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Beating the Odds: An Exploration of the Lived School Experiences of New York City Alternative High School Graduates

Abstract

The high school graduation rate in New York City has increased approximately 25% over the last 10 years (New York Department of Education, 2019). While there have been improvements in the graduation rates, approximately 30% of NYC high school students do not graduate within the 4-year timeframe. The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of recent NYC alternative high school graduates related to the Framework for Great Schools' three elements of trust, supportive environment, and strong family/community ties (NYCDOE, 2019). The research data was captured through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The data was analyzed and the findings revealed that recent NYC alternative graduates' experiences related to their traditional schools were primarily negative, attributed their successful completion of high school to staff relationships and motivation built within their alternative high school settings, and recent NYC alternative high school graduates function best in environments that are smaller in size and participants. The findings were linked to the three elements of trust, strong family/community ties, and supportive environments as defined by the Framework for Great Schools. Recommendations include schools intentionally creating a nonjudgmental and supportive environment, promoting/conducting non-disciplinary communication and outreach with student families, and creating policies within school to reacclimatize students who have returned from a long-term absence or suspension.

Document Type

Dissertation

Degree Name

Doctor of Education (EdD)

Department

Executive Leadership

First Supervisor

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Second Supervisor

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Subject Categories

Education

Beating the Odds: An Exploration of the Lived School Experiences of New York City
Alternative High School Graduates

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

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Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher College

December 2019

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Dedication

To my God and Savior Jesus Christ, you have been my rock and foundation. I give you the utmost thanks. It is my belief that without your “test” there would not be testimony today. God, you have guided me through the most difficult moments in life and doctoral process and for that I give you all the glory.

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, Calvin Ericson Gumbs who worked tirelessly to provide for his wife, his children, his family, and anyone requiring a helping hand. You have helped to make me the strong, intelligent, empathetic, and humorous woman I am today. After your passing I often wondered if you were proud of me. In this very moment I know that the job has been well done and it is well with your soul.

To my mother, Thelma Johnson I could not have made it this far without you. You have been the caretaker to my children, my chef, my doctor, my therapist, and spiritual healer when I felt like I had nothing left to give. You have taught me what it means to be a woman, mother, wife, and leader. You believed in me when I lost belief in myself. You are truly remarkable. Mommy, if I have not said it enough, “thank you.”

To my daughters Heaven, Leilanni, and Kadiejah thank you for coming into my life as a driving force. Completing this dissertation was very time consuming and stressful therefore, I thank you little ladies for your support, encouragement, and selfless sacrifices. I am extremely proud to be chosen as your mother and there would be no me without you three. To my husband, I thank you for allowing me to find my way and spread my wings. Self-discovery is a large part of why I am here now. To my siblings

and siblings-in-love, thank you for your support and encouragement. To my grandmother, Edrick York, thank you for being a pillar of strength in our family. To my family, friends, professors, colleagues, and mentors, “thank you.” This process has truly shown me that the statement “it takes a village” is beyond truthful.

A warm thanks go to my dissertation committee: Dr. Shelley Jallow, chair, and Dr. Byron Hargrove, committee member. Dr. Jallow, you have truly been exactly what I needed at all times. When I believed I knew it all you humbled me, when I lost faith you encouraged me, when I messed up and missed the mark you held me accountable, and when I didn’t believe you believed. Words cannot express how dear you are to my heart. Dr. Hargrove, you remained patient with me and always explained things as if they were the easiest things in the world. Your insight and counsel definitely aided me in crossing the finish line. Thank you both very much.

Special thank you to my team Sankofa-Balance. I would not be here today without your support. Dr. Delacy Davis and Dr. James Robinson of the “divine” cohort 9. The two of you have been supportive, caring, and absolutely amazing through this journey. I never knew that what began as respect for classmates would leave me with brand new family members. I thank you both for appreciating and caring for me. To Dr. Rachelle Hall, my accountability partner, “thank you.” You have been my sister and friend. I appreciate all the calls and text messages. Last but certainly not least the members of Cohort 9 I am thankful my life has led me to cross paths with each of you. Each weekend you pushed me to think critically and embody social justice. “We looked back, to see forward and created a necessary balance the entire way.” See each of you at the finish line.

Biographical Sketch

Edrick R. Johnson serves as an Associate Vice President of Career and Education Pathways at New York City Mission Society. Mrs. Johnson began her career in New York City transfer high schools in 2008. She has served in the role of Advocate Counselor, College and Career Counselor, Internship Coordinator, Program Manager, and Senior Director. Ms. Johnson attended The City of New York Brooklyn College and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology, specializing in Speech Pathology in 2007. She received her Master of Science in Education degree in School Counseling from Long Island University Brooklyn Campus in 2012.

Mrs. Johnson began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher College at Iona College in the spring of 2017 and successfully defended her dissertation in December 2019. Her research entitled “Beating the Odds: An Exploration of the Lived School Experiences of New York City Alternative High School Graduates.” A narrative inquiry study was conducted under the direction of Dr. Shelley Jallow and Dr. Byron Hargrove.

Abstract

The high school graduation rate in New York City has increased approximately 25% over the last 10 years (New York Department of Education, 2019). While there have been improvements in the graduation rates, approximately 30% of NYC high school students do not graduate within the 4-year timeframe. The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of recent NYC alternative high school graduates related to the *Framework for Great Schools*' three elements of trust, supportive environment, and strong family/community ties (NYCDOE, 2019). The research data was captured through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The data was analyzed and the findings revealed that recent NYC alternative graduates' experiences related to their traditional schools were primarily negative, attributed their successful completion of high school to staff relationships and motivation built within their alternative high school settings, and recent NYC alternative high school graduates function best in environments that are smaller in size and participants. The findings were linked to the three elements of trust, strong family/community ties, and supportive environments as defined by the Framework for Great Schools. Recommendations include schools intentionally creating a nonjudgmental and supportive environment, promoting/conducting non-disciplinary communication and outreach with student families, and creating policies within school to reacclimatize students who have returned from a long-term absence or suspension. .

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) continues to find ways to improve the high school graduation rates for the largest public school system in the United States. The traditional high school graduation rate for NYC is based on the number of students who complete 44 credits in multiple subject areas and pass five Regents exams over a 4-year span (NYCDOE, 2018b). The NYC high school graduation rates drastically improved between the 2001 cohort (46.5%) to the 2014 cohort (72.7%) (NYCDOE Graduation Rate Report, 2019). The 2013-2014 high school cohort began with over 70,000 high school students and 80.2% of them graduated. While there have been improvements in the graduation rates, approximately 30% of NYC high school students do not graduate within the 4-year timeframe. Consequently, a significant number of New York City high school students are still not graduating on time and the New York Department of Education has designed a range of strategies to deal with this problem (NYCDOE, 2018b).

New York City students who have demonstrated at-risk behaviors such as truancy, cutting class, and chronic class failure may delay on time graduation. Most students with delayed on time graduation choose three possible pathways. The first pathway is remaining enrolled in a traditional high school or alternative high school. The second pathway is to enroll in a program offering non-diploma credentials such as Skills and Assessment Commencement Credentials (SACC) or the Career Development and Occupational Studies (CDOS) credential. The third pathway for delayed graduation

students is to drop out of high school. Of the approximately 30 % of students who did not graduate on time within the 2013-2014 cohort, 18.5% of these students remained on roster at a New York City Department of Education traditional or alternative high school program (NYCDOE, 2018b). According to the NYCDOE (2018b), 1.4% of students not graduating on-time receive non-diploma credentials such as the SACC or the CDOS credential, and 7.5% dropped out of high school and never reenrolled.

Researchers have found students who fail to graduate from high school, are more likely to seek assistance from government programs, such as welfare, commit crime, and experience health problems as compared to students who graduate from high school (Aloise-Young & Chavez, 2002; Rumberger, 2004; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Students who fail high school often become a burden to society and increase their risk of other problems (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Students presenting challenges of truancy, pregnancy, drug use, chronic absenteeism from school are typically identified as “at-risk” youth and are often equated with high school dropouts (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010). High school dropouts are 63 times more likely to be incarcerated than a 4-year college graduate (Wilcox & Angelis, 2011). High school students who drop out of school often experience difficulties transitioning to adulthood. (Belfield & Levin, 2007). Given the importance of educational accomplishment to the future achievement of a young adult’s transition to adulthood, understanding why high school students drop out of school is imperative to ensure that all young adults are prepared to enter the adult world. Some researchers believe that many students who drop out of high school are still academically capable and therefore could finish high school if given the right type of educational choices (Franklin, 1992; Franklin & Streeter, 1995).

One educational solution to increasing persistence while addressing the needs of academically disadvantaged students is enrollment in alternative schools. According to Ruebel, Ruebel, and O’Laughlin (2001) “One of the most promising approaches for addressing the needs of dropouts, as well as students struggling in traditional schools and considering dropping out, is placement in an alternative school program” (p. 58). In many schools, at-risk students meet the fate that was predicted for them—failure to complete high school. However, there are some schools where these students are remaining in school and exceeding expectations. Many of those "beat-the-odds" schools are small schools (Darrisaw-Akil, Finkelstein, Castro, & Stetar, 2013). While traditional high schools are defined as secondary schools supported by public funding and operated by local public districts (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010), an alternative school is defined as: “ a public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education” (United States Department of Education[USDOE], 2012, p. 55).

At the New York State level, alternative schools are educational options for students who are at risk of dropping out of school. These schools are designed to remain engaged in an alternative learning environment that focuses on their particular skills, abilities, and learning styles (NYSED, 2018). Each state has the autonomy to add to the federal definition of alternative schools to meet their need, and therefore, there is no standardization of the alternative schools (Schwab, Johnson, Ansley, Houchins, & Varjas, 2016). Alternative high schools in New York City are defined as small, full-time high schools designed to reengage students who have dropped out or fallen behind in credits (NYCDOE, 2018b). The flexibility and varied models of alternative schools may be the

reason that alternative schools have not received full institutional legitimacy or validity from traditional educators (Raywid, 1999).

School reforms instituted in NYC to address the needs of at-risk students have resulted in the creation of new educational options such as charter schools, learning centers, magnet schools, fundamental schools, and alternative schools. In NYC, transfer high schools, a special type of alternative school, were developed in the early 1990s (Metis Associates, 2009) in order to help at-risk-students graduate within a 6-year timeframe (Dennis-Warren, 2017). Within alternative schools in New York City, smaller learning communities were created by the Department of Education and has led to a growth of small secondary schools (Darrisaw-Akil et al., 2013). Small schools are defined as schools that are composed of less than 600 students (Hemphill, Nauer, Zelon, & Jacobs, 2009). Alternative high schools in New York City serve approximately 300 students or fewer (Metis Associates, 2010). In New York City, the growth of small schools expanded from just 32 in 1993 under former New York City School Chancellor Joseph Fernandez to 53 schools under the former New York City School Chancellor Carmen Farina's leadership in 2010. As a part of the current Mayor Bill DeBlasio administration, former School Chancellor Farina extended funds to 13 alternative high schools. Community-based organizations (CBO) received funding to manage Learning-to-Work Programs (LTW) (NYCDOE, 2018). LTW programs were designed to help overaged under-credited (OA-UC) students stay engaged in school by developing the skills they needed to complete high school, gain employment, and succeed in post-secondary education (Dennis-Warren, 2017).

Transfer high schools in New York City, are a form of continuation schools. Continuation schools are education settings that were created as a means of reengaging and retaining students who have not benefitted from extracurricular activities found in the traditional setting such as clubs, sports teams, and other incentive programs (Dennis-Warren, 2017). The goal of the transfer school is to address the needs of students who are over aged and under-credited (OA-UC) (Metis Associates, 2009). Transfer schools emerged as a result of policy shifts in the NYCDOE, which focused on small schools that partnered with CBOs. Their mission is to afford students additional opportunities for graduation such as test prep, attendance outreach, and academic counseling (New York City, 2018). Perhaps, most importantly, transfer schools provide additional time. Transfer schools are allowed more time to graduate students as a part of the 6-year cohort (Dennis-Warren, 2017). According to Dennis-Warren (2017), transfer schools provide two additional years for students to get on track and graduate. The data associated with each cohort is based on the year that students enter high school, with the exception of those who are entering the country for the first time. In those cases, their cohort is based on the year of enrollment. The 53 alternative high schools in New York City remain in existence within the five boroughs of New York City, and operate so students have increased chances for success.

Alternative high schools have a number of advantages and disadvantages. The alternative schools, currently run by school districts in the United States, struggle with negative stigmas as dumping grounds, or warehouses for at-risk students who are falling behind, have behavioral problems, pregnancy concerns, or are juvenile delinquents (Kim, 2008). On the other hand, others have found alternative schools to be student-centered,

and caring environments, which emphasize strengths, resources, and interpersonal relationships (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Dennis-Warren, 2017; Morley, 1991; Schargel & Smink, 2001). What remains unanswered is, what components of successful alternative schools can be attributed to student achievement.

There continues to be a debate over the value and effectiveness of alternative high schools. Some researchers believe the educational system has increasingly used alternative schools to warehouse underperforming students considered disruptive in traditional schools (Cox, 1999; Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009). Placing all students who display at-risk behavior in a single academic setting is considered warehousing (Lehr et al., 2009). Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian, Justin, and Lequia (2016) suggested school districts offer specialize program design for high school students who have high rates of course failure or low credit accumulation. They suggested while alternative programs are developed to increase student success, there is little research that evaluates the academic, career, and social adjustment outcomes for students, or outcomes from the unique at-risk student perspective.

Nationally, at-risk students enrolled in alternative high schools continue to face a range of mental health concerns, socioeconomic limitations, and academic challenges (Aron, 2006). According to data collected by the NYCDOE, NYC alternative high schools are primarily located in neighborhoods with high levels of poverty (NYCDOE, 2018b). Many NYC students enrolled in alternative schools have experienced academic failure, based on specific criteria that are outlined by the state in which they attend school (Aron, 2006). Alternative schools, in general, nationally tend to enroll students who are most at risk for academic failure, underprivileged, and most in need of academic

intervention (Brown & Beckett, 2007). The population of typical alternative schools consists of individuals who live in poverty, experience language barriers, earn poor grades, have poor school attendance, and/or have disabilities, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, or autism, to name a few (Carver et al., 2010). While efforts within schools are being made to narrow gaps, schools are still facing the challenges of meeting the needs of non-traditional learners, discipline demands, and dissatisfied youth. Perzigian, Afacan, Justin, and Wilkerson (2017) concluded the discrepancies in enrollment patterns within alternative schools suggest inequitable access to educational opportunities such as technology, lack of space, and updated reading materials, thus mirroring inequalities alternative school students face societally. According to data collected by the NYCDOE (2018b), alternative high schools in New York City, are primarily located in neighborhoods with high levels of poverty. Additional research needs to be conducted to determine if students attending alternative schools in New York City feel they are receiving these opportunities.

