used, and the district's name will not be used. This information will be stored by the principal investigator, this includes the questionnaire results. Data will be confidential and anonymity will be maintained. The information will be stored in a locked file cabinet for seven years following the research's conclusion.

While every effort will be made to keep confidential all of the information, it cannot be absolutely guaranteed. Individuals from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Institutional Review Board, Research Protections Program, Federal regulatory agencies, or my UMKC Doctoral Committee may look at records related to this study for quality improvement and regulatory functions.

In Case of Injury

The University of Missouri-Kansas City appreciates the participation of people who help it carry out its function of developing knowledge through research. If you have any questions about the study please call Robert Cordell, the investigator, at (816)

Although it is not the University's policy to compensate or provide medical treatment for persons who participate in studies, if you think you have been injured as a result of participating in this study, please call the IRB Administrator of UMKC's Social Sciences Institutional Review Board at (816) 235-1764.

Questions

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact the principal investigator:

Robert Cordell- University of Missouri-Kansas City, School of Education

Department of Urban Leadership and Educational Policy Studies

Phone: (816)

Fax: (816)

Authorization

Your signature is indication that you have volunteered to participate in this research study.

Teacher Participant Signature: _____

Teacher Participant Printed Name: _____

Date _____

Principal Investigator's Name: Mr. Robert Cordell

Version Date: June 3, 2010

APPENDIX B

SURVEY QUESTIONS: STUDENTS/TEACHERS

DATA COLLECTED FROM STUDENT SURVEYS

DATA COLLECTED FROM TEACHER SURVEYS

Survey Questions: Students/Teachers

1. Please describe how Grounding Time has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
2. Please describe how the monthly school-wide field trip or activity has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
3. Please describe how the monthly Character Trait of the Month and Positive Referrals has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
4. Please describe how the Discovery Class has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
5. Please describe how the Positive School Assembly has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
6. Please describe how Academic Support has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
7. Please describe how Behavior Support has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
8. Success looks different for everyone. What does success at school look like to you?
9. How has our school played a role in your success?
10. What characteristics would you list in high-quality teachers?

Survey Data
Teacher and Student Survey

Question 1

Please describe how Grounding Time has influenced your learning and relationships with students.

“Grounding time has influenced my learning by giving me a positive start to my day and helped me to connect with other students and teachers.”

“Grounding helped relieve a ton of stress.”

“It has helped me a lot when I’ve been upset or had a bad day. It helps me express my feelings when I need to express them.”

“Grounding has help me when I have been down, sad and not have the best day.”

“Grounding has influenced me a lot. It has allowed me to not just sit down and talk about the bad that happens in my life, but also the good. Only thing that grounding requires is willingness which is good. Grounding has turned some bad days into good days. This everyday group setting has allowed me to build a strong bond with my teacher. Overall it’s a good source of encouragement.”

“It helped me by letting me feel comfortable with my teacher.”

“Grounding time has influenced me by helping me by helping me create stronger bonds with other students at the school.”

“Grounding time helped me because it gave me a safe place where I could express how I feel.”

“Grounding Time helps me to get to know my teachers and they take the time to help me whenever I have a personal issue.”

“I have attended this school for two years and found the grounding process to be odd and new to me. I bonded more with my teachers and peers in grounding than I would have in class and thought it was a positive way to connect with my teacher.”

“It helps bring us students closer and helps releave [sic] stress. You hear someone’s problems it makes you want to find a way to help them and it gives them someone to lean on if times are hard.”

“It has given me a chance to get closer to my teacher and classmates I have made a bond with them and learned a lot about them and from them.”

“Grounding time has influenced me in so many ways. It taught me to open up, and get to know the teachers more.”

“It helped us connect with the teachers as well as the students to reflect on the day.”

“Grounding helps the students relax better, and strengthens the bond between the teacher and student.”

“Grounding Time helps everyone get to know each other and if the teachers knows more about you, chances are you will build a strong relationship.”

“I love grounding time. It gave you a chance to get to know the teachers better and not just seen them as teachers, but as human beings. For me, I can focus better on school since I have grounding to talk about things that are bothering me, etc.”

“Grounding was good for getting to know people more. It influenced my relationship with the teachers a lot.”

The teacher responses were typed from the survey form to this text as they appeared. The teacher responses were:

“Grounding has improved my relationships with my students by providing a safe place to openly talk about subjects that are not discussed in a normal classroom situation. My students are very honest about my failings and reflect my best points as well. This grounds me and gives me a base from which to grow as a teacher. I learn things about them that might not normally be discussed. This trust bond allows me to have a deeper relationship with my students. When I need to say something they don’t want to hear, I can, without the student feeling “picked on” or that the comment is personal.”

- 1) “Learn: Understanding the background and challenges of my students, even the daily events that might affect learning for that day.
Also understanding family dynamics and how they influence the way a student responds to class work or discipline.
- 2) Relationships—improved relationships allow for student feelings of safety. They are more willing to take criticism and critique from me—more willing to try something hard. To work harder.”

“Grounding Time has allowed me to get to know my students on a more personal basis, not only their likes/dislikes but also issues that require a level of trust to share such as experiencing a close death, trying to quit smoking pot, struggles in dating relationships.”

“Grounding time has given me the opportunity to know the students as people, not just students. I know what bothers them and interests them. It helps me know when to make allowances and how to motivate them. I can be more patient and understanding if needed. On the other hand, I can hold them accountable more easily.”

“Has given me a greater insight to the students’ personal and academic lives, which in turn helps me communicate more effectively with them, their families, and our staff.”

“Grounding time allows me to get to know my students on a more personal level. It is kind of like therapy sessions where we can express the good and bad parts of our day. Everything expressed during grounding time is confidential, so this creates a trusting relationship among teachers and students.”

Question 2

Please describe how the monthly school-wide field trips have influenced your learning and relationships with students.

The student response are:

“The monthly school-wide field trips or activity has influenced my learning how to understand others and how to have teamwork with others.”

“School field trips were great and educational. It showed teachers really care.”

“It has helped me with learning because we are in a new environment and it’s something new/fresh.”

“It has made us bond more/learning wise it was different but helpful.”

“The school wide field trips have been great. I think the best field trip would be to Tucker Leadership Course. I think this because we the students go to get involved with each other and also the teachers. This field trip really showed the teachers the Academy, and other strengths and weaknesses.”

“It was cool to see them out of school”

“The monthly field trips has help me learn more about diversity in todays society and throughout history.”

“The monthly field trips helped me get closer to the teachers because it gave me a chance to interact and get to know the teachers more.”

“The monthly field trips help me get on more of a personal level with my teachers. It shows me what they do and don’t like and I get to hear their opinions outside of school.”

“My relationship w/ my teachers was not effected by the monthly field trip really.”

“It gives me a chance to bond with the teachers and to learn about why they became a teacher.”

“The field trips were fun, and helped me learn a lot [sic]. The teachers talked to me about any information I did not get.”

“It made things a more hands on experience and gave more activities a realistic and comfortable experience”

“The field trips are the same way. They help us relax and have some fun at school, which strengthens the bond with teachers.”

“I loved going on field trips with the Academy. You learn a lot and become closer to everyone around you.”

“The field trips were great ideas. I think it gives the students a chance to learn outside of the school building, like a breath of fresh air. It’s a different setting for the students and teachers.”

The teacher responses are as followed:

“Most of the students enjoy the all school field trips. Sharing this group activity is often the discussion point for grounding both before and after the event. Questions often come up that require we do a bit of research. This sharing of food and experiences, bonds the group closer.”

“Field trips have allowed me to visit with students in an informal setting Learning is fun and I am able to model the excitement of learning something new—and I celebrate another students experiences.”

“The field trips and activities have generated greater friendships among the students (thus the increase in safety) and improved my relationships. Students get to see me in a different environment and allow for more meaningful conversations.”

“It has provided an avenue that allows us to positively “socialize” with students. By getting to know them as people and for them to see us as people too, a break of sorts from the traditional teacher/student relationship and to both be learners together.”

“This is another opportunity to interact with the students as people. They see us as people as well. It’s a less formal learning environment, one in which the teachers are also learning. Since we teachers enjoy learning, that sends a message about the intrinsic value of learning.”

“Broadens our students’ social, cultural, and academic well-being.”

“School-wide field trips and activities allow teachers and students to learn different cultures, historical aspects, arts and crafts, etc. This in return creates a bond outside of a regular classroom setting.”

Question 3

Please describe how the monthly Character Trait of the Month and Positive Referrals has influenced your learning and relationships with students.

Student Responses:

“Character trait and positive referrals have influenced me by trying to be the best person I can be and positive referrals help to make me feel good.”

“It gave me more reasons to try harder.”

“These are always great. When you are chosen, it motivates you to keep moving and succeeding.”

“Being called up for character trait is amazing. It makes me want to be called up for all of them.”

“The Character Trait was very helpful to me. Every month was different so it allowed me to really show a different side of me every month.”

“It made me want to get a award”

“This has helped me by trying harder to get the prize at the end of the month”

“The monthly character trait helped me to use the positive things about me to my advantage.”

“The positive referrals have influenced my learning and relationships with teachers because sometimes the teachers will tell you when you have been doing good at working on the character trait of the month and it helps you feel good.”

“The monthly character trait assembly positively reinforced my relationships with my teachers because I realized they cared enough to recognize me for something, i.e. a reward.”

“It shows how to build a strong and positive attitude when a teacher awards you. It makes you want to be a better student.”

“It makes me feel like I’m doing something right.”