Principals of transfer schools in New York City believe the school setting is beneficial to students who attend because they are tailored to serve at-risk students, whose history makes academic success problematic at best, but they do not compromise on the rigor of academics (Dennis-Warren, 2017). As a part of the partnership with CBOs, transfer school students receive services, such as individual counseling, attendance outreach, home visits, college and career readiness training, and paid internships (Metis Associates, 2009). NYC transfer schools have several systems in place which assist with preparation for both college and careers. According to the NYCDOE (2018b), the transfer school model includes innovative academic curriculum and full-time

high school programs seeking to reengage overaged, under credited students who have dropped out of school. To address some of the shortfalls that their students arrive with, transfer schools provide: seminars to support academic and personal growth, tutoring and Regents preparation services, incentive opportunities, cultural exposure to the arts, and preparation for the rigors of college and careers (Dennis-Warren, 2017). Although the number of New York City alternative schools have more than quadrupled over the last 15 years, these alternative schools have been criticized for development and implementation without sound planning, adequate staffing, and other organizational flaws (Raywid, 2001). Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan, Justin, and Datar (2016) posited that if NYC alternative schools are to meet the needs of students, policies and procedures will need to be identified and evaluated to improve the effectiveness of alternative schools.

Dennis-Warren (2017) recently used qualitative methodology with NYC principals of high performing transfer high schools to discover the behaviors, characteristics, and traits of highly effective school leaders serving low-income African American students in New York City transfer schools. The study was conducted using qualitative methodology with principals of high-performing transfer high schools. The study determined that highly effective principals of transfer schools must be committed to student success, provide support to ensure teacher success, have high expectations of all stakeholders, and have systems in place to build capacity through distributed leadership to provide leadership to transfer schools. Though the Dennis-Warren (2017) study added to the body of research related to effective transfer schools, it did not evaluate the schools from the students' perspectives. How do current students enrolled in alternative high schools view the alternative high schools?

Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian, et al. (2016) quantitatively evaluated outcomes of students in a behavior-focused alternative school. The study found that students who attend a behavior- focused alternative school significantly earned more credits, received fewer office referrals, and received fewer suspensions than when they were enrolled in their traditional school setting. The authors suggested best practices for alternative schools to achieve student success. Unfortunately, the study did not collect qualitative data to illustrate the meaning of the quantitative data collected.

Alternative schools nationwide typically utilize many different quantitative indicators such as: school attendance, credits earned, number of suspensions, office referrals, and systems to determine success. For example, Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian, et al. (2016) investigated the effectiveness of secondary behavior-focused alternative schools using the follow variables: school attendance, credits earned, number of office referral, and number of suspensions. The ambiguity remains, although alternative schools have been shown to be effective, over what specific components within alternative schools lead to student success, or whether effective alternative schools are even able to be identified.

Problem Statement

Collectively, the empirical evidence from the national and NYC alternative high school literature suggests that alternative schools have the ability to engage, retain, and graduate at-risk students (Dennis-Warren, 2017; Denton, 2018; Franklin, Streeter, Kim, & Tripodi, 2007; Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan et al., 2016). Furthermore, the evidence from practical experience in NYC alternative high schools suggests students have strong connections with staff members and peers within their school communities and have

increased academic success in alternative schools in NYC. The practical experience is consistent with the national literature findings (Franklin et al., 2007; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan et al., 2016). However, there continues to be a number of key deficiencies such as unanswered questions, limitations, or flaws in design in empirical research in the US and NYC alternative high schools.

The empirical research related to alternative schools and student outcomes have been conducted at single sites, quantitatively, or from the perspective of individuals other than the students. The proposed study intends to evaluate the lived experiences of alternative high school graduates, qualitatively, and at multiple sites located throughout New York City. A question that remains to be answered by current empirical data is: What components of the alternative schools aided in the success of students? The scores of students have been evaluated, the perspectives of principals have been noted, yet the voices of successful graduates of alternative schools remain unheard. The voices of alternative school graduates are relevant and important because they have successfully graduated from an alternative school, have experienced a traditional high school environment, and can provide unique insight related to their experiences and paths to success. This study will add to the body of research related to alternative school education and inform both educational administrators and non-profit community-based organizations of best practices and effective alternative-school methods.

Theoretical Rationale

The primary framework to guide this study is based on three components of the Five Essential Supports for School Improvement as defined by Bryk and Schneider (2002). In Table 1.1, the Framework for Great Schools six elements, indicators, and

measures for predicting growth of students are described. The Framework for Great Schools was used to develop the research questions and interview questions for the study. This study intends to answer the research questions by exploring the lived experiences of New York City alternative high school graduates through the lens of the Framework for Great Schools (Framework) (NYCDOE, 2018a). The NYCDOE (2018a) states the Framework for Great Schools was applied from the research conducted by Bryk and Schneider (2002) to ensure that all students compete and engage as citizens in the 21st century. Intensive case-study research and longitudinal analysis was conducted with more than 400 Chicago elementary schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Bryk and Schneider (2002) stated that “trust does not directly affect academic performance, but fosters organizational conditions, which in turn promote activities that do directly affect learning” (p. 34). This theory was developed as a conclusion to their ten-year, mixed-method, longitudinal study which focused on school improvement. The concept of trust was derived as an answer to why some schools embraced change while others remained ineffectual (Denton, 2018).

Table 1.1

The Framework for Great Schools Elements, Indicators, and Measures for Predicting Growth

Element	Indicator	What “Good” Looks Like
Supportive Environment	Safety and order Social emotional learning Academic support and press	A school culture where students feel safe, supported, and challenged by their teachers and peers; and are engaged in ambitious intellectual activity.
Strong Family Community Ties	Parent involvement School-school leaderships	School leadership drawing on the resources within the building and from the local community; encouraging partnerships with families, local businesses, community organizations, and city agencies.
Trust	Family-staff trust Central trust Student-teacher trust Staff trust	Across all relationships, there is respect, personal regard, assumed competence, and integrity; and all parties value and respect each other.

Note. Adapted from <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlvres/620F30E4-IFA2-4ABC-9667-66529530290C/0/FrameworkforGreatSchoolsQverview.pdf>

The Framework for Great Schools identifies six essential elements: (a) trust; (b) effective school leadership; (c) supportive environment; (d) rigorous instruction; (e) strong family-community ties; and (f) collaborative teachers. According to the Framework for Great Schools, student success is achieved when at least three of the six elements are strong. Figure 1.1 shows that when schools are strong in three or more dimensions, sustain improvement is ten time more likely than schools that are weak in three or more areas. Schools weak in most of the six elements are thirty times more likely to stagnate than schools that are strong in most areas (NYCDOE, 2018a).

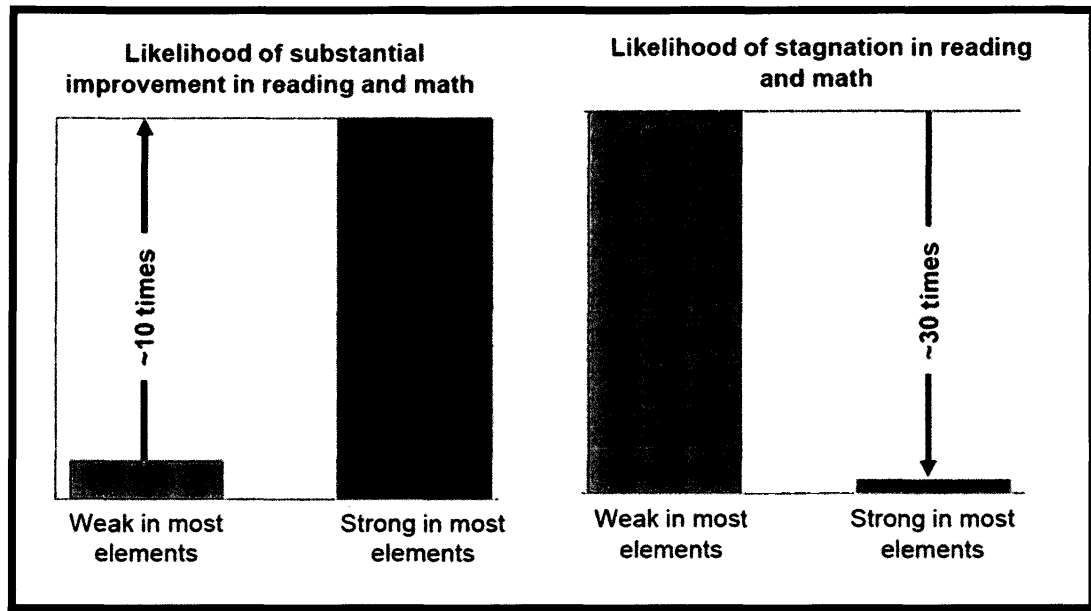


Figure 1.1. Strength vs. weakness in Framework for Great Schools elements, Reprinted from <http://schools.nyc.gov>.

Student achievement is at the core of the Framework for Great Schools. The layers of the Framework for Great Schools can be seen in Figure 1.2. The Framework has three student support essentials that surround the core. These elements are supportive environment, rigorous instruction, and collaborative teachers. The next layer of the Framework focuses on supports that are required beyond the classroom setting. This layer of the Framework incorporates strong family-community ties and effective school leadership as a collaboration. The last layer of the Framework for Great Schools is the element of trust. Trust ties all five supports together. The building of trust across the system within schools to include administrators, educators, students, and families is the foundation of the Framework for Great Schools (NYCDOE, 2018a). The NYCDOE (2018a) states the Chicago Consortium on School Research (CCSR) provides powerful evidence that interplay among all the areas is equally important, and improvement in one area can be leveraged to create improvement in other areas.

The Framework for Great Schools



Figure 1.2. The Framework for Great Schools. Reprinted from <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/about-us/vision-and-mission/framework-for-great-schools>.

Each element of the Framework for Great Schools is unique and important to overall school success. The impact on student achievement and learning is strongest when all elements are present (NYCDOE, 2018a). The Framework for Great Schools have been used by the NYCDOE since 2016 to help identify effective schools and create a pathway for improvement for schools not meeting all the standards of the Framework (NYCDOE, 2018a). In this study, three elements of the Framework for Great Schools will be utilized. The three elements are strong family- community ties, trust, and supportive environment. The Framework for Great Schools will be used in this study as a comparison tool. The researcher will examine the narratives of recent New York City alternative high school graduates utilizing the Framework for Great Schools to identify any connections between graduate success and the four identified components of the Framework for Great Schools.

Statement of Purpose

Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of recent NYC transfer school graduates and their perceptions of how the

NYC alternative school components and experiences related to trust, supportive environment, and strong family/community ties as defined by the Framework for Great Schools helped them earn their high school diploma. Building on the line of research focused on alternative high school outcomes (Dennis-Warren, 2017; Franklin et al., 2007; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al., 2016) and the Framework for Great School (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), there continues to be a need for more research to identify the key components of effective alternative schools from the viewpoint of successful graduates. Successful graduates have attended both traditional and alternative high schools and can provide beneficial insight regarding factors which have led to their success. Research focused on alternative high school outcomes have primarily been conducted quantitatively and therefore, there is a need for qualitative research. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the lived experiences of successful transfer high school graduates. The voices of successful recent graduates were used to highlight their experiences in and perspectives of alternative schools, framed by the key components of effective schools identified by the Great Schools Framework. This research endeavors to contribute to closing the gap in the literature about alternative high schools in NYC. Research has not yet identified a standardized framework or specific components that lead to successful student outcomes.

Research Questions

The primary research questions that will guide this study are the following:

1. How do recent New York City alternative high school graduates describe their lived high school experiences before attending a New York City alternative high school?

2. What specific components and experiences within a New York City alternative school do recent high school graduates identify helped them achieve academic, social, and personal success during their high school years?

3. What specific components and experiences within a New York City alternative school do recent graduates identify helped them earn their high school diploma?

Potential Significance of the Study

The significance of understanding the in-depth perspectives of a small cohort of recent alternative high school graduates can help improve educational policy formation, resource allocation, and teaching and learning strategies. De La Ossa's (2005) qualitative study of alternative school students found that at-risk students can give valuable feedback about public schools and that this feedback has implications for education policy. The narratives of graduates of alternative schools can provide insight which can help prevent current students from dropping out. This study can help identify and understand which programs and resources help at risk students in traditional schools and alternative schools. More pointedly, if the researcher can identify specific components for effective secondary schools the data can help traditional schools increase the on-time graduation rates.

Definitions of Terms

Alternative School—designed for students at risk of not graduating from high school; an alternative school is typically a public school that has at least 30 students but not more than 250 students and has a separate administrator or teacher in charge of the school and offers a nontraditional curriculum (Aron, 2005).

Change the educational system—alternatives that attempt to make system-wide change in educational systems. Many of the approaches to education championed through advocates for these types of systems are in effect today and include the small-schools movement and the school-within-a-school movement (Raywid, 1994).

Change the student—alternatives that attempt to fix the student. These schools are temporary assignments that are highly structured and often contain therapeutic components (Raywid, 1994).

Change the school—highly innovative schools that focus on changing the curriculum and instructional approaches to traditional education. These schools are typified by a highly positive school climate (Raywid, 1994).

Community-based organizations (CBO)—small, informal organizations that provide various services towards the development of local communities and can be used as channels to route development information and other resources required to improve living conditions in communities (Opare, 2007).

Graduation Cohort—a group of students who are expected to graduate in 4 years with a regular high school diploma from the start of high school (Dennis-Warren, 2017).

Nontraditional Education—educational programs that are offered as alternatives within or without the formal educational system and provide innovative and flexible instruction, curriculum, grading systems, or degree requirements (Horn & Jerome, 1996).

Overaged—students who are one or more grade levels behind their peer group (Dennis-Warren, 2017).

Six-year Transfer school cohort- Transfer schools provide two additional years for students to get on track and graduate (Dennis-Warren, 2017).

Traditional high schools- are defined, as secondary schools that are supported by public funding and operates by local public districts (NCES, 2012).

Transfer schools – Small, academically rigorous, full-time high schools designed to re-engage students who have dropped out or who have fallen behind in credits (NYCDOE, 2018b).

Overaged – Students who are one or more grade levels behind their peer group (Dennis-Warren, 2017).

Under-credited – Students who do not meet the minimum credit requirement to be considered a part of a designated grade level (Dennis-Warren, 2017).

Chapter Summary

This study will advance the knowledge about lived experiences of New York City alternative high school graduates. The theoretical framework that will be utilized is the Framework for Great Schools. The Framework for Great Schools represents a multilayered and dynamic construct. This study will focus on the self-reported narratives of New York City alternative high school graduates. The literature on alternative schools and the essential elements of the Framework are reviewed in Chapter 2. The methods employed to conduct the study are described and outlined in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 provides data analysis and findings of the study. Chapter 5 provides implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

The graduation rates of New York City high school students have steadily increased over the last decade. Despite the increase in graduation rates, 30% of students in New York City do not graduate with a high school diploma within 4 years. The dropout rate has decreased nationally, yet there are still over one million students in the United States who drop out of school each year (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2013). Therefore, alternative schools have been enlisted as an intervention to improve the value of education for at-risk students to decrease the number of students who drop out (Hoyle & Collier, 2006). An understanding of the characteristics of effective alternative schools is needed for educational leaders to implement and maintain alternative schools. Subsequently, by classifying these characteristics and providing the same dynamics to all students within alternative schools that do not yet offer them, student success and on-time high school graduation rates should increase. In this chapter, the literature on the history of alternative schools, types of alternative schools in the United States, background of transfer schools in New York City, structures and strategies used in alternative schools, elements of the Great Schools Framework, and an empirical review of the perceptions of alternative schools is comprehensively reviewed.

History of Alternative Schools

Alternative programs as we know them today began in the 1960s as private alternatives to public education (Raywid, 1999). Raywid (1983), an early researcher of alternative schools, described alternative schools as those which do not charge students additional costs to attend, are open to all students who wish to voluntarily enroll, and have administrative independence. More recently, however, alternative schools are described as schools for students who are at risk of failing and dropping out of traditional schools as a result of absenteeism, early parenthood, learning difficulties, and/or discipline problems (Slaten, Irby, Tate, & Rivera, 2015; Bullock et al., 2015). These alternative settings were primarily found in urban and suburban areas (Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006) and primarily aimed at making schoolwork for populations that were failing there: minority youngsters and the poor (Raywid, 1999).

The early suburban alternatives became innovative programs seeking to invent and pursue new ways to educate (Raywid, 1998). Two initiatives were adapted and provided the impetus for several movements within the United States (Quinn et al., 2006). The first movement was the free school movement which based its political ideology and educational philosophy on the work of A.S. Neill (Conley, 2002). Neil, an innovative educator, founded the Summerhill school, a private residential school in Great Britain (Quinn et al., 2006). Neil believed that traditional schools confined students and did not respect the personal freedom that students needed to learn (Conley, 2002). The second movement of the freedom school was seen in the southern United States (Raywid, 1998). Free schools and freedom schools were separate movements. Freedom

schools were guided by the philosophy that traditional schools were not appropriate for African American students (Conley, 2002).

The structure of alternative schools differs greatly depending on their philosophical foundation (Quinn et al., 2006). The growth of alternative schools in the early 1990s encouraged Raywid (1994) to develop a three-level classification system for identifying the range of alternative school programs in the United states: (a) Type I, schools that students choose to attend (e.g., magnet schools) that emphasize innovative programs and strategies; (b) Type II, schools also known as last chance schools that students are typically sent to as a last step before expulsion or detention; and (c) Type III, schools that are remedial and therapeutic in nature. This categorization system provided a structure for the discussion and study of alternative schools at the time and has been used over a decade (Quinn et al., 2006). Raywid (1998) refined the original structure to better capture the complexities of alternative schools today. This restructuring also contains three levels:

1. Change the student: alternatives that attempt to fix the student. These schools are temporary assignments that are highly structured and often contain therapeutic components.
2. Change the school: highly innovative schools that focus on changing the curriculum and instructional approaches to traditional education. These schools are typified by highly positive school climate.
3. Change the educational system: alternatives that attempt to make system-wide change in educational systems. Many of the approaches to education championed through advocates for these types of systems are in effect today

and include the small-schools movement and the school-within-a-school movement.

The effectiveness of these alternative programs varies. Change-the-student programs rarely changes the students and typically becomes permanent placement settings (Quinn et al., 2006). In change-the-school programs, students have thrived academically and behaviorally, but often fail when they return to their original traditional school settings (Raywid, 1998). In the change-the-educational system programs, which have been implemented in urban school districts in the United States, report early data showing positive results (Quinn et al., 2006). As the number of alternative schools increased nationally, the different types of alternative schools in the United States increased as a result.

Types of Alternative Schools in the United States

There are several different types of alternative schools with a variation of names and purposes contingent on student needs (Aron, 2006; Hemmer & Uribe, 2012). The decline in student engagement, or the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught (Great Schools Partnership, 2014), in schools over time can lead to delayed graduation or dropping out. As the reasons may vary, traditional schools are often unable to meet the needs of many nontraditional students, leaving them with few options. To address this concern, alternative school designs have a widespread range depending on scope, mission, and accreditation. Raywid (1994) states that:

Despite the ambiguities and the emergence of multiple alternatives, two enduring consistencies have characterized alternative schools from the start: they have been

designed to respond to a group that appears not to be optimally served by the regular program, and, consequently have represented varying degrees of departure from standard school organization, programs and environments. (p. 26)

Young (1990) posits that using the characteristics of alternative schools outside of public education, educators within the public school system designed their own alternatives to conventional education with the advent of open schools. Open schools are defined as autonomy in learning and pace, noncompetitive evaluation, and a child-centered approach (Young, 1990). The presence of the open schools influenced the creation of public alternatives at all levels of education. Some common alternative schools include magnet schools, dropout centers, schools-within-a-schools, discipline centers, free schools, continuation schools, and many others including charter schools (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010; De La Ossa, 2005; Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008; Raywid, 1994; Ruiz De Velasco et al., 2008).

In addition to program design, the scope of alternative education varies depending on the emphasis of the program. Some alternative programs emphasize creativity and innovation while others are designed for disciplinary purposes (Foley & Pang, 2006; Raywid, 1994). Each school has varying distinctive characteristics dependent upon the curriculum and its delivery methods and its structural makeup. Some of these schools include the following:

- Schools without walls: These schools house students at various sites within the community and are designed with flexible schedules to accommodate students needing special educational and/or training programs.

- Schools within a school: These schools are located within the home school, usually in their own distinct wing, and are created for students with academic or behavior problems.
- Multicultural schools: These schools are designed to integrate culture and ethnicity into the curriculum; some had a diverse student body and some catered to a specific ethnic group.
- Continuation schools: These schools are used as an option for those who were failing in the regular school system because of issues such as dropout, pregnancy, failing grades; these schools were less competitive and more individualized.
- Separate alternative learning center: These schools are located at different sites within the community and are established for students with special circumstances such as the need for parenting skills or job skills.
- Fundamental schools: These schools emphasize a back-to-basics approach in reaction to the lack of academic rigor perceived in the free schools.
- Magnet schools: These schools developed in response to the need for racial integration and offer a curriculum that emphasizes themes meant to attract diverse groups of students from a range of racial and cultural backgrounds (Young, 1990).
- College-based alternative school: These schools are usually located at colleges or universities and are intended to assist students who need additional high school credits. They are staffed by public school teachers but provide students with services that boost self-esteem and individual growth.

The City of New York has the highest number of students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools nationwide (NCES, 2018). In addition, New York City developed Transfer High Schools, which are forms of continuation schools, implemented to address the dropout rates and lack of on-time graduation.

Background of Transfer Schools in New York City

To address the concerns of the high dropout rates in New York City, in 2005 the Mayor Bloomberg Initiative and the NYCDOE's Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation (OMPG) were created in October (Metis Associates, 2009). According to the NYCDOE (2005), dropout rates in New York City public high schools have been a continuous concern. New York City ranked 43rd among 50 most populated U.S. cities in terms of its public high school graduation rates according to a 2008 report (Swanson, 2008). New York City's on-time graduation rates have been estimated at only 45% and is far below the national average of 74% (NYCDOE, 2005). The Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation's main purpose was to assist with developing stronger high schools that would lead to high school graduation and enhanced post-secondary opportunities for overaged, under-credited (OA-UC) youth (NYCDOE, 2005). In 2007-2008, there were almost 72,000 young adults who were enrolled in New York City public high schools who were considered OA-UC, that is, they were at least 2 years behind their expected age and credit accumulation in relation to expectation for high school graduation (Metis Associates, 2009). As a part of the OMPG reconfiguration of New York City public schools, transfer schools were developed (Metis Associates, 2010).

The NYCDOE (2005) defines transfer schools as small, academically rigorous, full-time high schools designed to re-engage students who have dropped out or who have

fallen behind in credits. The eligibility requirements for enrollment into a Transfer High School include the following criteria: students are 16 years or older, history of low attendance, students have received recommendations from a traditional high school, and students who have completed an intake process which includes completion of an application, interview, and an assessment to inform class placement (NYCDOE, 2018b).

The mission of a Transfer High School is to provide students with additional opportunities to graduate (Metis, 2009). Transfer High Schools are partnered with community-based organizations (CBOs). CBOs are small, informal organizations that provide various services towards the development of local communities and can be used as channels to route development information and other resources required to improve living conditions in communities (Opare, 2007). In Transfer High Schools, community-based organizations provide students with attendance outreach, counseling, case management, student engagement events, employability skill development, academic support, internships, and college and career planning (Metis Associates, 2010). For the purpose of clarity in this dissertation, transfer schools will be referred to as alternative schools because they are a subset of the category of alternative schools. Understanding the background of transfer schools is essential to this study. The researcher examined the lived experiences of successful transfer school graduates to identify what elements graduates consider create an effective alternative school.

Structures and Strategies Used in Alternative Schools

In an urban school district, there are many critical factors that contribute to student success and graduation. This study sought to determine if at-risk alternative graduates lived experiences of what makes a successful alternative school matches with

what is being offered at alternative schools in New York City. Since what happens in the classroom can significantly impact student outcomes, it is important for researchers to identify the type of school structures that allow the optimal classroom environment to exist.

Solution-focused alternative schools. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) examined the traditional and alternative school experiences of at-risk students currently attending a public alternative school that was designed using the practice methods and philosophy of solution-focused brief therapy (Kim & Franklin, 2009). The data was drawn from a quasi-experimental mixed method study that assessed the effectiveness of the alternative public high school in preventing school dropout (Kelly et al., 2008). In this mixed method study, a pretest-posttest comparison group design was used to compare credits earned, attendance, and graduation rates of students attending the alternative school to a group of students attending a traditional public high school in the area. The qualitative data in the study was collected using a case study design and semi-structured individual interviews with a subsample of students attending the alternative school. The researchers used the results of the qualitative interviews to gain student perspectives about both traditional education and alternative education.

In the findings, students received one-to-one personal attention. Students attributed their increased learning to smaller classroom sizes. Students believed that the alternative schools focused on student strengths and allowed students to set their own goals. Overall, students felt that they had benefitted from the Solution-Focused Alternative School (SFAS) and had achieved at a level they could not have accomplished

in their traditional schools. A limitation of this study is that the study was conducted at only one solution-focused school program.

In a study by Franklin et al. (2007), an evaluation of the effectiveness of a solution-focused, alternative school preventing students from dropping out of high school was conducted. The study was a quasi-experimental, pretest-posttest group design. The researchers conducted the study in the Austin Texas Independent School District (AISD). Franklin et al. (2007) used both convenience and purposive sampling procedures. The experimental group consisted of 46 solution-focused alternative school (SFAS) students recruited from a list of students who attended one of the three large public high schools before attending an alternative school. The comparison group consisted of 39 public high schools. The overall findings support a solution-focused school's ability to engage, retain, and graduate high-risk students. The students in a solution-focused alternative high school also increased in academic gains.

Smaller classroom size. The study of class size and its association to achievement dates to the late 1800s. The first empirical study looked at class size and its influence on achievement was conducted in the early 20th century (Rice, 1902). It is difficult to take away much useable information from Rice's study because he reported very few numbers. From then until 1920, there were a few other studies about class size, but their nonexperimental logic and lack of experimental control made their results of little use (Glass & Smith, 1979). Since the 1920s, research related to class size has evolved. A study conducted by Bausell, Moody, and Walze (1972) found that students who receive instruction within smaller classroom sizes perform better academically on exams. Students in 4th and 5th grades were randomly assigned to receive individual

tutoring for one hour over 2 days on exponential arithmetic. The other group was placed with randomly comparable teachers for the same amount of time with 25 students. The same test was administered to both groups. The smaller class scored approximately one-half deviation above the class with 25 students (Glass & Smith, 1979).

A study conducted by Bain and Achilles (1986) reported that students who were placed in smaller classroom performed better on standardized exams than students in larger classes. This study was referred to as the Project Prime Time. Teachers reported that the classes with smaller number of students had fewer behavior-related problems. In addition, teachers who instructed in smaller classes reported that they were more productive and efficient as teachers than in larger classroom settings. The results from this study in Indiana led the state of Tennessee's legislature to appropriate \$3 million in the first year for a study of students in kindergarten and then distributed similar amounts in succeeding years for the project. The project was known as Student-Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR). The STAR project included classes from inner-city, urban, suburban, and rural areas so that development of children from different backgrounds could be reviewed. What was found was students who had been in smaller classes in Grades K-3 scored higher than those who had been in regular-sized classes (Mosteller, 1995). In the 1990s, two more studies followed that also found a connection to a learning increase when classroom size was smaller (Finn & Achilles, 1999; Molner, 1999).

Re-engaging Practices

There is a significant amount of time and effort put in by parents, teachers, schools, communities, and school boards to ensure young people have the structure and support to earn a high school diploma. In today's society, a high school dropout is

predicted to live below the poverty line (Rumberger, 2013). The need for a high school diploma may not secure one's future like previous generations, but it still opens doors for higher learning, work, or a career. Identifying re-engagement practices that are successful with at-risk students is important to decrease the dropout rate and increase on time graduation. Lehr et al. (2009) posited that since alternative students are considered at-risk, simply measuring academic progress may not adequately describe the effect that an alternative program setting may have on student success. Only measuring academic success discounts, the fact, that students who attend alternative programs typically gain self-esteem, attend school more regularly, and develop stronger personal relationships (Lehr et al., 2009).

Re-engaging students to an educational environment requires an environment that is conducive to student success (Conrath, 2001; Kim, 2010). Yet, determining what establishes an environment that is encouraging to success can have several meanings. Some strategies used to re-engage students have been later start times, teacher communication of high standards, personalization, and creation of supportive environments. The National Association of School Psychologists stated that facilitating social emotional support for students is a necessary component for at-risk student success because of the link between social-emotional health and academic success (Suldo et al., 2009).

One of the key features of small schools that give them an advantage over big schools is the ability of staff to form close relationships with students. Small alternative schools allow for teachers to identify with students and form a sympathetic bond. The lack of bond between alternative education teachers and students can stifle the necessary

trust with students to build “empathetic understanding, and a special vision for their students” (Kim, 2010, p. 91). Schools which tend to provide increased personalization are schools where teachers and other staff members take an active role in the holistic development of their students.