“They made me more confident about myself, and the teachers made me succeed.”

“It helped students by influencing themselves to do better.”

“I was glad that I’d been recognized, and teachers were glad that I was doing well.”

“I think if students have something to look forward to get rewards they will try harder because students feel there is nothing to try for.”

“I love that stuff. It’s awesome that the teachers, etc., take the time to recognize the students for their efforts.”

“You know when your doing something well.”

The teacher responses:

“Students who receive an award for a positive trait or received a positive referral are often students who lack self-esteem. Many of the Academy students have never received praise at school so hold these awards in great regard. Talking to them after they have received an award I find that they have bonded with staff. They feel they are valuable and have something positive to add. This good feeling is often a way to break through to the students during difficult times. I have learned that community is the place where real tangible learning can occur.”

“As a teacher of resume’s it is often difficult to get the students to think positively about themselves starting with the Character Trait as been wonderful, even if they don’t with them they are more familiar with positive characteristics. As for relationships with students, as they portray these traits and teachers recognize them they appreciate and one (such as I) more open to the teacher.”

“It has challenged me to really examine and look for the seemingly little things we often take for granted. It also provides ways to give kudos to students who wouldn’t normally be able to be recognized in a traditional setting.”

“The Character Trait of the Month is a good tool for helping teachers focus on the positive. It gives us a specific tool for acknowledging positive behaviors. As we try to

shape the behaviors of our students, it is as vital to teach the appropriate behaviors as it is to teach them what not to do.”

“Helps the staff focus on the positive aspects of our students and allows for recognition our students would not normally get.”

“Monthly Character Traits and positive referrals allow me to recognize which students are being good role models and helping others. This display of affection can rub off on some students that seek negative attention.”

Question 4

Please describe how the Discovery Class has influenced your learning and relationships with students.

The student responses were:

“Discovery Class helped me to have a positive attitude and to tell me how to handle day to day situations.”

“Discovery was a real fun class its very interesting. Its like a anger management in a way but a fun one. The teacher was great. She really brought out the fun sides of Discovery.”

“Good class, but no teacher/student bond there”

“The Discovery Class helped me learn how to properly behave in a business settings”

“The Discovery class helped me to control my anger more and not to blow up.”

“It has taught me how to manage my skills and to be the adult in a stressful situation.”

“They made me more confident about myself, and the teachers made me succeed.”

“Personally I think it covered subjects that didn’t seem as important as a core class.”

“Discovery helped the different classes bond with each other, and taught us valuable social skills.”

“Discovery helps you with life skills it teaches you how to handle your anger to have better relationships with people.”

The teacher responses:

“Each of us and each of our students come to the Academy with a slightly different language. While the common language of Discovery is not my natural style of teaching, it is necessary for the students. Our students often have very chaotic home lives and need consistency from staff to feel safe and to learn. Discovery language and lessons give that consistency.”

“Discovery Class has been great. Students who took Discovery were more willing (because they understood it) to take BIST classroom direction, improving the safety in the classroom. Students don’t like disruptive students (even if they are one sometimes). The more I worked with the Discovery students, the more we both came to an understanding of appropriate classroom learning. ([student name] is a good example— hated being re-directed, in time Discovery and BIST, he became happier, had fewer temper tantrums)”

“It has provided a common language for building use and allows us to talk with kids in a means that typically de-escalates the situation.”

“It’s great to have a common language to address behaviors. Having some ready-made phrases really helps when kids shock you or catch you off guard. You can say the right thing automatically because you already know the words.”

“Has provided a foundation on which we can build, in regard to social and behavioral skills.”

“The Discovery class teaches students how to conduct themselves in the classroom and in society. This class really makes my job easier because I don’t have to deal with discipline problems as much.”

Question 5

Please describe how the Positive School Assembly has influenced your learning and relationships with students.

Student Responses:

“Positive School Assembly has influenced my learning by understanding what I could do better on.”

“Helped me try harder and was fun with teachers.”

“Those assembly’s are always fun. You get awards and compliments.”

“Being able to trust teachers.”

“Positive school assembly influenced me because it shows you who is doing the right things in school. Its even better to be the one getting the award it’s a great feeling.”

“It was a time to joke with teachers”

“Positive school assembly has influenced my learning and relationships with teachers by getting more break some to help others and honor others”

“The assemblys helped because it was a chance to praise everyone for their achievements.”

“The positive school assemblies make you feel like you’re actually being paid attention to by the teachers.”

“The positive school assembly helped me to realize our teachers really do care enough to take time out to nominate us or do things for us like the senior slide show. “

“Coming from a different school you don’t know to many people it can be awkward but with assembly you meet others and learn about teachers. It also brings you closer to other students.”

“It gives a connection when a teacher picks me for something it’s very sweet.”

“They influenced me to be a better person, and made me happy to be at school.”

“I think it kind of kept a neutral outcome throughout the year.”

“I also believe the school assemblies help the students wind down in school, and help with a relaxed bond between teachers.”

“I think the assemblies are awesome because they recognize kids strengthes and make them feel special.”

The teacher responses were:

“The positive school assemblies are a necessary part of the coming together of the students and staff. I have been humbled by the sheer joy I see in students who receive a small certificate from me. It takes so little time to say “you did a good job,” yet we don’t hear it often enough. “Thank you” or “congratulations” are easy to say, but hold great emotion. That you see, really see, a student gives them great power and self-esteem. They reflect this back and challenge staff to be better.”

“Students who are recognized for good work tend to like to live up to their reputations. When all students see their accomplishments I think it helps their feeling of worth—thus an improvement in learning (because they know they can). It gives the teacher another thing to compliment the student on, or encourage them to strive for. It is hard to measure but it is an important factor.”

“Everybody needs praise, so the kids like these assemblies, whether they’re too cool to admit it or not. We, as teachers, need the time to remember good things are happening here. Sometimes it just seems like hard work.”

“Provides another opportunity for student recognition & building cohesiveness.”

“I believe the assemblies provide another way to recognize our kids for the good things that they do and reinforces the positive mindset of our building-wide push.”

The sixth question of the survey was: Please describe how Academic Support has influenced your learning and relationships with students.

The student responses were:

“Academy Support helped by being able to pass classes with the best grades possible.”

“These teachers are amazing They make me feel like they really care about me passing.”

“The Academic Support at the Academy is excellent. Even though I had every teacher, even when I didn’t, they were still checking up on me.”

“Academic support has helped me achieve my goals in class”

“Because all the teachers helped with your work when you were having trouble”

“The one on one with the teachers without it I would not have been successful. They will help you get through the hard times and the bad.”

“I don’t like how everyone in the lab is always on my case about every little thing they don’t give me a chance to do anything.”

“The support helped me tremendously. The teachers did everything they could to help me. Mrs. [female teacher] went extremely overboard to help me, which was awesome.”

“The 1 on 1 as well as the teachers determination helped greatly.”

The teacher responses were:

“Often we have found that behavior issues are really academic issues so having an Academic support system built in is very helpful. Many of our students come to us with gaps in their knowledge base. The Academic support team can address issues one to one in ways that I cannot always do in class. Working with other staff to help a student provides a greater net so fewer issues slip past. My goal is to have the student leave my class feeling that school may be hard, but it is doable.”

“Academic Support seemed like the missing link to improve student relationships. Students get very defensive when they know they are failing and it is hard to connect with them. With an additional teacher working with them (one teacher just doesn’t have the time) they are more willing to try harder to succeed and I can have another opportunity to positively interact with them—in partnership with another teacher.”

“It has not impacted me much. I’ve always worked pretty closely with my students to help them pass.”

“Academic Support has given me concrete things to do to better help students be successful academically. When students see me really trying to help them they respond in kind and usually form a working relationship.”

Question 7

Please describe how the Behavior Support has influenced your learning and relationships with students.

The student responses:

“Behavior Support helped me by calming me down when I get angry.”

“The ways they handle the behavior is very different and affective.”

“It makes it seem as teachers were your second parents”

“Some of the rules at the Academy seemed like too much, but I tried to not break the rules anyway.”

“Behavior support has helped me by controlling my anger in class/business environments”

“I like the help when I am upset and they understand me”

“Taught me to understand the rules, and be respectful to them.”

“I wouldn’t know, but in some cases it seemed overegg rated in certain predicaments.”

“Behavioral support like the recovery room really helps students because it teaches them how to calm down and learn how to deal with people.”

The teacher responses:

“The behavior support team is a great asset to the students and the staff. The behavior team can take a very frustrated student and give him/her the time to cool off and calm down. When the student is ready, they can talk out the issues and look for solutions. Often by the time the students come back to me to process, a plan is in place and it takes very little time to get through the issues. This not only lets me help the student with the issue, it allows me to help the rest of the class while the student is calming down. Letting a student know that while their behavior is an issue, we still care about them and want them to feel safe is a great way to give the student what eh/she needs without disrupting the learning of others. This helps both students and staff owns their personal behaviors and plan on how to correct the issue(s).”

“Although it may seem strange that the more a student faces discipline the stronger the relations, it is true when discipline is truly ‘training’ rather than a punishment.”

“Behavior support provides structured guidance to the student and they understand better why teachers react the way they do. They understand their role in misbehavior and can improve. It is a win for the teacher and student, and my ability to connect with the student has improved. Learning how to do it correctly makes it positive.”

“Since I don’t really think fast when a kid is acting up, it’s great to have a plan. It helps me to take a student’s behavior in stride. If A, then B.”

“Bridges the gap that most of our students have between their home and school.