Yeager (2014) suggested that when teachers communicate high standards to students with the assurance that the students have the potential to reach those standards, as a result, there will be an increase in trust and an improvement in the academic behavior of at-risk youth. Students who are more confident are more likely to re-engage to their educational setting (Kim, 2010). Tomlinson (2015) recommended that we challenge and engage students by “teaching for excellence in academically diverse classrooms” (p. 203). When students are aware that they are not being engaged and are being instructed with poor pedagogy, the end result is a tendency to disconnect.

The later start times at the non-traditional academies allow adolescent students the option to attend a school that meets the adolescent students’ more natural sleep patterns. Later start times are accessible at the nontraditional academies because juvenile students tend to go to bed later and wake up later (Caskadon, 1999; Dement & Vaughn, 1999). Structuring alternative programs with systematic intervention supports such as later start times will often yield improved student behavior, attendance, and academic progress (Raywid, 1994). Understanding some of the strategies and structures that encourage re-engagement of at-risk students helped the researcher for this study establish correlations when analyzing the narratives of graduates of alternative high schools in New York City.

Chapter Summary

The U.S. education system has created alternative schools to decrease the number of at-risk students leaving school prematurely and serve these students by using different methods than found in traditional educational settings (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). The number of alternative schools in the United States has risen from 2,606 alternative schools in 1993 to more than 10,900 in 2001 (Saunders & Saunders, 2001). Alternative educational programs are not only growing in number, they are growing in diversity across the United States and vary greatly in their design, philosophy, and effectiveness (Fizzell & Raywid, 1997) The literature reviewed focuses on the resilience, types of alternative schools, strategies, and educational factors that impact student school performance. We lack information regarding exactly how alternative high schools approach meeting the needs of their students (De La Ossa, 2005). Students attending alternative schools have high self-esteem, more positive attitudes toward school, improved school attendance, higher academic performance, and decreased delinquent behaviors than when they attend traditional schools (Cox, 1999).

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of recent NYC alternative high school graduates related to the three elements of trust, supportive environment, and strong family/community ties as defined by the *Framework* for Great Schools. This chapter begins with a discussion regarding the rationale for the use of qualitative narrative methodology. Chapter 3 provides detailed descriptions of where and how the study was performed. Specific information about the participants of the study are detailed in this chapter, and this chapter also provides specific information about the semi-structured interview questions.

General Perspective

Alternative schools were created to reduce the number of at-risk students leaving school prematurely and assist these students by providing alternate academic options outside of more traditional educational settings (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Being identified in secondary school as an at-risk student with a history of academic and behavioral difficulties is usually a major predictor to failing out of high school (Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al., 2016). However, there is some evidence that effective alternative schools are meeting the needs of at-risk students and produce positive student outcomes such as increased attendance, credit accumulation, and test scores (Karvonen et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the lack of standardization of structure and policy throughout alternative school's cause some to question if alternative schools are the reason for student success (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Raywid, 1994). While

alternative schools are steadily increasing in the United States, particularly in New York City, the empirical research on the practices and characteristics of effective alternative schools are still very vague, inconclusive, and limited (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015).

The New York City Department of Education has emphasized the use of alternative schools to address the at-risk population over the last several decades. Although the graduation rate of NYC high school students has increased by 26% between the 2001 entering freshman cohort and the 2014 cohort and the overall NYC high school dropout rate has decreased by 10.5% between the 2001 cohort and the 2014 cohort, the total number of students not graduating within the standard 4-year timeframe have remained stagnant. Since 2001 roughly 30% of each graduating cohort failed to graduate within 4 years (NYCDOE, 2018b).

While the number of alternative public school settings in New York City has increased from 32 schools in 1993 to 53 schools in 2019, reflecting a 60% increase, there continues to be a debate over the value and return on investment (ROI) of alternative schools in the United States. Empirical studies have documented the advantages and disadvantages of alternative schools (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Dennis-Warren, 2017; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al., 2016). For example, Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian, et al. (2016) posit that if alternative schools are to meet the needs of students, new policies and procedures will need to be identified and adopted to improve the impact of alternative schools. Although there is some evidence that alternative schools are effective for at-risk high school students (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Dennis-Warren, 2017; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al., 2016), specific components within alternative school, that lead to student success, effective NYC alternative school have not been identified.

Quantitative methodology has primarily been used within studies that demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of alternative schools. (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al., 2016).

Many students placed in an alternative education setting have a history of academic and social failure. They were often disproportionately subjected to punitive and exclusionary disciplinary practice and consequences (Flower et al., 2011). Most students in New York City alternative high schools have failed traditional high school. Despite the prior failure in the traditional educational setting graduation rates of high school students in alternative schools in New York City have increased (NYCDOE, 2018b). According to the School Quality Snapshot developed by the New York City Department of Education over 75% of transfer schools have scored excellent or good in at least three of the six elements of *the Framework* for Great Schools (NYCDOE, 2019). While previous alternative high schools have examined principal perspectives (Dennis-Warren, 2017), very few have focused on the vantage points of current students (Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan et al., 2016) or recent graduates.

The researcher elected to study the lived experiences of recent alternative high school graduates by utilizing a qualitative narrative methodology. Qualitative research allows for a deep exploration of how individuals make meaning of their experiences. Qualitative research is appropriate for developing an in-depth understanding of participants' narratives of their experiences (Merriam, 1998). Conducting qualitative research offers the flexibility needed to retell the experiences of the participants in evocative form by utilizing narratives rather than numbers, thus allowing the freedom to employ a methodical approach to gather empirical evidence (Fontana & Frey, 2008).

Most studies related to student success in alternative high school utilized quantitative methods (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan et al., 2016) or have focused on principal perspectives (Dennis-Warren, 2017). The Framework for Great Schools was used as the theoretical framework to guide this study. The Framework for Great Schools is currently used as the evaluation tool for effective NYC public schools utilizing six key elements. For the purposes of this study the researcher applied three of the six elements of the Framework for Great Schools specifically trust, supportive environment, and strong family/community ties. The researcher examined the narratives of recent New York City alternative high school graduates utilizing the Framework for Great Schools, to identify any connections between graduate's success and the three identified components of the Framework for Great Schools. Therefore, by examining the lived experiences of alternative high school graduates the researcher has identified components of alternative high schools that may lead to student success.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of recent NYC alternative high school graduates related to the three elements of trust, supportive environment, and strong family/community ties as defined by the Framework for Great Schools that helped them earn their high school diploma.

The primary research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do recent New York City alternative high school graduates describe their lived-high school experiences before attending a New York City alternative high school?

2. What specific components and experiences within a New York City alternative school do recent high school graduates identify helped them achieve academic, social, and personal success during their high school years?

3. What specific components and experiences within a New York City alternative school do recent graduates identify helped them earn their high school diploma?

Research Context

This study was conducted at three of the 53 transfer high school programs in New York City. The New York City Department of Education currently has 53 transfer high school programs throughout the five boroughs (Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan, and Staten Island). The research context for the present study was delimited to recent graduates from three transfer schools supported by *Pathways from Poverty* (a pseudonym). Pathways from Poverty began working collaboratively with alternative school programs for the NYCDOE in 2005. Pathways from Poverty has over 10 years of experience providing services for at-risk youth enrolled in New York City Transfer high schools. Two schools were omitted because of their high number of English Language Learner student population. The school site in Brooklyn was selected for the study because the graduation rate closely aligned with the overall NYC graduation rate. The sites located in the Bronx and Harlem were selected for the study because their similar graduation rates that align with the median graduation rate for alternative high schools across NYC (NYCDOE, 2019).

Table 3.1 shows the enrollment and graduation characteristics of the three alternative high schools managed by Pathways from Poverty. The table displays the NYC

locations, assigned pseudonym, enrollment, English language learner status, and graduation rates of the alternative high schools that partner with Pathways from Poverty.

Table 3.1

Enrollment & Graduation Characteristics of Three NYC Alternative (Transfer) High Schools Managed by Pathways from Poverty Community-Based Organization

Location	Pseudonym	Enrollment	English Language Learner (Yes/No)	Graduation Rate (%)
Bronx	Site A	315	No	57
Brooklyn	Site B	247	No	70
Manhattan	Site C	325	No	59

Note. The table displays data from the 2018-2019 school year. Adapted from <https://infohub.nyced.org/reports-and-policies/school-quality/school-quality-reports-and-resources>

The Bronx location had a 2018 graduation rate of 45% and the Harlem location had a graduation rate of 59%. The third selected site is located in Brooklyn and has a graduation rate and a cumulative Regent’s rate closely aligned with the overall New York City high school graduation and Regents pass rates. The Brooklyn site has a graduation rate of 80% which closely aligns to the average graduation rate of NYCDOE high schools. Lastly, each selected school site for the study has an average of 45 graduates yearly. Each site was assigned a pseudonym to maintain the anonymity of the school and to add an additional layer of confidentiality for participants.

The three selected sites for this study have similar instructional programming. Each site is on a trimester system which allows students the ability to earn six credits per trimester and 18 credits during the school year excluding summer instruction. At least

70% of the student population at each site falls below the New York City poverty level and the socioeconomic statuses of the student body at the sites are closely aligned. The school site in Brooklyn has a slightly higher number of students living in transitional housing or shelters. Transitional housing is supportive and temporary housing accommodations that aims to bridge a gap between homelessness and permanent housing. The school sites in Brooklyn and Harlem have the same staffing pattern. The school site located in the Bronx has one less counselor due to funding. All other aspects of staffing are the same across school sites.

Research Participants

The study included graduates from three New York City alternative high schools partnered with Pathways from Poverty. All participants were at least 18 years old, attended a New York City traditional high school prior to enrollment in a transfer high school, and graduated between June 2017 and June 2019. Pathways from Poverty provided the researcher with a letter of support and permission to access their internal database called Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) (Appendix A). The database ETO stores active students and alumni demographics which include but is not limited to graduate's year of graduation, previous high schools, site of graduation, date of birth, and contact information (address, email address, and phone numbers). The researcher ran a report within Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) identifying eligible alumni for this study. The report identified 308 alumni who graduated between June 2017 and June 2019, which resulted in a population of 308 graduates.

Sampling procedure. Purposeful sampling is the practice of selecting participants from a known sample that is rich with useful data for a study (Merriam,

1998). Creswell (2007) explained that in qualitative research “the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 125). Purposeful sampling was appropriate for this study because it assisted in selecting participants who could detail their experiences of attending an alternative education program, attending a traditional high school, and graduating from an alternative education program. A purposeful sample was drawn from a population of recent NYC alternative high school graduates three schools partnered with Pathways from Poverty located in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Harlem between June 2017 and June 2019 which totaled 308 graduates. From the 308 graduates, 116 graduates (37.66%) were at least 18 years of age, attended a traditional high school in NYC, prior to attending one of three alternative high schools partnered with Pathways from Poverty. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants to receive information regarding participation within the study. A letter of introduction (Appendix B) and informed consent (Appendix C) was emailed and mailed to the 116 graduates that fit the criteria of at least 18 years old, attended a traditional high school in NYC, and graduated from one of the three schools partnered with Pathways from Poverty between June 2017 and June 2019 for the study. In the graduate introductory letter, participants were asked to email the researcher their signed informed consent to express interest in participating in the study. The letter also included information on compensation for completed interviews (i.e., \$25 gift card).

Two weeks from the distribution of the letter of introduction for graduates and informed consent the researcher received 43 informed consent forms via email (37.93%). The researcher separated the responses by school site. Seventeen (39.53%) responses

were received from the Brooklyn school site, 14 (32.56%) responses were received from the Bronx site, and 12 (27.91%) responses were received from the Harlem school site. The researcher began calling eligible participants to schedule a one-on-one interview. The researcher left two messages and an email for a total of 25 participant and did not receive replies. The 25 participants were eliminated from the study due to lack of response. Two participants were unable to participate in the study due to scheduling conflicts for the remainder of the summer. One participant requested to be withdrawn from the list of eligible participants. The researcher scheduled a total of 15 one-on-one interviews with the remaining 15 eligible participants 3 weeks after the initial distribution of the introductory letter and informed consent. Six of 15 scheduled participants did not show up for their interview times or cancelled more than three times. A total of nine NYC alternative high school graduates participated and were interviewed for this study. Four graduates who participated in interviews attended the Brooklyn site, three graduates attended the Bronx site, and two graduates attended the Harlem site. The graduates that were not used for the study received an email from the researcher explaining that an overwhelming number of graduates responded.

Nine participants in total were interviewed. Seidman (2006) recommend sufficiency and saturation as the two criteria for deciding the number of participants. Sufficiency refers to the amount and range of participants needed to reflect the population, while saturation of information refers to the point where the data collection no longer reveals new information. Saturation is a tool used for ensuring that adequate and quality data is collected to support the qualitative research study (deMarrais, 2004). Saturation was used to determine the exact number of graduates who participated in this

study. The researcher sent interviews to be coded immediately following each interview. Upon receiving transcriptions, the researcher began coding each document. Qualitative research does not have any concrete rules on the number of participants for a study (deMarrais, 2004). According to deMarrais (2004) “less is more” (p. 61). More participants can also mean a superficial analysis. “The number of participants in a study should matter less, and the depth in which a participant’s experiences are understood, analyzed, and re-presented should matter more” (deMarrais, 2004). Therefore, with the nine interviews, this study reached saturation.

Instruments Used in Data Collection

According to Chase (2008) “a narrative may be oral or written and may be elicited or heard during fieldwork, an interview, or a natural occurring conversation” (p. 59). Narrative is most often depicted as: (a) a short story chronicling an event with characters; (b) a comprehensive story that covers an important segment of one’s life such as school, illness, war, etc.; or (c) a narrative that covers someone’s entire lifespan (Chase, 2008; Kim et al., 2008; Polkinghorne, 1995). In this study the instrument used to collect data was in-depth interviews.

The interview protocol was an instrument that consisted of 11 items (See Appendix D). Each interview question in the interview protocol was linked to an element of the Framework for Great Schools (See Appendix E). Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 10, and 11 were developed to elicit responses related to strong family/community ties. Questions 6, 7, 9, 10, and 11 were developed to elicit responses related to supportive environment. Lastly, questions 5, 9, 10 and 11 were developed to elicit responses related to trust. Each individual interview was designed to last approximately 45 minutes to capture the voices

of New York City alternative school (transfer school) graduates. Interviews allowed the researcher to capture rich details about the experiences of alternative high school graduates while enrolled in traditional high schools and alternative high school settings.

Interviews for the study were held at the Pathways from Poverty headquarters, at the Brooklyn school location, and by phone conference. Four interviews were held in a private office within the Brooklyn school site. Three interviews were held in a private room in the Pathways from Poverty central office. Two interviews were conducted over the phone because participants returned to college out of state. The researcher scheduled the interview time with the participants via phone and followed up by text message and email. Prior to commencing the one-on-one interviews with graduates, the participants were informed of the purpose of the interview both verbally and written (Appendix D). The researcher emphasized that the study was voluntary. Participants were reminded that interviews would be anonymous, recorded, and voluntary. The researcher ensured the confidentiality of the participants by not using names, student identification numbers, or any identifying information from NYCDOE or ETO. Pseudonyms were created by the researcher and participants before the interviews began. This process allowed the researcher to establish a rapport with the participants.

The interview protocol (Appendix E) created a link between the research questions, theoretical rationale, and interview questions. A group of five program managers, middle management professionals employed by Pathways from Poverty that oversee the Learning to Work programs within the New York City Department of Education school sites reviewed the interview protocol questions. In addition, the interview protocol was tested and reviewed by four alternative high school graduates who

did not qualify for the study. Testing the interview questions with a similar demographic of graduates helped the researcher adjust questions and to establish the timeframe needed to conduct the interviews. Most interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. There were two interviews that lasted 25 minutes because those participants provided very short responses to questions.

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) state that in-depth interviewing involves the researcher trying to understand how the perspectives of the informants developed. The personal interviews allowed an opportunity for a deeper understanding of factors that influenced graduates lack of achievement in the traditional school setting, resources and support services that enhanced success in alternative high school programs, and outside influences that may have led to student success in alternative school settings.

Procedures for Data Collection

Four interviews were held in a private office within the Brooklyn school site. Three interviews were held in a private room in the Pathways from Poverty central office. Two interviews were conducted over the phone because participants returned to college out of state. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher reviewed the informed consent with the participant. Then the researcher distributed the \$25 Amazon gift cards and asked participants to sign upon receipt. Participants were given gift cards prior to participating in interviews to ensure participants that they would receive the cards regardless of completion of the interview. Participants were also asked to select a pseudonym for themselves to maintain their anonymity. Each interview was recorded using a digital recorder and Rev.com recorder. Fontana and Frey (2008) advocated building “a partnership between the researcher and respondents, who should work

together to create a narrative—the interview” (p. 117). Since this was a narrative-inquiry study, responses that led to developing a story was the desired outcome of the interview process. Field notes included student body language and non-verbal gestures. At the end of each interview, students were provided an opportunity to express their feelings about the interview as well as ask clarifying questions as needed.

Researcher bias and ethics. When researchers communicate how their personal experiences and beliefs may affect how the findings of the study are interpreted, they are clarifying biases, thus, increasing the quality of the research study (Creswell, 2014). The interviewer/researcher was employed by the community-based organization used for this study at the time the study was conducted. Having worked in alternative education for over 10 years, the researchers’ values and beliefs could influence the study. Therefore, rather than assume that the interviewer/researchers’ bias could be divorced from subjectivity, the interviewer/researcher disclosed subjectivities within the context of the research. Biases related to this research study are discussed along within the findings. Though a connection to the sites where this research study was conducted was pre-established, no information for this study was obtained prior to approval from IRB. All participant contact and data collection were done in compliance with institutional guidelines.

Procedure for Data Analysis

Data collected during the in-depth interviews were audibly recorded, transcribed by Rev.com, and reviewed by the researcher for accuracy. The researcher followed the same interview protocol for each participant. The audible recordings were uploaded and submitted to Rev.com to be transcribed. The researcher listened to the audio recorded

interviews and compared the audio recorded interviews to the transcriptions provided by Rev.com. Rev.com returned the transcribed data to the researcher within 2 days. After the transcripts were reviewed by the researcher to ensure accuracy the researcher submitted transcripts to a peer researcher for review.

Coding of the data began following the researcher's review of all transcripts for accuracy. The analysis process began with data management. During this stage field notes were rewritten. Field notes contained information about recurring words, phrases or ideas that were presented during the interviews. As a result, the researcher was able to record potential codes and categories and make connections to both the theoretical framework and research questions regarding this study. Magilvy and Thomas (2009) explain the three steps in the coding process which were followed in this study. Step one in the coding process was the identification of words or phrases repeated by of participants found throughout individual texts. The second step in the coding process included identifying similar code words and phrases clustered and regrouped together into categories. The third and final step in the coding process involved reviewing and arranging the categories into common topics concluding

Attribute coding, in vivo coding, descriptive coding, and process coding methods helped facilitate the data analysis process. Attribute coding provides essential information including details about the study site and characteristics of the participants early in the data set to support future data analysis and interpretation (Saldana, 2016). In vivo coding and descriptive coding was utilized to assign labels or words to particular sections of interview data. The assigned labels were used later to establish categories. The various open coding methods gave the researcher an opportunity to: (a) simplify large segments

of data; (b) present the authentic voice of each graduate; (c) interpret words and statements signifying larger ideas; and (d) recognize ideas and concepts having importance and meaning for the graduates.

The researcher then utilized axial coding methods. The axial coding method assisted in data analysis by identifying patterns of codes with similarities among graduates' transcriptions from the interviews. In addition, the frequency of codes within the data was acknowledged. The documented trend and focused codes identified were reclassified into categories. During the final cycle coding or selective coding, an analysis of relationships among and between the categories uncovered the central theme(s) associated with the related research question and overall study.

The researcher took 2 weeks to develop the initial codes. Analysis was completed one week after coding. A chart was created by the researcher to review codes across interviewees and interview questions. This secondary process was conducted in 4 days. When the final codes were developed the researcher and peer researcher took 8 days to compare codes.

The researcher used codes to establish categories and then themes. Codes were then compared with the goal of reaching an 80% agreement, which represents good qualitative reliability (Creswell, 2013). This process was repeated with additional sections and transcripts until reliability was achieved. Rubin and Rubin (2005) suggested coding by researchers "forces you to pay attention to what interviewees said and helps you prepares for the next interview" (p. 204). Silverman (2001) suggested that continually listening to participants' words during the transcription process amplifies the researchers' awareness of the participants' perceptions. Interview transcripts were

deconstructed into separate concepts based on verbal indicators. Indicators include the participants' words, phrases, and sentences. As relationships between concepts emerge, ideas are grouped into categories (LaRosa, 2005). Guetzkow (1950) stated "coding procedures involve two operations: that of separating the qualitative material into codable units and of establishing systems of categories which can be applied to the unitized material" (p. 57).

Summary

The number of alternative high schools or transfer schools has increased nationally over the last 10 years. The resources, structures, and supports that are related to student success and effective alternative school remain vague. This chapter has explained the qualitative methods used to explore the lived experiences of New York City alternative high school graduates. Selecting the ideal research methodology is a key component of the research process. This chapter outlines the rationale for using qualitative inquiry for the study and provided details of narrative inquiry. The qualitative research design of this study effectively informed the problem statement. The chapter discussed various aspects of research design including population, sample, participant selection, gaining access, research sites, and the various types of data collection procedures that were used. Finally, the researcher discussed various details regarding the improvement of increasing trustworthiness in the conducted research.

Chapter 4: Results

In NYC the graduation rate has increased over 25% between the 2001 freshman high school cohort and the 2014 cohort (New York City Department of Education Graduation Rate Report, 2019). Despite the increase of the graduation rates, approximately 30% of NYC high school students do not graduate within 4 years of entering high school. As a strategy to address this concern New York City Department of Education has increased the number of alternative high schools by 60% between 1993 and 2019 (NYCDOE, 2019). Despite the increase in the number of alternative high schools in NYC some question the true effectiveness of alternative schools due to the lack of standardization in policy and structure (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Raywid, 1994). In addition, the empirical research remains inconclusive, limited, and vague (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015). Empirical studies have been conducted utilizing the voices of principals (Dennis-Warren, 2017) or were conducted quantitatively (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian et al., 2016) to explore the effectiveness of alternative high schools, but further research, utilizing the voices of recent alternative high school graduates, is imperative for a more complete understanding.

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of recent NYC alternative high school graduates related to the Framework for Great Schools' three elements of trust, supportive environment, and strong family/community ties (NYCDOE, 2019). This qualitative study was conducted at

a nonprofit community-based organization located in Central Harlem called Pathways from Poverty. Pathways from Poverty has partnered with the New York City Department of Education since 2005 to educate at-risk students enrolled in alternative high schools referred to as Transfer High Schools. The organization currently has a total of five transfer high schools in NYC. The researcher used the Framework for Great Schools as a theoretical framework because it is used to measure the effectiveness of all public schools in NYC. The researcher selected three elements of the Framework for Great Schools to guide this study the three elements are trust, supportive environment, and strong family/community ties. This chapter presents the findings that emerged from the data collected in this study. The results are displayed using various tables to summarize the experiences shared by the participants. Multiple quotes taken from the participants are included to provide additional context to the narratives of the participants.

Research Questions

The data collected in this study addresses the following three questions:

1. How do recent New York City alternative high school graduates describe their lived-high school experiences before attending a New York City alternative high school?
2. What specific components and experiences within a New York City alternative school do recent high school graduates identify helped them achieve academic, social, and personal success during their high school years?
3. What specific components and experiences within a New York City alternative school do recent graduates identify helped them earn their high school diploma?

Data Analysis and Findings

Participant descriptive data. The population identified for the study was determined by running a report in Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) based on the following criteria: (a) at least 18 years old; (b) attended a traditional high school in NYC prior to enrollment in a NYC alternative high school; and (c) graduated from one of the three identified schools partnered with Pathways from Poverty between June 2017 and June 2019. The population of eligible participants were 116 of 308 (37%). Of those 116, 43 completed informed consent (or 37.07%). Of those 43, nine were selected to participate.

The participant descriptive data can be viewed in Table 4.1. Table 4.1 lists the pseudonym for each participant and the pseudonym for each site. In addition, Table 4.1 lists the location of each participant's traditional school, the location of each participant's alternative school, age, sex, qualification for free or reduced lunch, and race. Race was determined by graduate's self-identification on Pathways from Poverty Demographic Form. The data from the demographic forms are entered into Efforts to Outcomes (ETO). A total of nine eligible NYC alternative high school graduates were interviewed for this study. Five NYC alternative high school graduates were female (55.55%) and four NYC alternative high school graduates were males (44.44%). Five of the participants identified as African American (55.55%) and four participants identified as Hispanic (44.44%). Participants completed a demographic form for Pathways from Poverty. The identifiable race categories on the demographic forms were African American, Hispanic, White, Asian, or Other. Four participants (44.44%) attended the alternative school site in Brooklyn. Three participants (33.33%) attended the school site in the Bronx and two participants (22.22%) attended the Manhattan (Harlem) site.

Table 4.1

Descriptive Data of Nine Recent Alternative High School Graduates

Graduate Pseudonym	Location of Alternative School	Alternative School Pseudonym	Location of Traditional School	Free/Reduce Lunch Eligible Yes (Y) or No (N)	Age	Race (African American, Hispanic, White, Other)	Sex (Male (M) Female (F))
Participant 1 (P1)	Brooklyn	Site B	Brooklyn	Y	19	African American	F
Participant 2 (P2)	Manhattan	Site C	Manhattan	Y	21	Hispanic	M
Participant 3 (P3)	Bronx	Site A	Bronx	N	18	African American	F
Participant 4 (P4)	Brooklyn	Site B	Brooklyn	Y	20	African American	F
Participant 5 (P5)	Brooklyn	Site B	Brooklyn	N	18	African American	M
Participant 6 (P6)	Brooklyn	Site B	Brooklyn	Y	19	Hispanic	F
Participant 7 (P7)	Manhattan	Site C	Manhattan	Y	19	African American	F
Participant 8 (P8)	Bronx	Site A	Bronx	Y	21	Hispanic	M
Participant 9 (P9)	Bronx	Site A	Bronx	Y	19	Hispanic	M

The average age of the recent NYC graduates was 19.33 years old based on the descriptive data in Table 4.1. Seven of the nine participants (77.78%) qualified for free or reduced lunch. According to the New York State Education Department (2018b), a family of must earn below \$33,475 to qualify for free lunch and \$47,635 to qualify for reduced lunch. The New York City Government Poverty Measure (2017) states the poverty threshold for a household consisting of two adults and two children is \$32,402. Based on the data from Table 4.1, 77.78% of the recent NYC alternative high school graduates are living below or close to the poverty threshold.

Individual profiles. The following section summarizes the profile for each of the nine participants.

P1. P1 is a 19-year-old female who graduated from school Site B. Her alternative high school is in Brooklyn and her traditional high school was also located in Brooklyn. P1 identifies as African American. She graduated from her alternative high school within 9 months. P1 attended one traditional high school prior to enrolling in an alternative high school setting.

P2. P2 is a 21-year-old male who graduated from school Site C. His alternative high school is in Manhattan (Harlem) and his traditional high school was in the Bronx. P2 identifies as Hispanic. P2 graduated from his alternative high school within 2 school years. P2 attended multiple schools prior to enrolling in his alternative school setting. During the interview P2 revealed that he moved to many schools because he has been homeless several times. In addition to attending a traditional high school in New York, P2 has attended traditional high schools in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

P3. P3 is an 18-year-old female who graduated from school Site A. Her alternative school is in the Bronx and her traditional high school was in Manhattan. Maya identifies as African American. P3 graduated from her alternative school in one school year. P3 attended one traditional high school prior to her enrollment in the alternative high school. During the interview P3 shared that she graduated as the valedictorian of her alternative high school class.

P4. P4 is a 20-year-old female who graduated from school Site B. Her alternative high school is in Brooklyn and her traditional high school is in Manhattan. P4 identified as African American. P4 graduated from her alternative high school in 18 months.

Victoria attended a private parochial high school and a traditional high school located in Manhattan prior to entering her alternative school setting.

P5. P5 is an 18-year-old male who graduated from school Site B. His alternative school is in Brooklyn and his traditional high school is also located in Brooklyn. P4 identified as African American. P4 graduated from his alternative high school in 18 months. P4 attended high school in Jamaica prior to entering his traditional high school in New York City. He entered his traditional high school when he migrated to the United States.

P6. P6 is a 19-year-old female who graduated from school site B. Her alternative high school is in Brooklyn and her traditional school is in Brooklyn. P6 identifies as Hispanic. P6 graduated from her alternative high school in 8 months. P6 attended on traditional high school prior to entering her alternative high school.

P7. P7 is a 19-year-old female who graduated from school site C. Her alternative high school is in Manhattan (Harlem) and her traditional high school is also located in Manhattan (Lower Eastside). P7 identifies as African American. P7 graduated from her alternative high school in one school year. P7 attended one traditional high school prior to entering her alternative high school.