“Behavior Support allows me to help students recognize their triggers and to brainstorm how to help them make better choices with their actions in the future. They will often open up about what’s really going on as well.”

Question 8

Success looks different for everyone. What does success at school look like to you?

Student responses:

“Success looks like passing grades and trying to do your best at everything.”

“When you and your teacher work together.”

“Success to me is getting what needs to be finished, feeling good about yourself, and completing things.”

“Being involved in everything—schoolwork, rising your hand, everything.”

“What successes looks like to me is when you

- Keep your head up when everything is going wrong
- Help others
- Take advantage of every opportunity”

“Passing”

“Success in school should look like the Academy with positive learning environment”

“I think that success at school means coming to an alternative school and getting As and Bs cause I failed last year.”

“Success at school, for me, is coming to school and actually trying my best instead of just going through the motions. It also means having a good support system through teachers, friends, and other faculty.”

“Success at school is teachers impacting students’ lives in positive ways and helping them to learn valuable life skills.”

“Without this school I would not have graduated from high school. It helped get me back on my feet and finish up school. Success is I am proud of what I have been through and what I have accomplished.”

“Like the Academy”

“Achieving my goals/future”

“Feeling happy and comfortable where you end up.”

“Success is having a job “you want” and doing what you want in life.”

“Getting good grades, having a positive attitude, being successful, and caring about your future.”

“Good Grades, classes are enjoyable, get along with all the teachers.”

“Good grades”

Teacher responses:

“Success for me looks like students making progress. I do not so much care about grades as hope. If students know they understand more than they did coming in, if they know they can relate to the material and enjoy the process then my class has been a success. I want to keep being challenged by my students to find new ways of presenting the material. I want to see the “got it” look on their faces and see their joy in understanding what I am teaching.”

“Success for me is helping each student feel safe, valued and successful in her/her own right. I had a past graduate come up to me and say, ‘I will never go to college but I have a good job and a beautiful daughter and life is good. Thank you for helping me to see that.’ No teacher could ask for more.”

“Success means a student has gone from point A to point C. Some students have different points they can get to. A student may not graduate from the Academy, but maybe they learned something they will use for the rest of their life.”

“For some students, success is all getting all C- and graduating. For others, it’s getting a 4.0 and going on to MU. Some might want a good enough GED score to qualify for scholarships. Some kids actually want to learn something. Success is a student’s feeling good about himself and hopeful about the future. He/she should feel prepared with some control over life.”

“Growing professionally and measuring our growth from results (mastery of content).”

“For several students being able to follow the 3 BIST Life Goals is HUGE success. For others, it’s earning credits so they can graduate. And still for others, being successful means having a trusted adult in their life, making better choices, and becoming a mature young adult.”

Question 9

How has our school played a role in success for students?

➤ The Academy helped students succeed

The student data reads as follows:

“I love the Acad!”

“It gave me extra support and understanding that I needed.”
“By staying after school and working with me.”
“All Fs to A – B – Cs”
“The Academy is the reason why I have graduated today. Staff has played a big role in that.”
“By helping me succeed.”
“Your school has helped me graduate on time.”
“You guys were always there to help when I was having a rough day and helped me get through it.”
“Our school has helped me be successful because they actually pay attention and know when I’m stressed and when I’m struggling.”
“ helping me in every possible way to graduate.”
“I was very sick and almost died this school was there to help me. Without it I would be nothing.”
“They have helped me in every way possible and it means so much to me!”
“It was great!”
“It helped me set my life back on track.”
“The Academy is slower paced, but that’s actually what students need to get their work done.”
“It has helped me a lot and made me try to do better and made my grades very impressive because there is something to try for.”
“The Academy has helped me with a lot of my success. It’s not just about learning the stuff, it’s how we learn and making sure we understand.”
“Helped my grades and relationships with people”

The teacher responses from the surveys were:

“Our school works to improve learning for all of our students with high expectations and tremendous support. They get to see success in their life academically, sometimes for the first time.”
“We care for the “whole” student, not just their academics. We provide opportunities and the support to be successful. We give them a trusted adult to connect to.”
“I think we do a lot to help students feel good about themselves. Because we care so much and don’t give up on them, they can believe they are worth loving.”
“By teaching them accountability, we show them they have power over their actions.”
“Provided an alternative education which they most certainly need.”
“Our school has closed the achievement gap among our at-risk students in order for them to get on track to graduate.”

Caring is crucial to the full development of young adolescents. They need to see themselves as valued members of a group that offers mutual support and trusting relationships. They need to be praised and rewarded for earning success. They need to become socially competent individuals with the skills required to cope successfully in everyday life. They need to have hope for a promising future and the competencies required to take advantages of the opportunities society offers (Turning Points, 1989, p. 25).

Question 10

What characteristics would you identify in high-quality teachers?

Student responses:

“Caring, understanding, patient”

“Understanding, caring, support”

“Motivation, responsibility, caring, and compassion”

“Respect, outgoing, good listener, helper, someone who uses their blessings to be a blessing”

“Funny, happy”

“Characteristics in a teacher should be positive attitude towards students and always offering help.”

“Patient, caring”

“Sense of humor, understanding, confident, friendly, smart, out-going, and knows when to be serious and when to have fun.”

“Honesty, compassion, empathy, respect, kindness.”

“One word amazing they will help you with whatever you need. Thank you very much”

“Happy, easy-going, fun”

“They are really nice, and caring. Give up a lot of their time for students.”

“Friendly, humorous, [sic] supportive, people oriented”

“Helpful, kind, and trustworthy”

“Building relationships w/ you and caring about what happens, smart, nice, patience, and persistence”

“I’m not sure, but qualities I like in teachers are... Well I’m not totally sure, but I really Mrs. [Female Teacher], Mrs. [Female Teacher], Mrs. [Female Teacher] also.”

“Most of the teachers at the Academy”

“compassion”

Teacher responses:

“High-quality teachers:

-Love their students so they can connect with them

-Have high expectations

- Are consistent
- Have techniques that encourage learning (not just providing information required)
- Love to teach! (Students can tell!)”

“Loyalty, professionalism, humor, grace, accountability, and leadership; just to name a few.”

“Integrity, patience, commitment, respect, perseverance”

“High-quality teachers must know the content that they are teaching, love being around children, and are team players.”

- “Flexible
- One who adapts the materials to the learners and helps them make real world connections.
- team player
- continual learner
- positive attitude
- easily approached
- who shares knowledge, expertise, etc., freely with others
- one who builds up rather than destroys
- listener and a do-er”

APPENDIX C
TEACHER FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS
AND TRANSCRIPT

Teacher Focus Group

Participants: Four purposely selected teachers

Date: October 9, 2010 Saturday from 9:00am-12noon

Location: Classroom of the school

Three sections: approximately 45 minutes of conversation followed by a 10 minute break

There is an over-riding question for the group which will begin as a semi-structured interview and immediately transform into an open and free-flowing conversation among the four teachers.

Section 1

- Please share some information about your educational philosophy and also share why you chose to teach in an alternative setting.
- Describe any experiences working in an alternative school, other school, or the attributes needed to be in place for a successful alternative school.
- How does the school impact success of students?

Section 2

- Describe your experiences of relationship building with students
- Success looks different for everyone. What does success look like for so of your students?

Section 3

- Please reflect on the ten-question survey that was dispensed to both students and teachers.

- Please feel free to expand on any of the aspects of our school found in questions 1-7.

Add any additional thoughts pertaining to relationship building.

1. Please describe how **Grounding Time** has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
2. Please describe how the **monthly school-wide field trip or activity** has influences your learning and relationships with teachers?
3. Please describe how the monthly **Character Trait of the Month and Positive Referrals** has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
4. Please describe how the **Discovery Class** has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
5. Please describe how the **Positive School Assembly** has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
6. Please describe how **Academic Support** has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?
7. Please describe how **Behavior Support** has influenced your learning and relationships with teachers?

Teacher Focus Group Transcript

Mr. Cordell: Thank you ladies for participating in this research study. I am beginning Chapter 4 of my Ed.D. dissertation. The focus of my research is on relationship building between teachers and students in an alternative school and how teachers go about building relationships with students. My research has included: the teacher survey, the student survey, and this teacher focus group. This is the third component is this semi-structured interview process. The focus group in this interview process includes four teachers. I have a few guiding questions that will work into a free-flowing conversation.

I have also provided each person the guiding question on paper here at the table. We will have a segment of time of approximately 45 minutes followed by a 10 minute break. We will then have the second portion and break, and then the third portion. We will conclude at approximately 12 noon.

First, please share some info about your educational philosophy

Share why you desire to work in an alternative school setting.

Describe your experience working in an alternative school setting, perhaps in other schools or other school districts.

Finally, relate how you build relationships with students in an alternative setting and how those relationships are used to guide students to success.

What attributes does the alternative school need; how can the climate/culture of the school impact the students' success as well?

Let me introduce the teachers in the focus group: The pseudo names are:

Mrs. Moore

Mrs. Murray

Mrs. Breckenridge

Mrs. Wallace

Mrs. Moore: My educational philosophy is that I firmly believe that everybody can learn when given the opportunity. Learning looks different for most kids. As a teacher it is my challenge to find something that will work for each individual to make learning available in the classroom. Now sometimes I have to ask for help outside of the classroom; I am constantly learning. Feel free to ask for help. I model that for students by going to another

teacher. And I don't have a problem with that. I tell my kids I am a lifelong learner; I ask for help. I believe you cannot write anybody off. I don't get to take the easy way out, just saying that kid's lazy, say that person can't learn. That's immoral as an educator. I have to have respect for the people you work with, a commitment for them to rise up to high expectations. They have low self-esteem in the first place, so any time they can have success in the classroom can have long-term positive effects.