P8. P8 is a 21-year-old male who graduated from school site A. His alternative high school is in the Bronx and his traditional high school is in Manhattan. P8 identifies as Hispanic. P8 graduated from his alternative high school in 2 school years. P8 attended one traditional high school prior to entering his alternative high school.

P9. P9 is a 19-year-old male who graduated from school site A. His alternative high school is in the Bronx and his traditional high school is also in the Bronx. P9

identifies as Hispanic. P9 graduated from his alternative high school in 16 months. P9 attended two traditional high schools in the Bronx prior to entering his alternative high school.

Table 4.2 displays the number of months each participant was enrolled in their traditional school settings, the number of months they were enrolled in their alternative school, and the reason why they transferred from their traditional school setting to an alternative high school setting. Each participant discussed their reason for transferring to an alternative school during the one-on-one interviews. This data was not available in Efforts to Outcomes (ETO).

Based on the information in Table 4.2 NYC alternative high school graduates in this study enrolled in their traditional schools for an average of 23.33 months and their alternative high schools an average of 13.56 months. The shortest tenure between traditional and alternative schooling was experienced by the only immigrant student. Four recent NYC graduates stated that their reason for leaving their traditional school was due to suspensions and issues with students/staff members. Two participants stated that they left their traditional high school because of their homelessness. Lastly, Participant 5 (P5) left his traditional school to graduate sooner because he started as a freshman in the United States despite completing several years of high school in Jamaica.

Table 4.2

Descriptive Summary of the Nine Participants' High School Enrollment (Months) and Reason for Transferring from High School

Participants	Months enrolled in a traditional high school in NYC	Months enrolled in a NYC alternative high school	Participant's reason for leaving traditional high school setting
Participant 1 (P1)	30 months	9 months	"I left my traditional school because I kept getting suspended and I fell behind."
Participant 2 (P2)	39 months	22 months	"I went to an alternative school because my family was homeless, and we moved around a lot."
Participant 3 (P3)	26 months	12 months	"I left my old school because the environment was not supportive. I also got into a lot of situations with the teachers and the principal. Therefore, I was always getting detention and suspensions."
Participant 4 (P4)	22 months	18 months	"I came to my alternative school after my family moved out our shelter in the Bronx. My case planner said it would help me catch up."
Participant 5 (P5)	6 months	18 months	"When I came to NYC from Jamaica, I went to a traditional school, but they told me it would take 4 years for me to graduate. My aunt later told me if I went to an alternative school I could graduate sooner."
Participant 6 (P6)	22 months	8 months	"I left my traditional school because I felt stupid. I did not graduate with my friends."
Participant 7 (P7)	31 months	13 months	"I left my traditional school because I got into many altercations with females, so I stopped going to school and fell behind."
Participant 8 (P8)	48 months	24 months	"I played around and cut school a lot in the beginning. I was very far behind and I went to the transfer school to graduate sooner."
Participant 9 (P9)	34 months	16 months	"I left both my traditional schools because of issues with students and staff. I felt like the staff were trying to push me out anyway."

Note. Eight of the nine participants attended one traditional high school. Participant 2 attended a total of three different traditional high schools. Participant 2 was asked to only respond reflecting on the NYC traditional high school.

Qualitative analysis. Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were the tool used for data collection in this study. The researcher also collected the following demographic

information from Pathways to Poverty's internal database Efforts to Outcomes (ETO): (a) age; (b) sex; (c) race; (d) alternative high school site; (e) length of time enrolled in alternative school; and (f) schools attended prior to entry in alternative high school.

Transcription process. Each participant interview was digitally recorded, and transcribed through an online transcription service Rev.com, resulting in precise transcripts. The researcher reviewed and edited each transcript while comparing the audio recording of each participant's interview to strengthen the degree of data accuracy.

Coding process. The process of coding included a combination of both first cycle coding methods and second cycle coding methods. First cycle coding methods, as explained by Saldana (2016) take place during the initial phase of a recurring analytical process, giving meaning to data and involving the continuous comparison of data, codes, and categories. Saldana additionally explains second cycle coding as an advanced step in the analytical process involving reorganizing and reanalyzing the first cycle recorded data for developing categories, themes, and concepts.

Interview Question 1. Table 4.3 displays the codes and categories developed from participant responses to interview question one (IQ1). Interview question one was used to capture each participant's relationship with staff and peers in their traditional school setting. All participants (100%) described their relationships and traditional school settings in a negative manner. The categories that emerged from IQ1 were *low expectations, personal connections, lack of support, and reactive communication*. The categories that emerged were linked to the themes *supportive environment* and *strong family/community ties*. The three elements of the Framework for Great Schools were used as overarching themes for this study.

Table 4.3

IQ1. Codes, Categories, & Theme Responses to Interview Question: How would you describe your relationship with staff and classmates while enrolled in a traditional high school?

Codes	Categories	Themes
I did whatever I wanted and still passed my classes, I skipped school often and no one cared, I was told I will never graduate, the staff never expected me to do well there, my traditional school only cared if we did well on test, why are you here you are going to fail anyway	Low Expectations	Supportive Environment
I had no strong relationships, I had no connections to any staff, I didn't talk to any staff member and had no connections, wasn't connected to the teachers, when I talked to my teachers I never felt a connection, my relationship with staff was less than average	Personal Connections	Supportive Environment
My teachers never helped me, the staff wasn't helpful, they(staff) just were focused on getting their job done nothing else, the teachers never cared to know me, I get a paycheck if you pass or fail, They never tried to help me understand the work, teachers would not allow me to make up work, teachers would skip over me in class if I had a question	Lack of Support	Supportive Environment
I got suspended often, they never talked to me only detention and suspension, they always called my mother to complain, the dean had my mother's number in her personal phone, I only spoke with staff when I was in trouble	Reactive Communication	Strong Family & Community Ties

Note. Codes have been extracted from the responses from all nine recent NYC alternative high school graduates and grouped into categories and themes. Seven interviews were held in person and two were conducted via telephone.

Seven of the nine participants (77.78%) stated that they had no personal connections with staff members at their traditional schools. Eight of the nine participants (88.89%) stated that their teachers within their traditional school setting did not support them. Six of the nine participants (66.67%) recalled being suspended often, receiving detention, or negative calls home. The two themes were *supportive environment* and *strong family and community ties*.

Supportive environment. Supportive environment is one of the six elements of the Framework for Great Schools. Supportive environment is a school which has established a classroom and school culture where students feel safe, supported, and challenged by their teachers and peers (NYCDOE, 2019). According to Bryk (2010), supportive environment is defined as:

All adults in a school community forge a climate that enables students to think of themselves as learners. At a minimum, improving schools establish a safe and orderly environment—the most basic prerequisite for learning. They endorse ambitious academic work coupled with support for each student. The combination allows students to believe in themselves, to persist, and ultimately to achieve. (p. 24)

The NYCDOE (2019) aligns supportive environment to their quality review of school by incorporating the following term- maintain a culture of mutual trust and positive attitudes that supports the academic and personal growth of students and adults. In addition, establishes a culture for learning that communicates high expectations to staff, students, and families, and provide supports to achieve those expectations. Based on

the responses of the participants, their traditional school environment did not provide a supportive environment.

Another category that emerged when graduates discussed their traditional high schools was a lack of support. For example, all participants reflected on the lack of personal connections with individuals at their traditional high school with the following commentary from Participant 4:

I would say my relationship with staff members in my traditional high schools, they were more common and average, like a typical “hi” and “bye,” not really anything like a personal connection. We never really got along or got to know one another well. Most of the people who associated with me in my old high school, they just knew, ok yeah, he is in school or he is a bad kid. But it was never like they truly knew about me or personal life experiences.

Participant 8 (P8) posited:

I feel like the teachers at my traditional school really didn't care. The way they was with me, late 3 days to school you're suspended. Which means you are missing more school, so you don't have the class time to pass. So, I feel like they didn't care. They would always say you are not going to graduate so dropout. They also would not take the time to help me because they already knew in their minds that I was going to fail anyway. My mom would come up to the school and setup tutoring and the teacher would let me text on my phone and do whatever. When my mom called to see if I went to tutoring, he would say yes but he wasn't teaching me nothing. I was just chilling you know.

Participant 5 (P5) stated:

At my traditional high school, it was more like straight to business. There was no concern about the actual ... Well, from my perspective, there was no concern about the actual student education afterwards. It was just more or less, can you hit the requirements to pass the test, and can you get out of here? Opposed to, did you actually learn something? Do you want to go over this a little bit more thoroughly? It was like they were always trying to meet a quota, rather than trying to actually teach a student.

Other graduates shared similar views. “Well, when I was in my traditional high school, I wasn’t too connected to the other teachers, because it was like anytime when I talked to them I did not feel a connection back,” said Participant 1. “Some of the staff wasn’t more so helpful. They was just like wanting to get their job done. Not really caring as much about your grades. My relationship with my principal there was very bad. He was very negative towards me,” Participant 3 posited. Graduates were concerned that teachers and staff members perceived them as “bad,” “troublemakers,” or “delinquents” which connected to the category *reactive communication*.

Strong family and community ties. NYCDOE (2019) describes strong family/community ties as “School leadership brings resources from the community into the school building by welcoming, encouraging, and developing partnerships with families, businesses, and community-based organizations.” Bryk (2010) describes strong family/community ties as: “Through active outreach efforts, staff members seek to make the school a more hospitable and welcoming environment for parents and strengthen the connections to other local institutions concerned with the care and well-being of children and their families” (p. 26).

Eight out of nine participants (88.89%) stated that their traditional schools often called their families when something negative occurred. Participant 9 made the following statement during the interview:

My traditional school only called my mom when I did something wrong. They would call her for everything negative because they wanted me to transfer out of their school, but my mom wouldn't do it until I was 18 years old. So, I think they thought that if they called her for every little thing, she would get annoyed and take me out. They called my mother if I was late, if I left out for lunch, if I felt that a teacher was wrong and said something about it, if I had a fight, they were just on me but on me for all the wrong reasons.

Participant 7 (P7) stated:

My traditional school only called my family when they needed papers filled out like the lunch form or for dumb stuff. They called when I got into arguments with other girls or fights. They never called my mom when I wasn't doing well. They didn't even use to call her for open school night. It's like they didn't care if I was going to graduate or not. I was just another number and another dollar. They didn't care at all and that cause me to act up more. They really honestly did not care if I failed or passed my classes. They only cared that I was not getting physical and I returned my lunch form so they can get money.

One participant of the nine participants (11.11%) stated that the family did not receive calls often. The participant did recall the school calling the home for something negative. Overall, the participants did not have positive experiences within their traditional high schools.

Interview Question 2. Interview question two (IQ2) captured the contact traditional high schools made with recent NYC alternative high school graduate families. Each participant answered the question and explained the communication their traditional schools had with their families. All participants (100%) stated that their parents were primarily or only called for negative reasons. Table 4.4 displays the responses of each participant for interview question two. The data collected from interview question two was also linked to categories *lack of support* and *reactive communication* with the overarching theme *strong family and community ties*.

Overall, participants stated that the traditional school called very seldom. If they did call it was for topics related to negative disciplinary concerns, PTA meetings, and for collection of administrative paperwork such as lunch forms.

Interview Question 3. *When you were enrolled in a traditional high school did you feel like a member of the school community? Why or why not?* Interview question three (IQ3) captured the recent NYC alternative high school graduate's experience as a member of the school community in their traditional schools. Three of the nine participants (33.33%) asked the researcher to clarify the question. They wanted to better understand the meaning of "member of school community." Seven of the nine participants (77.78%) stated that they did not feel like members of the school community within their traditional schools. The two remaining participants stated that they somewhat felt like a member of the school community. Table 4.5 displays the codes, categories, and theme related to interview question three (IQ3) based on the responses of the participants.

Table 4.4

Direct Quotes and Responses to Interview Question 2: Did your traditional high school contact your family? If yes, why?

Participant	Responses to Interview Question 2
P1	My traditional school only called my mother about negative stuff. They called if I was late, arguing with other students, or just not showing up at all.
P2	My school never really called my mother at all. They never really started calling until they wanted me out of the school because of my lack of credits.
P3	So, my principal at my old school did not like me because of my attitude. He would call my mother if I breathe too hard. He was always calling for bad stuff.
P4	My traditional school called my mother to let her know I was cutting or not in class.
P5	Well, my family never really got calls from my traditional school. I was very quiet and low key because I was new to the country. The few times they did call was when they thought I was skipping class or absent.
P6	My traditional school always called my mother. They complained that I was loud, always in the hallway, absent, cutting and stuff.
P7	They called my house when they wanted my mother to come to PTA meetings, for lunch forms, and to say I am absent. Other than that, they never called.
P8	To be honest I was always getting into physical fights in my old school so they would always call my mother for that. At the end, they kept calling my mom so that she could move me to a new school.
P9	Nah, they never really called and if they did it was for bad stuff.

Table 4.5.

Codes, Categories, & Theme Responses to Interview Question 3: When you were enrolled in a traditional high school did you feel like a member of the school community? Why or why not?

Codes	Categories	Themes
No, I was just a number/ they never cared about me/ they barely knew who I was/ I wasn't causing trouble or the smartest kid, so I didn't matter	Lack of Support	Supportive Environment
They never understood me/ very judgmental/ immediately thought they knew me and judged me/ labeled me a troublemaker/ wouldn't give me a chance to try/ because I was loud/ they judged me and excluded me from activities	Judgmental Acceptance	Supportive Environment

Note. Codes have been extracted from the responses from all nine recent NYC alternative high school graduates and grouped into categories and themes. The codes are separated by a (/) to signify a different participant

Eight of the nine participants (88.89%) stated that they felt unimportant in their traditional school settings. Participant 1 responded:

I never really felt like a member of the school community because I was often excluded from events. I would be loud in the halls with my friends so we would be told we could not go to basketball games, trips, and other things that happened at the school. I didn't really feel like I was a part of the school when I was enrolled at my traditional high school.

Participant 7 posited:

Well, I guess I sort of was a part of the school community. The staff would try to encourage me to join a team or club. They would also invite me to trips and stuff. I never really went because I did not have a relationship with the staff nor the students. I felt like what was the point of going. Also, my school was not really welcoming. They were very judgmental. They would make inappropriate comments about student's sexuality, clothing, hair, body, and so many other things. I just felt like the teachers and staff were extensions of the students.