Mrs. Breckinridge: As we look at these students in their chairs, we don't know their stories. We look at these kids and never know which ones can turn into a joy to have in class. It's innate in human nature to love learning. It's not because they don't want to learn; it's that they have a fear of learning, a fear of failure. If we can bring that out that natural human love of learning, if we can tap that, yes, we can impact their future. We can make such a difference! Every student can learn. We never know where they are and where they are going to be.

Mrs. Murray: My educational philosophy, also, is that everyone can learn. Especially in my content area [math], I see many teachers, whose approach is: take this assignment, go home and do it. Well oftentimes they don't know how to do it, so they ask their parents, uncle, aunt, they don't know how to do it, either. Sometimes they hire a tutor, and it becomes a power struggle. So I thought, why not change it? Instead of calling it homework, call it "daywork." Teach the lesson in class, then have them take it home and review it. What I am finding works is that they are not taking the time to review the work, and that's a different issue. It works better in an alternative setting. In a high school setting you expect them to be responsible to do the homework that is assigned to them. Reach a relationship with them.. Other than that, I enjoy guiding them. I work *with* them.

Mrs. Wallace: I agree that all students can learn. It's a matter of finding the switch that turns that natural curiosity on; most of our kids are at risk. A lot of them have had negative experiences in education. They want to push us away before we push them away so to speak. That has happened to a lot of our kids in the past. By being able to get to know them and their individuality, help get them excited about learning before they will even be willing to take a risk. It's hard for them to risk looking or even feeling stupid in front of their peers. It confirms that negative image they have of themselves. Kids in alternative settings all come with different stories, from different socio-economic backgrounds. Because we're in a smaller setting we get the chance to get to know them as a person and not just a student. We can develop a relationship of mutual respect. They become willing to take a risk." They are not afraid of us "coming down on them," embarrassing them, because they trust that we have their best interests at heart. So I think they are able to take that risk of failure. To have help for that relationship. If it weren't for establishing that relationship of trust.

Mrs. Murray: When we talk about at-risk, kiddoes are often at-risk because they are behind on credits. Or they are at-risk because they selling drugs, using drugs, but what I found in my classroom, if they are not doing the homework, let's change that. Let's have them work with

an A+ tutor, use some grounding time to get you caught up. I just love the setting we have here. They're so used to saying, "Just let me fail," but we can say, "No!"

Mrs. Wallace: Sometimes I say, particularly in Drawing class, "It's OK to make mistakes because a lot of times we learn more by making a mistake than doing it right the first time." That's why I don't like them to erase because "...if you recognize that line you just drew is incorrect I want you to leave it there and draw the correct line." You made a mental note along with some visual evidence OK that was wrong. I have recognized that was wrong, and I'm going to correct it. They want to get rid of it. They want to erase; they want to wad it up and throw it away. They want to not have that mistake as a reminder. In our most recent unit I have been making them draw in pen, and they bring a pen with an eraser. They want to erase it. I say no, you've made a visual note of what to do and what not to do. So a lot of them are afraid to even fail in that regard...to not be so successful the first time around.

Mrs. Breckinridge: I think you have hit on a really good point about an alternative school. I think most of them have one overriding factor, regardless of socioeconomic background, male, female, age. They all have this awful feeling. The majority of students I meet, the trauma of school, that feeling of failure is so huge in life, they don't want to fail, and they act out in a way they control.

Several teachers (in unison) They build walls!

Mrs. Breckinridge: I think that's one of the reasons alternative environment works so well, that one on one that builds that relationship take the walls down, acceptance of failure take the walls down some of them will be OK with failing now and then. Either you have the perfectionist that wants to get As on everything or get 99 out of 100, or you get students who won't do their work. I know for me why I ended up turning to an alternative school, my first year teaching I was working with very large class, I had six kids failing, and I worked like crazy so those six kids wouldn't fail. By Christmas time (I had all the Social Studies problem kids) all of them were doing their work. My second year they asked me to put together an alternative program for junior high kids. I was glad to create my very own alternative program. I had to create from scratch what I thought would work. I didn't even know what an alternative school was, so I went from scratch. The things that I put into place are like what I see here, based on the respect and appreciation of that student. They feel they can trust.

Mrs. Moore: I've spent my whole career in alternative education. I have a background in criminal justice. I spent several years working with children in lockdown, watching them struggle. I think that profoundly affected was a kid who was about 15 years had robbed a federal building. Mom was in the military, gave him everything she could give him. Even in lockdown he was making bad choices. It ended with his escaping and he got sentences of 15 years and 10 years running sequentially. He was 15 years old. I've had a passion for working with kids most of my life anyway, but from that point, I've had a passion for working with kids. My goal was to work with kids and to prevent them from being on the other side. That was a powerful motivator for me. I came to [Moselle], I worked in detention, and I took a year off for family reasons. I called [Moselle]. They said, "Are you ready to come back? We

have something in mind for you.” The Academy had not been in existence. This was my second year of public school teaching. I was given a great opportunity to work in this setting and building. I’ve watched something from the beginning to grow. One thing that keeps me doing it is that I want to see kids reach their full potential, and because of my own personal background, I know that there are people out there who have given up on so many of our kids. I’ve made a firm commitment not to give. Their potential may not be what I would like it to be, but it’s that they reach the very best in their lives. I get to be a part of that every day, helping them, molding them into young men and women that (some are in their 30s now) come back or they see you in the street, they remember all the sacrifices you made. You didn’t think you got through, but they are introducing you to their families, their children, and saying, “This is my teacher” to their children. I tell people I wake up every day loving what I do. There are challenges, yes, but I still love what I do. If you can find something in your life that you love, the commitment is definitely there. I’d love to see the Academy continue to grow and prosper like it has done the last 15 years and still meet the needs of our population. They are very special young people, and no one needs to be falling through the cracks. They have value; if we can give them nothing else but the fact that they have value, I think that’s going to change lives.

Mrs. Wallace: I was an at-risk kid, and I had one teacher in particular who changed my life. I think she was there for a reason. I think back to the things she did for me when so many people would have given up on me and thrown in the towel and were disgusted with me. She never gave up on me. She hung in there with me, for whatever reason. She did little things just like we do every day. She would pass me a card, “thinking about you, hoping everything’s OK” for no reason. She would do little things like that just to let me know she cared. I worked my tail off for her. I went out for basketball, and she was my basketball coach my eighth grade year. I am not an athletic person; I’ve never really been an athletic person! I took a PE class every stinking year of high school just so I could be with her. I even took an aerobics class because I could tell there was a real sense of fondness—it was mutual. I took weight lifting my senior year, all these classes I would not think of taking had it not been for her. Here a couple of years ago I had a riding up to Eagle Days I got to thinking about it I started writing a letter to her. The things I remember about her quite honestly have nothing to do with the curriculum she taught. I mean, I could not get up and do aerobics now. I might hurt myself. It’s the personal things she did for me. And I know I was going to go to any lengths, perform on any level, because of that. I think that has a really strong drive for me, because I know personally what that relationship can do when we find a hook for our students.

Mrs. Breckinridge: That ties into how we define success in an alternative school. It may look a little different from a regular school. It may be pass/fail; it may not be all As. If I see a kid change from considering themselves a failure, not seeing themselves as smart or intelligent, but they’re working their tail off and finding joy in that work, recognizing they can succeed.

Mrs. Wallace: And they know somebody cares.

Mrs. Breckinridge: Yes, they know somebody cares. . . . Maybe they will get a D in my class. Like the student we were talking about earlier. She had a 35% and now she's up to 55%. She's going in the right direction. She may not reach that A until she's in college. Neither did I! But look—I have a career; I have a life! But if we can change that trigger, change that direction, they can say, “I had success when I was a student.” Maybe they did not get all As. Maybe they got a GED, but they got a job. They can say, “Hey, I got a job; I'm doing what I love.”

Mrs. Wallace: A student we had my first year of teaching 13 years ago came back. He was standing outside one morning, and I was really flabbergasted at how old he was. He is in his early 30s, and he still comes back to see us and thank us and talk to us. I said to him, “It's really nice your students come back when they have turned into a real person.” He said, “What do you mean, a fake person?” I said, “No, I just mean someone who's doing OK in life, who's happy.” That's kind of my driving force now. It's kind of weird when you're in Price Chopper, when they're running up and acting a fool trying to get your attention. Even if it's someone who has dropped out, you know you have planted seeds that somehow sometime sooner or later they'll come to bloom.

Mrs. Breckinridge: I taught for a while in an AP program with male students. They would come in and they would be so angry if they got 95%. Their only goal for that class was to get an A. Whether they learned the material or didn't learn the material; whether they found it joyful or not, it didn't matter. When I came back to Alternative after that experience—ahhh--I had students who would get a C and they were thrilled! It was how I thought education should be. It felt so much better. It's not A, B, or C; it's the joy of learning; it's helping; it's changing someone's life. I think that's what alternative schools do; it's our goal: Changing kid's lives for the better.

Mrs. Murray: My first year in the district I taught sixth grade at [School Name] Middle School. Some of the students that I had were [student name, student name, student name, and student name]. I transferred to the high school, and of course the classes were big—like 25. When I found out I could come to the Academy I was excited. It kind of reminded me of middle school. Small classes, field trips...and by golly I saw [student name, student name, student name, and student name].

ALL: following you!

Mrs. Murray: One thing about the alternative setting, when I found out about the field trips, I said, “awesome.” It's more than the grades. It's about being a productive citizen. Going out and giving back and learning how fortunate they are. We went to—what—Freedom House a couple of years ago.

Mrs. Breckinridge: Yes! They worked their little butts off,

Mrs. Murray: yes they did

Mrs. Breckinridge: and they were so proud!

Mrs. Wallace: They think they don't have anything to give, anything to offer anyone else. That gives them that chance. It helps them realize "I do have value." When we started working on the decorations yesterday, I showed them the pictures from a couple of years ago, and they got excited. They weren't excited until then, but they saw the little kids coming through, trick or treating, and they started to get pumped about it. They often think they don't have anything to contribute. Providing those opportunities gives them a chance to see, "My life is bad, but somebody else's is worse, and I can help them." It gives us value.

Mrs. Moore: I remember the first time we did the [Halloween] decorations. Our kids were really jazzed that day. They were sitting on the floor in the hallway so they would be on the same level as the kids. Your kids were amazing, dressing up in costumes.

Mrs. Breckinridge: You've got 18-year-old kids dressing up like Elmo and Oscar the Grouch and Cookie Monster

Mrs. Moore: and thinking that it's wonderful. And we're modeling the social behaviors that our kids need to develop. And even when we go on field trips we're showing them how to behave appropriately in social settings in the community and still have a good time. I don't know about you, but I'm having a good time! They usually see me as very strict and very structured, but those times when I get to be a little bit goofy. Then I have days in the classroom when some kids set me off, I just laugh all day. The kids need to see us being human. That's really important. That has impact on our students. We have pictures on our walls and stuff like that. We talk a little bit about what we do outside of school. That lets them see there are other parts of us. I tell kids the reading story all the time, especially my kids who don't want to read, how when I was growing up, I used to be such a bookworm, I would carry like five books around all the time, even to the movie theatre. Before the lights went down, I'd be reading. But it's the love of reading, the love of knowledge we're trying to give you. With knowledge you gain power; you gain control over your life.

Mrs. Murray: Ever since we started the SSR program throughout our district, the sixth graders I had, the [student name, student name, and student name] they're coming in, they're wanting to read. I say, that's great.

BREAK

Mr. Cordell: Thank you, ladies. The main focus of the next part of the conversation will be on relationship building. How does relationship building look to you as an individual; how does that work with each individual student factoring in their academic needs, behavior needs. Sometimes team approach to relationship building with students. Let's begin with a conversation on relationship building in an alternative school setting.

Mrs. Moore: The essential element in a relationship is trust. Trust is a hard thing. Kids have experienced things that have made them not trust adults. We have experienced things that make us not trust the adults we're around or even some of the kids because of some of things we have learned about them. But we have to start somewhere. For some of them I have an automatic connection. For others I have to work harder, but you have to have a willingness. You can't come to the conclusion, "oh, it's not going to happen." You just have to say, "At some point this kid and I ...I will stand up for you, and I will stand up to you because I want what's best for you. We may not always agree, and there are days when you are going to be very unhappy with me. You may never like me, but did you get what you need out of this class? That's my primary concern. After you work through all this, "the walls," with consistency. It's got to be consistency. Kids respect structure. They don't like it; don't get me wrong. Structure is something some of our kids are not used to for a long time. Some of our kids have been taking care of themselves for a long time. Then they come here and all of a sudden are saying we are taking this position and we are not going to back down off of it. These are the tools—Recovery, Discovery, and the one to one stuff we do with the kids, We're going to give you good tools so you can rise up to that challenge. It's worth it.

One thing I've learned over the years is that it is hard for kids who have spent their lives with people who do not value education...

Mrs. Wallace: That's very true.

Mrs. Moore: And we're coming in here and we're all about education. And I'm going, "If you've got to get addicted to something, get addicted to knowledge!...If you're going to be pushing, push learning." And they be going like, "What!?" But you've got to catch them off guard. As much energy we put into other things, we need to put into what we're doing right here. They have to know you believe they can be successful, that you are not going to give up on them. They're so used to pushing back when you're trying to pull them, kind of oppose what you're doing in the classroom, because it's not comfortable. It's such a small population that we see a lot of things that were overlooked in the bigger school. We see when the kids are being passive or intentionally not learning. Everything you do is magnified in a small setting like this. That means it takes courage to see yourself, and our kids are being forced to see themselves the same way we are seeing them. It takes time for their vision to catch up with our vision.

Mrs. Wallace: On the Recovery side, as a behavioralist, we talk about holding them accountable, having them look at themselves, I tell them, "This is hard." It *is* hard, not just

for teenagers. It's hard for *adults* to take an honest look at ourselves, at our behaviors and say, "OK, what do I need to change?" But it's a very necessary thing.

But coming back to the consistency, I think that's the key for a lot of our young people in alternative education, that they have not had a group of adults who have been consistent every time. When I went to conferences this week, we would talk about this. They would say, "If you are consistent over time, that's when you're going to build a trust. It's when you are inconsistent that they don't know when they can trust. When are you going call them on something; when are you not going to call them on something? But if you are consistent and call them on it every time, they are going to come to know that you are a reliable, dependable adult that they can trust. For some it just takes longer than others.

Mrs. Breckenridge: Our relationships do need trust, but it doesn't mean that you're good friends with them. It means there's a foundation, an expectation of maybe a hard work type relationship. They can trust us to work hard with them.

Mrs. Wallace: I think that's what's happening with [student name]. He's new to us; he doesn't quite have that trust established with us. He's never been in a situation like this. Definitely he was overwhelmed. More than one teacher told him, "We are here to help. What do you need do to be successful?" They don't have time to do that in a regular setting. Whereas we can make it a priority. The kids are going, "Whoa, I've never seen this before. He's had a lot of inconsistencies in his existence. He's lived in two different households and had two different sets of expectations, so there was no consistency. It's just going to be up to us. I know I have the wonderful opportunity to have that young man in my grounding group, and I've gone out of my way to have positive interactions with him. He just happened to mention that his eye was starting to hurt. Later in the day, I just asked him, "How's your eye doing?" just showing some concern. Thursday he got here after grounding, and I don't have him for class, but since the water fountain is just outside my door, I did see him in the hallway. I said, "We sure did miss you in grounding." I was on my way to do something, but I think he looked at me like I had fallen out of tree. Yesterday after he had a big plateful of breakfast, he was with the other boys tracing cars for our wall. (CARS is our Halloween decorating scheme.) It's a matter of teachers having the initiative to look for things, thinking, "What can I do to attach myself?" Well, he carries a sketchbook and he sketches a lot, so I will talk to him a lot about that, use that interest, ability to initiate positive interactions.

Likewise the other day in grounding almost every single kid in my group was reading, but I noticed out of the corner of my eye that he was texting. I didn't want to engage in a power struggle and disrupt that time period, because that definitely is what would have happened. However, at a later time period I did let him know that I had noticed it happened and it was not OK. If it were to happen again, I let him know, this [consequence] is what would happen. But I think he responded better to that than calling him out in front of the whole group, besides the fact that it would have disrupted the whole group.

Mrs. Breckinridge: That was a great compromise. There is some leeway for your phone to be out, but there is a consequence. But it's good to avoid power struggles if you're going to build a relationship. Look at the big picture.

Mrs. Murray: Well, the tickets that we give out (for positive behaviors) some kids get more tickets. Well, some kids need more encouragement than others. That's why they get more tickets. Of course, with the greeting, how you doing, how was your weekend? They may say fine, but sometimes their actions are not matching their words.

You say, "Stop what you're doing. Go see the social worker or guidance counselor. You can ask them, "Who would you like to talk with right now?"

They say, "Oh, you can see right through me."

We don't know if they're hungry or if they had a break-up or something's going on, there's a death in the family. These are young kids trying to take on adult responsibilities, and it's tough. We can't treat everyone the same. We just have to meet them at their own level.

Mrs. Breckinridge: So, in other words, you don't be the same for all the students. You're consistent with that one student. You have a relationship that's going to be strong, and I have this expectation and we're going to do everything you need for you to have a good day.

Mrs. Wallace: I had [student name] in drawing. At the end of the day, he looked kind of faded. You know how they kind of wear their emotions on their sleeves. I was keeping an eye on him. I got the other kids working, but I could tell he just was not himself. I laid my hand lightly on his shoulder and said to him, "[student name], are you OK? Have you been drawing your ?? "

He said, "No my artwork is crap. I can't figure this out." He was upset, and he had his artwork was turned over.

I asked him, "Can I see what you've done so far?"

He said, "I'm just not getting it."

I said, "Honey, that's why I'm here." I pulled up a chair and very quietly, while everybody was working, I said, "Here, let me show you how I would get started." I sat down with him, talked with him individually and showed him how to do it. He received that really well and he worked then for the rest of the class period. I could tell he was getting frustrated; something was going on. I wanted to keep him from shutting down. As you get to know the student a little better, you know whether they need black and white or more of that soft approach.

Mrs. Murray: We've had some of these kids for years, but for other kids, it's their first year. I might take the more subtle approach with them. But with students like [student name], who

we've had for years, I might say, "I know you. I know you can do this. Get to work, and quit messing around!"