Acceptance. Acceptance emerged as a category during IQ3. Participants often felt “judged” at their traditional high school. Participant 8 stated, “Teachers just assumed the worst of me they never even asked why I didn’t come to school or if I was ok.” Participant 2 posited, “That was the difference between my transfer school and traditional school. My transfer school did not judge me when I told them I was homeless. My counselors at my alternative high school never judged me.” Five of the nine participants (55.56%) mentioned feeling judged in their traditional high school. Participants felt lack of acceptance from “teachers,” “principals,” “deans,” “nurses,” and support staff such as “guidance counselors” and “special education coordinator.” Participant 6 spoke candidly regarding her lack of acceptance in his traditional high school:

In all honesty, my teachers and principal did not like me. They would honestly pick on me about everything. I believe that they treated me this way because I am openly gay. Like I dress like a boy and most of the kids in my school were straight. So, I would get suspended for wearing a hat or stupid stuff like being five minutes late. When I would go to the guidance counselor to take advance classes, she would say for what. You’re not going to graduate so why take advance

courses. Miss they really made me feel stupid and it made me not want to try to graduate.

The categories that emerged during IQ3 were linked to the overarching theme *supportive environment*.

Interview Question 4. *Can you tell me about a trusting relationship with a staff member you built while in high school?* Interview question four (IQ4) captured the participants' experience regarding trusting relationships built during their high school experience. All participants (100%) identified a staff member within their alternative school setting. Participant 2 and Participant 3 identified staff members at both their traditional school and their alternative school. Participant 2 stated, "I had a relationship with a teacher at my traditional because he knew my family's situation and my older brother." Participant 3 responded, "I had a relationship with the custodian. He would always encourage me to come to school."

According to Table 4.6, seven of the nine graduates (77.78%) did not identify any adults at their traditional high schools. All participants from the Brooklyn location identified the program manager and the Global Teachers as the individuals they developed a trusting relationship. The participants from the Bronx location also selected the College and Career Counselor and the Internship Coordinators as the two individuals they built trusting relationships with. All participants (100%) identified a member of the Learning to Work (LTW) staff employed by Pathways from Poverty as an individual they formed a trusting relationship with. Seven of the nine participants (77.78%) identified a NYCDOE employee as an individual they have built a trusting relationship with.

Table 4.6

Individuals with whom Recent NYC Alternative High School Graduates Developed Trusting Relationships and Location of the Connection

Participant	Individual Participant formed a trusting relationship with	Traditional or Alternative School Location
P1	Program Manager and Global Teacher	Alternative School
P2	Science Teacher Program Manager and Internship Coordinator	Traditional School Alternative School
P3	Custodian College and Career Counselor, Internship Coordinator, and Art Teacher	Traditional School Alternative school
P4	Program Manager and Global Teacher	Alternative School
P5	Program Manager and Global Teacher	Alternative School
P6	Program Manager, Global Teacher, and English Teacher	Alternative School
P7	Internship Coordinator and Guidance Counselor	Alternative School
P8	College and Career Counselor and Internship Coordinator	Alternative School
P9	College and Career Counselor and Internship Coordinator	Alternative School

Note. Staff members' names were changed to their work title to keep the site anonymity. Participants were allowed to list more than one mentor.

Participant 1 stated:

The program manager and my Global teacher always were by my side. They never judged me for any bad decisions I made. They would help me to problem solve and make better choices in the future. They always pushed me to be better person

for myself and no one else. They would give me tough love when necessary and be a shoulder to cry on when I was down or depressed.

Participant 7 responded:

I truly formed a bond with the College and Career Counselor and the Internship Coordinator. When I first got to the alternative school I didn't want to really talk to any staff or students, but they would constantly come over and talk to me. They would call me just to congratulate me for passing my classes or coming to school regularly. I realized they truly cared, and it made me want to do well.

Participant 3 also discussed wanting to do better in school for the alternative school staff.

Table 4.7 displays the codes, emerging categories, and overarching themes connected to the Framework for Great Schools. All participants (100%) responded to IQ4. All participants (100%) identified individuals they built a trusting relationship with and also provided reasons why they established the relationship. Eight of the nine participants (88.89%) stated that they built trusting relationships with individuals within their alternative high school settings because they provided a warm environment or a safe space. *Warm environment* and *safe space* were established as categories for IQ4.

Participant 2 was the only participant of the nine participants (11.11%) who stated that trust was established with an individual at their alternative high school site because of their living conditions and not because of a genuine initial connection. Participant 2 stated:

I feel like in the beginning I built a trusting relationship because I was going through a hard time and needed help. I was at a place that I had to trust someone to help me or suffer altogether. So, I mean I didn't start trusting the program

manager because he was cool. While I was there, he helped me find a job, he helped me with housing, gave me local food pantries because of my living situation, and like he really believed that I could do it.

Table 4.7

Summary of Codes, Categories, and Theme Responses to Interview Question 4: Can you tell me about a trusting relationship with a staff member you built while in high school?

Codes	Categories	Themes
Listen to my problems/ shoulder to cry on/ pushed me to be better/ worked hard to keep me out of trouble/ I know she genuinely cares for me/ he was hard on me but with love/ she came to my house when I was sick/ believed in me	Caring Adult	Supportive Environment
	Personal Connections	Trust
Helped with issues at home/ connected me to counseling/ they had a family intervention with counselors/ gave me list of food pantries/ referred me to the social worker to work on my anger/ gave me an internship/ paid for a cooking class/ I trust her because she went with me to the clinic when I was pregnant	Community Resources	Strong Family and Community Ties
I could talk freely with her in the office/ during the lunch group space is where I could be open/ the LTW staff are always smiling in the office/ they made me feel like family	Safe Space	Supportive Environment
	Warm Environment	

Note. Codes have been extracted from the responses from all nine recent NYC alternative high school graduates and grouped into categories and themes. The codes are separated by a (/) to signify a different participant

The categories that emerged from the narratives of the recent NYC alternative graduates related to trusting relationships were *caring adults, personal connections, community resources, safe space, and warm environment*. Participant 5 responded:

Since day one when I got there, the program manager has been looking out for me. She has truly kept me out of trouble. She has talks with me about my attitude and anger issues. She even sent me to counseling with the social worker for my anger. Like she truly cares about me. She comes to my house for a home visit if I am not in school. She is honestly the reason that I have a relationship with my mother right now.

Participant 7 explained:

Real talk the staff at my alternative school is really like family. They don't judge you no matter what. Even when you think they are going to turn their back they prove you wrong. When I had a death in my family they came to the funeral, sent flowers, and came to my house to check up on not only me but my family too. My grandmother was like what kind of school is that because normal school don't do stuff like that. I trust the internship coordinator because she did my original interview and everything, she told me she would do she has done that and more. If it wasn't for the internship coordinator and guidance counselor, I would have never graduated.

Participants of the study formulated trusting relationships primarily with staff members within their alternative high school settings.

Interview Question 5. *Please describe your school community in both of your high school settings.* Interview question five (IQ5) was developed to capture recent NYC

alternative graduates perception of their traditional and alternative high school settings. Participant's responses yielded the following categories *shared space/class size and access to resources*. Table 4.8 provides a comparison of the description of the traditional school setting and the alternative school settings of each participant. Participant 2 was the only participant to attend multiple traditional high school within several states. For this study Participant 2 was asked to describe his NYC traditional high school setting.

Table 4.8 displays data related to the category *shared space/ class size*. Seven of the nine participants (77.78%) mentioned the difference in size when describing the difference between their alternative high school setting and traditional high school setting. Empirical research has shown that there is a connection to learning increase when classroom size is smaller (Finn & Achilles, 1999; Molner, 1999). According to participants most of their traditional schools had over 1,000 students. Participant 2 stated:

I would say, probably, the small environment, not the crowded environment, because I am used to being a part of a high school that has 500, 600, 700, close to 1,000 students. So, going from that to a 500, not even, a 200-kid basis, I feel like I was able to understand more of the topics at my alternative school.

Table 4.8

Recent NYC Alternative High School Graduates Comparison of NYC Traditional High School Setting and NYC Alternative High School Setting

Participant	NYC Traditional School Setting	NYC Alternative School Setting
P1	My traditional school was very crowded. There were way more kid there. The staff was not helpful at all. They really didn't care if I passed or failed	My transfer school was definitely way smaller. The staff members all wanted to see me do well. They helped me to get an internship and a job after I graduated.
P2	My traditional school in NYC was huge. I went to a school with seven other schools in the building. I also didn't really talk to people there.	My alternative school really had a lot of help and things I didn't get at my other schools. I got an internship at the schools. I got an internship at the school garden and they sent me to a cooking class. At my school I also was able to join other clubs
P3	The campus was very big. There was always chaos especially during scanning. The hallways were divided so you can go through the doors and be in a whole new school. The guidance counselors there did not know what they were doing because they had so many students to see about.	I had a better understanding of what support meant at my transfer school. They understood my needs and were willing to work with me. The people were positive and supportive of me. At my transfer school I got my first job. Working for that organization opened so many other doors for me. Even now I have a job because of my first internship at my transfer school.
P4	My traditional school was bigger than my alternative school by far. They had a lot of clubs and events happening. The school had a lot of stuff for students, but the staff did not really make students want to go. I mean I guess it was cool, but I was there for a short while.	My transfer school was great. From the first time I came for my interview I could tell the difference in the people. They showed me they really cared about me. They also connected me to career experiences that I thought I would never get. I want to be a vet, so they arranged for me to go to an animal hospital for a day. Like they really go above and beyond to help kids.
P5	My school was ok. I was really into drama and didn't go. The people didn't really care so I didn't care either.	They really helped me to work on my attitude at the transfer school. Like they didn't judge me but they also didn't just let me do what I wanted. They expected more from me. The internship coordinator worked with me on my attitude and each time I improved in an

Participant	NYC Traditional School Setting	NYC Alternative School Setting
		area she increased my work hours. The school was also a family feel. The teachers were like aunties and uncles and stuff.
P6	I hated my school. They didn't like me and I didn't like them. My mother wanted me to go there but that wasn't my choice.	The funny thing is that I went to the transfer school because my traditional school wanted to kick me out. At first, I would not talk to anyone. But one day the counselor came and started talking to me at lunch and I thought she was a student. Like a week later I realized she was a staff member. That started my connection with the staff and stuff. They really helped me though. They have taken me to the doctor, got me job, helped me register for school, and they even still help me with homework for college if I need help.
P7	My school was cool. I just was real quiet until people picked on me. I ended up fighting with a bunch of girls. So because I was always fighting, I was labeled a bad kid. Teachers just would say you're not gonna graduate and why don't you focus on your GED.	My alternative school helped me to open up about my feelings. I would keep everything inside and just blow up on anyone around. But they helped me to tell people how I am feeling at the moment. The school also helped my family when we were going through a rough time. My alternative school took us on way more trips and stuff.
P8	My traditional school was not great. I played around and therefore no one took me seriously. I really didn't do much in that school	When I got to my alternative school, it was like starting over as a freshman. I had barely any credits and everything was new. The staff encouraged me to stay focused and told me that I could do it. I think because I was older than most of the kids in the school I was a bit embarrassed. They helped me to feel comfortable. This school was the first time I was a part of clubs or anything like that.
P9	I honestly hated that school. I did not get along with the staff or the students. The school was way too big. They would always make me feel out of place like I didn't belong there. So I just tried to stay to myself.	My transfer school was a good look. I had people that actually knew what I needed to graduate and they helped me to track my progress. Each time I met with my counselor we would look at my progress and talk about what I could do next. They didn't focus on the negative things like my other school.

The majority of interviewees responded with negative quotes related to the size of their traditional schools and class sizes. Participant 9 stated “the class was so large that there was always a fight” or Participant 3 emphasized “the teacher could not manage the class because it was so big”. Participant 7 stated:

A good thing about my transfer school was the small size. There were way less kids in my classes and the teacher could actually focus on helping me and other students on an individual level. Like that would never happen in my traditional school. I feel like I learned more because of the extra attention teachers and staff all together gave me at my transfer school.

All participants (100%) mentioned the internship program associated with the transfer schools. Participants discussed how the internship program has helped them obtain other work-related opportunities. Participant 4 responded:

They also connected me to career experiences that I thought I would never get. I want to be a vet so they arranged for me to go to an animal hospital for a day. Like they really go above and beyond to help kids. My internship coordinator tried to get me an internship in the animal hospital but could not so she got me a job in a pet grooming store. I was able to work with animals and learn more about them. This was not exactly what I wanted to do but it helped me learn and exposed me to different types of animals. They also helped me to get a summer job at the zoo.

Participants such as Participant 1 discussed how alternative high school staff also provided resources for the entire family. Five of the nine participants (55.56%) mentioned community resources that the alternative high school staff connected them or

their families to. Some of these resources included unsubsidized jobs, clinics, food pantries, and shelters.

Interview Question 6. *Describe the type of support you received from teachers, support staff (guidance counselors, social workers, psychologist), administration (program manager, principal or assistant principal), or any other staff member at your traditional high school.* Interview question 6 (IQ6) captured the support services recent NYC alternative high school graduates received from teachers, support staff, administrators, or any other member of their traditional schools. Two of the nine participants (22.23%) identified individuals within their traditional schools. Participant 2 identified a science teacher. Participant 2 informed the researcher of the teacher previous relationship with his brother and knowledge of his families' displacement and homeless status. Participant 2 stated "he would give me tutoring and allow me to use his classroom afterschool to complete work because he knew my living situation." Participant 3 shared she received support from the school custodian. She stated, "The school custodian is the only person at my traditional school that would ask me if I am going to class and passing. He is the person that actually gave me additional information on alternative high schools not my guidance counselor." The seven other participants could not identify supports they received from members of the school community in their traditional school setting.

Interview Question 7. *What types of services in your transfer school if any helped you academically, socially, or personally?* Interview question seven (IQ7) was developed by the researcher to capture the services within the alternative high schools that helped the recent NYC graduates academically, socially, or personally. Three of the nine participants asked for the question to be repeated or for the researcher to clarify the

meaning of one or more words within the question. All participants (100%) listed exposure to college and internships as services that were provided by their alternative high schools. The category *access to resources* emerged from IQ7 and was linked to the theme *strong family/community ties*. Participant 1 responded:

When I first came to my alternative high school I believe my first month they took me on a college tour. I went on a total of about four college tours while I was there. Seeing how college campuses work and how classrooms are, the ratio of the support and help that you can get at schools with SEEK or EOP programs. That actually made me know that college is what I wanted to do.

Four of the nine participants (44.45%) stated that visiting colleges with their alternative high school made them decide to attend college.

Some participants discussed school clubs or outside resource connections that made a difference in their experiences. Participant 2 shared that his involvement with the environmental gardening changed his perspective and life trajectory. Participant 2 responded:

The environmental gardening helped me. Working in the garden helped me to escape many of the issues I had going on in my head. When I was in the garden I could think clearly. Working in the garden promoted my path of being a chef. I was learning how fruits and vegetables are grown. I actually got to grow the ingredients that I cooked with and that was a very special experience. The staff at my transfer school listened to my plans instead of trying to put me on the path they think I should follow you know.