Mrs. Moore: I totally agree with that. I'm careful who I approach because I don't know what to expect from whom. I don't know people's responses. If I have a history with a kid, I might be saying, "You need to stop that." [student name] is a great example of that, and he just says, "Ms Moore..." He tries to con me, "You know I love you." I just say, "Anyway, get to work." Or they will tell me, "My momma's not going to do anything about that," I come back with, "I'll check with her and see." They'll back down off that position because they don't want mom to find out. There are kids that I can read; I can tell they're having a bad day. Rather than let that spill over, I have said to them, "Come on up here and say 'I can't be here today' and let me find you a place to be so you won't get in trouble." I told the kids, "My job is to be your teacher; I can't be your friend." They need adults in their lives, and I won't cross that line.

Mrs. Wallace: There is such a thing as too friendly.

Mrs. Moore: There is a difference between being friendly and being a friend, and we need to have very clear boundaries when it comes to that. I listen to them say, "This teacher did not get after me for this (or that)." I will say to them, "Oh, no. Do I need to go talk to that teacher and let them know that you think you don't have to follow protocol?" Quickly they will come back, "Naw, Ms Moore, that's OK." I tell them to enjoy that [freedom] while you can, but *this* is what we do *here*! Sometimes we get triangulated.

Mrs. Wallace: For some of our kids, that is their biggest survival skill—triangulation among the adults in their lives. Once they realize that's not a skill that is going to work here, that we're all going to be on the same page, that we're going to talk on a regular basis, then they start being real.

Mrs. Breckenridge: CP: Sometimes I hear them saying, 'Ms Murray, she's the meanest teacher ever.' I come back with 'She wants you to get it.' If you don't have their backs, these first year- teachers like Ms {teacher name}, a lot of students can be saying 'I don't like that teacher,' and nobody's there to defend them, to stop the triangulation.

Mrs. Wallace: They get used to the staff person who was there prior, and they might have a fondness for that particular staff person, sadness that that person is not back this year. It's just going to take time.

But when I was talking to {student name} the other day, he has already identified that Ms Bryant is somebody that he can trust. Six weeks into the semester he knows she is going to be consistent. She has found that whole knife-sharpening thing, something he's really good at, he's really confident in, with his abilities. She really went out on a limb there; it seemed a little dangerous, but it? I told him the other day, "Man, [student name], I really appreciate your sharpening those knives; they have been worthless since I've been here, and now they're really great." He just puffed up.

Another day we were passing back drawings, and I had written a positive comment in the margin. He said, “This is the first time an adult has ever said anything nice to me.”

“Really?”

He thought about it and said, “Well, I think Ms [teacher name] said something nice earlier this semester.”

I said, “I don’t know why that is, because you’re a really nice young man.”

He was being genuine, though; his perception is that no adult has ever given him positives. That is really sad because he IS a good kid because we sometimes forget to acknowledge that. He’s not a loud, in-your-face kid, not a squeaky wheel. Hopefully we can balance that out. The kid I connect with may not be the kid you connect with, but it’s important that every kid’s had a chance to connect with a couple of adults. That’s important for us to make sure we’re doing that.

Mrs. Breckinridge: I think it’s important, regardless of what he actually has experienced, to recognize what he thinks as valid. We can say all these nice things to students, but it doesn’t mean anything. But if you know a student and you make a positive comment, it holds true. It’s not just something you would say to anybody.

Mrs. Wallace: In psychology the other day, we were watching *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, and one student said, “This school’s for dumb people.”

I said, “I disagree with that. Actually I don’t anybody in this school who is stupid.”

They said, “What, how can you say that? Everybody in this school is a bunch of idiots.”

I said, “I disagree. Actually you guys are some of the smartest kids I ever worked with. You might have some idiotic behaviors. You might do some dumb things every now and then, but you’re not dumb—definitely.” Some of our kids are off the charts.

You look at success being different for each kid, like [student name], I have a soft spot in my heart for him. I had him last year in Drawing, and he was really good at it. I gave him lots of positives. I asked him, ‘Did you ever take a drawing class before? Do you draw at home?’ He said, ‘no.’ That has turned into a way into a relationship with him, and it’s coming back, paying off n psychology this semester. That’s a tough class to swallow—a lot of the terms—and he is giving it 150%. He’ll ask his 7th hour teacher if he can come in and work on his psych. I’ll read it to him, and he will say, ‘I don’t get it,’ then I put it in everyday terms, then he will say, ‘oh, OK.’ Now he is willing to seek me out and ask for help.. He was gone one day and came in asked for help. Heck, yeah, I’ll help him! He was kneeling on the floor writing down what I was telling him, and he’s really on fire in there. I see him and say, ‘Man,

where were you yesterday? I missed you in class.’ It matters to him that I noticed he was gone! It has to be genuine. Our kids have incredible bullshit detectors.

Mrs. Breckinridge: Worked great for weeks. Worked great in that relationship. Take that out and walk around with it.

Mrs. Wallace: find ways to celebrate their success. That reminds me of when I had [student name] in Psychology, and he had studied hard and made the highest grade on the test. When I gave him back his test, I told him, ‘You get on that phone there right now and call your daddy and tell him you got the highest grade in the class.’ He did not think I was serious, but I had him call his dad right then, in the middle of class. He was proud of that. He just beamed. As we celebrated our successes, we are building test.

Mrs. Moore: When he came, he ended up in the RR because of behaviors in class, I would go to RR and visit with the kid, whether or not they are in my class, just to hang out minute or two, just studying, I’d say “Can I help you with that.” It made tremendous difference in my relationship with him. I can redirect him all day long and he just says ‘yes maam. He sought me out to show me what he working on outside of lab.

One kid we were conferencing with in your office, Mr. Cordell, we were on phone to his mom, and bragging that he had such a good day. He could not have a bigger smile, and we could hear mom smiling on the phone too. He’s trying harder, and even when I have to hold him accountable, we aren’t giving up on him, just outlasting the behavior. Not commenting on where he was, just looking at the next goal.

Sometimes I take a no nonsense approach—just do this. OK, we are not going to ask you; I’m going to tell you this is what you are going to do. I’m going to keep coming back and bugging you; you might as well let me help you.

Mrs. Wallace: When they are in the RR for any length of time, they get used to my face, to Mr. [teacher name]’s face, just anyone different coming in and saying, “hey whatcha working on?” is a motivator. Maybe they feel like they are in an adversarial relationship with me at that time so they might not do much of what I ask them to do. Someone else can come in and ask them to do something, and they say, “no problem,” and they do it. That is always good. It is saying, “I care about you.” Judy does not even have the kid, but she will ask “how you doin’” It’s not even school related. That really pays off in the long run, too.

Mrs. Murray: [Student name], he said this is my first A, and I said I was not surprised. I asked him why he was surprised; I put it back on him. He said he was surprised because he was not redoing his work. I said you have the intelligence. You can be doing that in all your classes. You can be doing anything you put your mind to, and that just shows me that it works. He’s just one student who shows that being in a smaller environment at the Academy helps. Lotta times if the student does not like the teacher, he will not work.

Mrs. Breckinridge: Isn't that funny how much they'll do—I'll do this *for you!* Sometimes they think so little of themselves they won't do it for themselves, but they will do it for you. They don't plan to hurt you by not doing it, but they hurt themselves. That's one of the things that start to turn in an alternative environment. [Student name] is one example. She was so thrilled to get those As, like it was an anomaly. Then it was, "Why aren't I getting As?" like they had to be given to her. Then she wanted to earn them. That's pride. One of the first times she was mad at herself because she did not have an A, I said to her, "That's great! Do you realize you have this expectation for yourself?"

Mrs. Moore: I like we when get emails acknowledging when kids are doing good. Or even just acknowledging their birthday. It's posted out front and different teachers will wish him a happy birthday. The kids goes, "you know it's my birthday?"
"Yeah, I know it's your birthday. Happy birthday! They need little reinforcements along the way.

Mrs. Breckinridge: All these things work with any students. Up at the high school, what if they did that with every student, it would be wonderful, but it's not really possible with 32 kids in a class. That was my job. I did that. I worked with 35-40 students. My effort went into the 6 students that were failing. And the others students, they were doing OK. They had those positives, those supports somewhere else. The alternative school is SO important because it lets us take "those six" out of the general population that can "take care of itself" where they are being disruptive. Bring them to me, where I can bring them back up. The regular classroom teacher can focus on the "regular" students, and I can focus on the at-risk students. We just *tripled* the value of the education, and *everybody* can be more successful.

Mrs. Wallace: [Student name], when he first came to us, his body language, he was humped over, he would never look you in the eye, he didn't have that confidence in him. Sometimes when I would go out and get a soda, particularly if I was going out to get them for the teachers, I would get him a Dr Pepper. He asked "what's this for?" He got the biggest grin. That's just one tool in my repertoire. Next year I was having students fill out a questionnaire and responding to the question, "When did a teacher help you?" He said 'One time a teacher gave me a Dr. Pepper.'" That nearly brought tears to my eyes. To me that was 89 cents. To him it made a difference.

Mrs. Breckinridge: You know, another thing I've seen in programs that work is that our teachers are willing to own our mistakes and to apologize. One time I made a mistake; I came down hard on a student more than I should have. The next day I have him a buck and told him, "Hey, buy yourself a candy bar. I apologize. I looked at the situation again, and I realize I was wrong. You handled it really well when I did not do it right." The student could have been my enemy for the rest of the term because *I was unfair*, and he recognized that.

Mrs. Wallace: What a wonderful modeling job! How often do adults apologize to each other?

Mrs. Breckinridge: It did change things. It was a way of saying, “You are a human being; I am human being; I treated you badly one human being to another.” It changed how he treated me.

Mrs. Wallace: Sometimes when I have apologized to a kid, I have been met with utter disbelief, or denial: “That’s OK’.

I say, “No, it’s not.’

That models for them what we should do, models another aspect of respect. As a society we don’t apologize for anything we do. We’re going to do what we what, and who cares? That’s our pop culture, media culture. I don’t care if you’re offended. I’m going to step on whoever I have to get to the top. It’s not promoted to say, “I blew it. I’m sorry, I blew it. I should not have done that. Can you forgive me?” They have to try not to fall out of their chairs.” It’s part of that teaching.

Mrs. Moore: Even if we are not consistent, I may apologize. Well, if I let you get away with it, I should not have. I don’t want to be inconsistent with you, because that’s unfair. I did not mean to miss it, but thanks for sharing. They kind of chuckle. Never give up on them. Act like it never ever happened. Create an atmosphere of forgiveness.

One kid the other day, I gave me a compliment although earlier in the day I had to send him out of the room. He said, “Me and Ms Moore got in a fight earlier.’ I said, “no, I don’t fight with kids.” I was giving out tickets because I was recognizing what they were doing at that time. I was just holding them accountable for the classroom expectations; I was not holding a grudge.

Mrs. Breckinridge: Last year during first semester, I heard a lot of “that teacher hates me. Second semester you don’t hear that so much because they recognize that the teacher does not dislike them. She got on my case, but I went back and she was nice to me and helped me. They can be friends with teacher. That excuse of “that teacher hates me” dies off, and the responsibility goes back to them. The message is “you’re responsible for what you do.” They own their own behavior,

Mrs. Moore: It’s empowering. The kids were not happy this week because they were being “called” on for their Ds and Fs. We let them know we are concerned and gave them lunch work time to bring up their grades. They were upset, so Mr. Cordell and I walked the building talking to them individually. We told them we are still concerned, but we hear your objection to staying here for lunch. What we want from you is *your* plan for bringing up your grade. We made them sign off on it so we as a group can hold you accountable. If you do what you say, the grades will come up. If you don’t follow through, then *we* have to make some choices.

Mrs. Wallace: That's a very adult thing you asked them to do. We sign things a lot, but they don't. But signing it, in their handwriting, gives them accountability. If they don't live up to it, there are adult ramifications as well.

Mrs. Breckinridge: And they know, whatever plan they make, the teacher support will be there. How can we help you? If they decide to stay after school they have the understanding the teacher will be there to work with them. They can trust us.

Mrs. Murray: Also, they have to have the right supplies, the spirals, the folders. I say "guys, you're getting organized, now organize your thoughts, your mind is like a library. You got to dust off the cobwebs a little bit. Some kids come to class without a spiral, a book. I say you don't walk out of the house naked, do you? No, you wear clothes. You don't come to class without a book, either! It's the same thing."

Mrs. Breckinridge: I've had to do the same thing!

Mrs. Murray: You've got to put it like real life for them sometimes!

Mrs. Breckinridge: One kid told me, "For two years I've gotten away without doing any work because I have refused to bring a pencil." My reply was "You can't do that here. Here's a pencil; get to work!" He started bringing his own pencil. I know a lot of people complain alternative schools coddle them, giving them things or doing for them things they should do themselves. They expect us to make them into the exact same students you find at the regular high school. I don't know if that's possible. But what I *can* do is make the learning experience so positive and strong in their lives that they are headed in the right direction. They are on the ten-year plan. They may not be A students; may not have all the skills, but they are headed in the right direction.

BREAK

Mr. Cordell: In this last segment, of the ten questions from the teacher survey, you could expand on or revisit questions 1-7. Basically they are directly related to the aspects the supports and activities that support student behavior and academics. Additionally, if anyone has additional thoughts on relationships building feel free to add.

Mrs. Moore: I really like grounding time in the structure we have now. A few years ago it used to be just a hang-out time. Now building wide there is a certain structure, and it allows us to check in with students at the beginning. Being able to look at their emotions and rate them on a scale of 1 to 10 is a big deal, then answering the question of the day that the whole building is answering. Also, I really like the question, what positive thing has happened in the last 24 hours. It's a nonthreatening question. Sometimes our children get so bogged down in all the negativity, it helps when we ask them daily about positive. It's good that they see us in a nonthreatening situation. We sit down and share how we feel and share about ourselves. It gives them a voice, and we're all on an equal playing field. It's a given that all participate.

When it comes to SSR (Sustained Silent Reading), it's across the board, there's no debate, and we're all going to be doing it. That makes a difference.

Mrs. Breckinridge: All of these things that are great for relationship building and break down the barriers to learning. They prevent the students from their previous methods of failing. We know them well enough not to let them get away with it, and then we make it a safe place to learn. Sometimes at the end of grounding if we have a little extra time I put on a YouTube video, which I call "culture." Yesterday we watched *Liberace*.

Mrs. Wallace: I like the switch we made to divide the grounding groups by sex. At first I was a little bit ambivalent about it, but it's actually been incredible. It's been a great way to separate our population without a competition. I also like the way it lets them have positive interaction with each other as well as teacher. I've seen, particularly second semester, I've seen them really open up to each other. The boys allowing the others to see them be vulnerable. They trust their peers enough to disclose some private information. They're going out on a limb to do that. I agree with Mrs. Moore about the positive question—I might say 'my positive is that I put dinner in the Crockpot before I came to work so I don't have to rush home to fix dinner; it will be ready' or I might say 'a positive is my little girl won her soccer game.' They can see me as a person, beyond being a teacher. The way our grounding is—I can say "I'm anxious, but I can still be a five." For them, if they are upset, everyone will know they are upset, but I can be upset and I can still do my job. I can still be OK, and it's a wonderful thing to model for our students.

I know Mrs. Moore has walked into my psychology class at the end of the hour when one of my students had hurt himself physically and responded by cursing. Both she and I corrected the student, and the student objected, saying, "don't you ever curse, not even when it hurts really bad?" But we both said no. But yesterday I was in the art closet getting stuff for the kids for all their projects, and the box of rubber cement fell onto the floor, and several full bottles of rubber cement broke. So I had this huge mess to clean up, and I said, 'aww, nuts!!!' or something like that.' They came in running and immediately starting helping me. That was a really messy, bad situation where I could have reacted badly, but I chose not to. When we do things like that, it teaches them how to be OK when the situation is not OK.

Mrs. Moore: Some of the experiences in our grounding group have been awesome. Boys, by end of semester, were really encouraging each other. At the same time they would ignore certain behaviors as if they didn't exist and went on about their business. They had made an adjustment to having kids with challenging behaviors in the grounding group, rather than being impatient with them as they had done previously. And the kids with the challenging behaviors, they saw how the others look at them, that constant peer pressure, they saw that others did not want them to waste their time with the off-task behavior; they were able to build some strength in themselves to control their behaviors.

Mrs. Wallace: When we were able to go to the Tucker Leadership Lab a couple of weeks ago, my first year was not a positive experience. They did not mesh; people sabotaged the activities. I was not looking forward to going. It ended up I was really glad to I got to go. I

was able to step out of a leadership role and learn from the Tucker leader, how she was able to turn things around, be patient. In a positive way, she would say, “No, that’s not an option,” and keep them moving forward. If there were activities in which I was not able to participate, it was fun to see them encourage each other to overcome obstacles. I did not feel like I could swing, so I was watching. At first they were picking on one another, but then they started pulling together, and they got to Mr. Cordell swing on the rope. One time Joe swung on the rope, and they didn’t catch him right or something. He ended up swinging way out and ended up wrapping his legs around somebody who was there, so they all bumped off. I was dying laughing. It was great, funny. Nobody got mad when it happened. It was just funny and positive. Then we went to the teeter totter and were able to successful on it right away, so it boosted their confidence. Our ability to provide them the opportunity to go on field trips like the National Archives, that was informational, but how many of them would have gone on their own? When we go to the Nelson, for many of kids, their families would not take them to that. These experiences take them out their comfort zone. The one that has had the most impact on me personally, Dialog in the Dark, was the most overwhelming, life-altering experience. We take our sight for granted. To be really be submersed in that was overwhelming.

Mrs. Breckinridge: The kids went in that saying this is going to be stupid, but were amazed. They learned to think outside of themselves. It broke down some barriers. Those kinds of experiences pull stuff out of them. They’re a little narcissistic. They’re teenagers, plus they have to protect themselves from whatever chaos they have in their lives. Activities that take them out of themselves, they learn, and it opens them up for more learning in the classroom.

Mrs. Murray: I know some students love music, and I can tell them, “Cool, I’m a musician, too.” Like [student name], he raps, the guys in our grounding group said, “let’s rap our grounding,” and I said, “cool.” Actually it was very corny, but it opened them up, broke the ice a bit. They loved the field trip to the authentic Mexican restaurant and the breakfast. Free food and free drink, yeah, that works for them.

Mrs. Wallace: Yeah, after that field trip last year, I heard Joe tell one of the kids who stayed behind, “I thought it was going to suck, but it was really fun.” The other kid said, ‘I wish I would have gone.’”

Mrs. Murray: Yesterday when we were working on door decorations, and some kids were not participating, and Jonny said, “You guys are being douche bags,” and I was thinking the same thing. I was thinking the same thing!

Mrs. Breckinridge: When I created my own program in that junior high, the second year I was there I had a lot of complaints from the teachers and principals in the district. (They always say you have complaints if you’re successful.) Well, we’re sending you the wrong kind of kids, because we’re supposed to be sending you failures. But we send them to you and, all of a sudden, they’re getting As in their classes. They were in regular classes half time and my class half time. We should be sending you worse kids, because these kids should not be so successful so fast. But think about it, these kids are here because they were failing.

When you really look at it, you only see five or six kids that we battle with every day. We forget how truly successful we are with 90% of the students we serve. It's human nature, they want to learn, they want to be successful. All the positive supports we use make it happen.

Mrs. Wallace: I think the positive school assemblies make a difference, too. We're recognizing kids who would *never* be recognized at the high school! We're looking at our population and picking out someone who exhibits the character trait of the month. Would they ever have gotten a certificate at the high school amongst 1,200, 2000 other kids? No.

Mrs. Breckinridge: That's another thing that people complain about an alternative school—that we're being too fluffy, too nice, giving credit where it's not due. We give out those .they are earning those grades. I teach the same things I would be teaching in a regular classroom. Maybe I don't come across gruff, and maybe they use activities to learn instead of lecture, but they are learning the same content, the same quality, as a regular high school classroom.

Mrs. Moore: This recognition is so significant because some of these kids have never received positive attention. Even when I was growing up, if you weren't an athlete, an academic person or something like that, you were not even mentioned. You were not in the yearbook pictures except for your one little picture.

Mrs. Breckinridge: My brother was a top athlete, newspaper headliner, but never got his picture in the yearbook because he was a diver; he did not play football or basketball. It's hard in those big schools to be recognized but they deserve it.

Mrs. Moore Discovery class, we've gone and taught the tools. A few days ago, I was talking with some students who had not had the class, the opportunity to learn those communication skills. Some people don't know how to deal with their anger. Some of them get into the not OK child mode, the critical parent mode. Some of us, even as adults, get into the not OK child mode, the critical parent mode. My favorite mode is the OK child mode, but I can't stay there and do my job. However, in my job, I'm the logical adult, but the kids may perceive me as the critical parent, and that's not where you want to be, but sometimes it's like that. We know we have some kids who spend WAY too much time in the OK child mode. We need to teach them that there is a time and a place. I like being aware of what's being taught in that class, and we can reinforce it: "now you've been taught how to do so-and-so, so you need to apply it."

Mrs. Breckinridge: It's not just for that classroom environment. Really what they are being taught is how to behave in a professional environment. I made a comment in my classroom the other day, "you better get out some water words to put out that fire," and almost everybody knew what I was talking about. I didn't actually mean a waterfall of words to come out, but we were all on the same page.

It's nice that Discovery is part of the whole school environment. It allows us to teach new kids "this is how you act in our school."

Mrs. Wallace: As part of the behavioral team and working in the Recovery Room, when we come to the part when that student can finally take ownership for what happened, I say great, what can we do in the adult mode, what could you say or do that's not going to get you trouble? These are goals for life, not just for school. It's just a goal for them to strive for. It gives me a common language. Students are missing those skills because they have been taught that, in our house, when we are not OK, this is what we do. I can ignore it or I can go off. A lot of times they don't know what else they can do. I say, let's look at some other options. They don't easily recognize other options. I say, you can do this, or you can do this. They say, I never thought about that, because I'm either going to ignore it or I'm going to explode. It did not work. It will only work for a certain time period, and then you are going to have to deal with it.

Mrs. Breckinridge: It's a new method of interaction. They've had the teacher lecturing, telling them "You can't do that." There's no lecture; it's a teaching moment. It's a working together to reach a goal. This are the steps were are going to take to reach your goal. In the Recovery Room, this new method, you can encourage and enforce and teach.

Mrs. Moore: I have been able to be a big part of Academic support. I'm a big advocate for this. We have been able to pull kids out of class and work with them on someone else's work. It's a no nonsense situation, like with the VoTech kids who are not here for some of the other things we have. We pull them out of grounding to meet with the teacher, this teacher is going to hold you accountable in the classroom. I'm going to support that teacher. Together we are going to say that you need to get this done. You will spend extra time with me, then you can go back to grounding. The grounding teacher has to be in the loop, knowing the kid will be with me until he/she can fix some things.

Mrs. Wallace: I think it's important what Mrs. Murray said, these are kids who fall through the cracks in high school. Our kids want to stay there; that's where they want to live so they don't have to be accountable. But we tell them, "you're not in the crack anymore. We see you; we see your behavior. We see your positive behaviors, and we are going to support you and hold you accountable." For some of them, it's the first time they have been out of the crack, and it's uncomfortable.

Mrs. Murray: And that's where the power struggle comes in. "Man, I don't like this place. Man, this is stupid."

Mrs. Wallace: "Man, I used to do this all the time at the HS. But I tell them, 'yes, but you're not at the HS anymore.'"

Mrs. Breckinridge: "With reason. And they did not like the HS."

Mrs. Wallace: And it's family in a way. They might complain, but if you get somebody from the outside, it will be 'I got your back' because you don't mess with family. And the students say, "everyone here has a story." I feel at home at the Academy because everyone here has a story. There's camaraderie in having a story.

Mrs. Breckinridge: There's a feeling of us and them. They think we're all just this, but we're not. I know they exaggerate what they hear, but they say, "we're not!" They take pride in what they represent in the school.

Mrs. Moore: All the things that we do have impact on the success of our students. When you look at a cake, there are corner pieces and the center pieces. I like the corner pieces, myself... In order for that cake to be complete, nothing can be missing. All the pieces must be there, to create that magnificent outcome. For the whole student... we do what it takes; we make sure all the components of support are there. Sometimes it doesn't work for a particular student. Then we have to make a cupcake on the side; maybe that will work better. That could be the GED program or something like that. Maybe a student is not ready to sit down and eat the cake—yet.

Mrs. Breckinridge: There are students who have never been happy in this building, but they come back and tell us, "now I get it, and I'm glad I was there." Like that one kid that became a Marine. He fought all the way, but the people he fought the most, he came back and gave big hugs to. They had that trust. They knew the relationship was there. Were they happy—sometimes—to participate in that relationship? No. But it was their salvation. Now they are trying to make up proud.

Mrs. Wallace: [Student's name]'s sister [student name] was with us for a short time. She came back and gave me a coffee mug. It was her birthday and she gave me a present. She told me, I haven't gotten a HS diploma yet, but I'm working on it. It's still my goal. I was in Price Chopper a couple of weeks ago and ran into three students who had dropped out; they left the Academy in unpleasant circumstances. But they were grinning ear to ear as I was buying my groceries. They wanted to give me a big old hug in middle of Price Chopper. I think that speaks volumes for what we do.

Mrs. Breckinridge: Even if we have to use the State's version of success, graduation rate, if we look at what they were before the alternative school, we have improved the academic success as looked at by the state. All of those things have correlation to field trips, to grounding, to the BIST program, etc. We get the intrinsic improvements that we love to see and very tangible results.

Mrs. Wallace: like wedding cake...it sure tastes good.

Mrs. Moore: As I look back over the years. We started with three classrooms and twenty students. We have grown to where we are now. Look at what we've done right and what we've done wrong. I am just amazed at the transition and growth. We are part of watching our children grow. We plant a seed. Somebody else may come along and water it, but we believe in what we do.

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VITA

Robert C. Cordell graduated high school in 1991. He graduated from Missouri State University, Springfield, in 1996 with a degree in History and Secondary Education. He stayed in Springfield, Missouri and became the Director of Transportation and Operations of a ground transportation company. His job responsibilities included hiring staff, training, scheduling drivers to assignments, daily logistics, and maintenance of fleet vehicles. The company had an estimated 70 employees and a ground fleet of 120 vehicles. Previously, Mr. Cordell worked as employee of the company for two years while in college.

In 1999, Mr. Cordell decided to make a change in his career. Relocating to Kansas City in mid-summer of 1999, he took a position as a hall monitor at a high school to allow additional time in pursuing other job opportunities. This position allowed Robert to make an observation that his previous leadership experience and job responsibilities had a high correlation to that of educational leadership. After one year as hall monitor at Liberty High School, in the Liberty Public School District, Liberty, Missouri, he took a social studies teaching position at the district's alternative school.

While at Liberty Academy Mr. Cordell taught American History, World History, American Government, and Contemporary Issues. Mr. Cordell experienced success in the classroom with student engagement and learning by building relationships with students and using that as a vehicle to guide them to success at school. In 2006, Mr. Cordell received an award as an Outstanding Classroom Teacher at the Northland Regional Chamber of Commerce Banquet.

Mr. Cordell earned a Masters Degree in Secondary School Administration from the University of Missouri- Kansas City in 2002. He earned an Educational Specialists Degree

from UMKC in 2005. Mr. Cordell started his Ed.D. Doctoral Program at UMKC in January of 2006. He completed the course work in the spring of 2008. His doctoral dissertation is “A Qualitative Research Study of Relationship Building between Alternative High School Students and Their Teachers” is due to be accepted in May of 2011.

Mr. Cordell began assuming administrative responsibilities for Liberty Academy in 2006. He was appointed the principal of Liberty Academy in August 2008. Under his leadership, the school has successfully incorporated into the school’s functioning: Advisory Program, BIST, Recovery Room, Academic Support, Behavior Support, School-wide Field Trips and Activities, and Positive School Assemblies. This is all in effort to increase student sense of belonging, student success, increase attendance, and reduce suspensions.

Mr. Cordell is a member of the National Secondary Principals Association, the Missouri Principals Association, the Greater Kansas City Secondary Principals Association, and the Missouri Student Success Network of Missouri Alternative Educators.