Other participants focused on outside resources such as counseling and local doctor services. Participant 3 explained:

The staff helped me academically but mostly socially, and personally. They helped me emotionally. My mom was a part of the PTA so the staff members were familiar with her as well. The staff helped me to get through to my mom and speak to her about how I was feeling. They helped me to tell my mom the colleges I wanted to explore and the careers I wanted to pursue. It was really hard because my mom had a plan in her head for me. They helped us get counseling and we still go today. My alternative school connected me to other nonprofit organizations where I worked and was able to get a job after graduating. I got to attend a gala for the first time. The staff took me shopping and prepared me for that experience.

Participant 6 stated:

My transfer school staff have really went all out for me. They have helped me apply to college, made sure I registered for classes, helped me with financial aid when I was in their school and even this year now that I am in college. The staff members even went to the doctor with me because I am afraid of doctor's offices. They actually found me a doctor nearby and went with me for support. Knowing that they treated me like family helped me to do better in school because I wanted to make them proud.

The categories *access to resources* and *personal connections* emerged from interview IQ7. The themes *supportive community* and *strong family/community ties* were linked to IQ7.

Interview Question 8. *Can you recall a time when your transfer school hosted events for families and community members? If so, please provide an example. What impact did this have on you?* Interview question eight captured the types of events the alternative high schools hosted for families and community members. Interview question is linked to the theme *strong family/community ties*.

Table 4.9

Summary of Alternative High School Events attended by the Nine Recent Alternative High School Graduates

Participant	Events Attended
Participant 1	My family and I did not attend school events
Participant 2	Halloween Candy give away, greenhouse cooking day, culmination dinner, Cultural celebration, Friendsgiving, Silent protest against school shootings, and college workshops
Participant 3	Culture Day, PTA, College Workshops, Culmination Dinner, Health Fair, and School Talent Show
Participant 4	School hosted many events but my family and I did not attend.
Participant 5	Cultural celebration, culmination dinner, college workshops, and end of trimester graduation celebrations.
Participant 6	My mom and I went to the Mother's Day brunch. I also went to the cultural celebration, end of trimester graduation, culmination ceremony, college workshops, feed the homeless, and family soup kitchen day.
Participant 7	I attended the greenhouse cooking day, college workshops, culmination dinner, LYFE center mother's celebration, end-of-year intern celebration, and holiday potluck
Participant 8	College Workshops, culmination dinner, and cultural celebration
Participant 9	Community BBQ, culmination, culture day, college workshops, and school talent show

Seven of the nine participants (77.78%) attended at least one event at their alternative school site. Seven of the nine participants (77.78%) also stated that they attended the culmination dinner. The culmination dinner is a dinner held for student interns at the end of each academic school year. Participants that attended school events stated, “school events help to build a family environment.” Participant 8 stated, “The school events help us to feel like we are all family” and Participant 5 stated, “When I attended my end of the trimester graduation I really felt surrounded by family.” The categories that emerged from IQ8 were *school events* and *personal connections*. The overarching theme was *strong family/community ties*.

Interview Question 9. *Tell me about your mentor?* Interview Question 9 (IQ9) captured responses of recent NYC alternative high school graduates related to personal mentors. All participants (100%) answered IQ9. All participants (100%) listed a CBO staff member from their alternative school site as their mentor. Two participants (22.22%) listed a parent as one of their mentors. Three of the nine participants (33.33%) listed a NYCDOE staff member as one of their mentors. Participant 1 said:

The program manager was my mentor. She was honestly my backbone for everything. My first trimester at my transfer school my cousin passed away and it was very hard for me. So, I was very emotional and hurt. Then another bad thing happened to me and I had to be out for several days. The program manager did not judge me. She helped me through my dark times.

Participant 3 responded:

My mentor always comes for me. She drives me. I definitely look at her as a mother figure. She has definitely had a role in me becoming the person I am

today. In my last year, she pushed me even harder. She picked me as the intern of the year which was one of my favorite experiences. She pushed me to join clubs and organizations outside of the school. She made me try things that I was uncomfortable so that I can grow. She helped me to make a decision to go to counselling with my mother. She has been there for me in every way in which I can imagine.

Participants shared several personal accounts about their mentors and how they influenced their graduation. The categories that emerged from IQ9 were *acceptance*, *personal connection*, and *beyond staff expectations*. The overarching theme was *trust*. Table 4.10 illustrates these responses.

Trust. NYCDOE (2019) defines trust in a NYCDOE school as an environment that everyone works toward the shared goal of improving student outcomes, preparing students for success in school and beyond. Across the school community, there is respect. School staff, parents, students and administrators value each other. According to Bryk (2010) trust is defined as:

At the most basic level, relational trust is grounded in social respect. Key in this regard are the conversations that occur within a school community. Respectful exchanges are marked by a genuine sense of listening to what each person has to say, and in some fashion taking this into account in subsequent actions. Even when people disagree, individuals feel that the value of their opinion has been recognized. Such social exchanges foster a sense of connectedness among participants and promote affiliation with the larger institutional context. (p. 24)

All participants of the study described personal circumstances or information with which they trusted their mentors.

Table 4.10

Summary of Codes, Categories, and Theme Responses to Interview Question 9: Tell me about your mentor

Codes	Categories	Themes
Help me cope/ support me when I am going through a lot/ shoulder to lean on/ helped me when I was emotional/ helped me control my emotions and anger	Personal Connections	Trust
Took personal time to help me/ went above and beyond/ took additional time out their day/ would stay after hours to help me study/ texted me every morning to make sure I was up/ they actually cared about me	Beyond Staff Expectations	Supportive Environment
Realistic perspective/ did not judge me, she wasn't judgmental/ I could tell them anything without being judged	Acceptance	Supportive Environment

Acceptance was a category that emerged during interview question nine. Similar to IQ3, participants shared a sense of being “judged” at their traditional high school. A new category that emerged for IQ9 was *beyond staff expectations*. Seven of the nine participants (77.78%) stated that staff members went above and beyond to help them. In addition, participants recalled numerous accounts of alternative high school staff members providing assistance outside of work hours.

Interview Question 10. *Can you list three things that were great about your transfer high school and why?* Interview question ten (IQ10) captured the three things recent NYC alternative high school graduates perceived to be great about their alternative

high school settings. Table 4.11 lists the participants and the three great attributes of their alternative high schools.

Table 4.11

Three Great Attributes Identified by Recent NYC Alternative High School Graduates Related to their Alternative High School

Participants	Three Great Things about Alternative School
Participant 1	Support of staff, high expectations, and family setting
Participant 2	Small environment, internships, staff that truly care
Participant 3	Staff that care, LTW internships, family feeling
Participant 4	Communication, the work ethic of the staff, and college trips
Participant 5	College tours, the staff, and the engagement
Participant 6	Internship opportunities, college tours, and the caring staff
Participant 7	Internships, communication, and acceptance
Participant 8	Incentive trips, college tours, and internships
Participant 9	Internships, smaller classes, and family environment

Supportive staff and internships were the top two attributes related to attending an alternative high school. Six of the nine participants (66.67%) identified supportive staff as one of the greatest things about alternative high schools. Six of the nine participants (66.67%) identified internships as the greatest thing about an alternative high school. Four of the nine participants (44.44%) identified college tours as the greatest thing about alternative high school. Three of the nine participants (33.33%) identified family environment as the greatest part of their alternative high school. Some additional components that were identified were communication, acceptance, expectations, small school environment, and engagement. All participants (100%) responded to IQ10.

Interview Question 11. *Would you recommend a transfer high school? Why or why not?* Interview question eleven (IQ11) was developed to capture recent NYC alternative high school graduate's likeliness to recommend a transfer school and the reason. Table 4.12 displays the participant, whether they would recommend a transfer school, and the reason.

Eight of the nine participants (88.89%) would recommend an alternative high school. One of the nine participants (11.11%) stated that the recommendation would depend on the needs of the individual. Seven of the nine participants (77.78%) would recommend an alternative high school because of the staff and support received in an alternative high school. Participants also stated that that would recommend an alternative high school because of the communication, resources, internships, college, and class size. The answers provided for IQ11 were linked to the emerging categories from IQ10. All emergent categories linked to the overarching themes *trust*, *supportive environment*, and *strong family/community ties*.

Table 4.12

Will Recent NYC Alternative High School Graduates Recommend Alternative High Schools? Why or Why Not?

Participants	Would you recommend a transfer high school?	Why or Why not?
Participant 1	Yes	The staff motivate you to do better. They encourage you to keep going when you think you cannot. My school also gave me a bunch of regents prep to prepare me for my test.
Participant 2	Depends on the student needs	It depends on the need of the student. If they need a smaller environment and extra attention. If the student is on track and wants to be social and a part of clubs and stuff a traditional school is better.
Participant 3	Yes	The staff motivate students to do better, they actually care about students, and they help you even when you graduate.
Participant 4	Yes	I would recommend my transfer school because of the support system there. I would also recommend it there because they know how to communicate with young people.
Participant 5	Yes	People care about you and you have the ability to get work experience from internships
Participant 6	Yes	I would recommend my transfer school because they teach so that you understand, and the staff really care about you graduating and doing well.
Participant 7	Yes	The staff at the alternative school encourage students to do better and the internship helps to prepare students for work. The staff is accepting and nonjudgmental.
Participant 8	Yes	I would recommend a transfer school because they meet you where you are. They help you with college, internships, and personal issues
Participant 9	Yes	I would recommend an alternative school because you have opportunities there that traditional schools don't have. So there are internships, way more college trips, and teachers can really focus on you because of the smaller classes.

Summary of Results

This qualitative narrative inquiry study was designed to explore the perceptions and experiences of recent NYC alternative high school graduates related to the three elements of trust, supportive environment, and strong family/community ties as defined by the Framework for Great Schools. Nine graduates were selected through purposeful sampling from three different alternative high schools similar in demographics. Themes grounded in the research questions of this study framed the organization of the collected data. The questions evoked responses that would align with the Framework for Great Schools.

The data also reflect that all participants believed access to resources, support, and warm environment were key elements to their successful high school graduation. The first round of coding methods produced a large volume of data. The data resultant from the coding process abridged many coding descriptions consistent with interview participants' perceptions of the elements connected with successful graduation from an alternative high school. The results of this study produced several categories that were connected to the overarching themes *trust*, *supportive environment*, and *strong family/community ties*. The findings provided specific elements of an alternative high school recent NYC alternative high school graduates related to successful graduation from an alternative high school. Chapter 5 outlines the major findings, discusses how the findings relate to the body of literature presented in Chapter 2 and what implications the findings have on the practice and on future research, details limitations within the current study, and provides recommendation that should be considered for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

In NYC, there has been a notable increase in the overall graduation rates over the past 10 years. Although there has been a substantial increase in graduation rates within NYC approximately 30% of high school students in NYC fail to graduate within the 4-year timeframe (NYCDOE, 2018b). Alternative high schools were adopted to combat the concerns related to dropout rates and on time graduation rates in NYC. NYC has increased the number of alternative high schools by 60% between 1993 and 2019. NYC alternative high school graduates were interviewed, and asked questions directly related to three research questions. The research questions aim to address how NYC alternative school components and experiences related to trust, supportive environment and strong family/community ties as defined by the Framework for Great Schools helped alternative high school graduates earn their high school diploma.

This purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of recent NYC alternative high school graduates related to the three elements of trust, supportive environment, and strong family/community ties as defined by the Framework for Great Schools. Specifically, it targeted explicit characteristics of an alternative high school that relates to student success. To achieve the purpose of this study, the following research questions were developed:

1. How do recent New York City alternative high school graduates describe their lived-high school experiences before attending a New York City alternative high school?
2. What specific components and experiences within a New York City alternative school do recent high school graduates identify helped them achieve academic, social, and personal success during their high school years?
3. What specific components and experiences within a New York City alternative school do recent graduates identify helped them earn their high school diploma?

In this chapter, the researcher concludes this study by briefly: (a) outlining the implications of findings; (b) providing recommendations for future practice and research; and (c) concluding the overall study.

Answering Research Questions

Research Question 1. *How do recent New York City alternative high school graduates describe their lived-high school experiences before attending a New York City alternative high school?* Interview Questions 1-6 were developed to evoke answers to Research Question (RQ) 1. Participant responses revealed negative experiences for recent NYC alternative high school graduates prior to entering their alternative high schools. The categories which emerged from the interview questions related to RQ1 were low expectations, personal connections (lack), lack of support, reactive communication, judgmental, acceptance (lack), shared space/class size, and access to resources. Participants of the study described their traditional school settings as environments where they were not accepted as members of the school community and lacked trusting relationships with staff. Participants described their traditional school settings as large

buildings containing multiple schools within a single building. Due to shared space and large class sizes, participants described chaotic and unsafe conditions. Recent NYC alternative high school graduates described staff members in traditional high school settings as unapproachable and judgmental. Based on the narratives of the recent NYC alternative graduates their traditional school contacted families for negative reasons primarily. Lastly, 77.78% of participants could not identify resources provided to them by their traditional schools and could not identify a staff member whom they formed a trusting relationship.

Research Question 2. *What specific components and experiences within the New York City alternative school do recent high school graduates say helped them achieve academic, social, and personal success during their high school years?* Participants answered questions about what specific components of their alternative school helped them achieve academic, social, and personal success. The responses resulted in an emergence of the category *school events* and *access to resources*. The categories linked primarily to the theme *strong family/community ties*. Participant's responses to IQ7 identified college exposure trips, internships, school clubs, counseling referrals, and doctor referrals as components which aided in their success. Participants listed several events held by their alternative schools which they attended. The culmination dinner was the event most participants attended. Recent NYC alternative high school graduates linked school events to a feeling of "family" within the alternative school setting. The connections and feeling of "family" motivated participants to improve academically to make the staff members proud

Research Question 3. *What specific components and experiences within the New York City alternative school do recent graduates say helped them earn their high school diploma?* Interview Questions 9-11 were developed to elicit the answer to Research Question 3. Based on the responses of recent NYC alternative high school graduates, the staff relationships and motivation were the number one component related to their success. Participants discussed the staff member's ability to set high expectations, work outside of office hours, and accept students for who they are despite past failures. Participants described the personal connections formulated with NYCDOE staff members and CBO staff. Participants all identified members of the community-based organization as mentors and individuals they formed trusting relationships with. Additional components identified by participants were internships and college exposure opportunities. Participants linked their internship experiences in their alternative schools to post high school success as well. Internship helped to prepare participants for jobs and interviews after high school. The college exposure trips encourage several participants to enroll in college or consider college as a post-secondary option. Some additional components identified by recent NYC alternative high school graduates were family setting, high expectations, small environment, communication, engagement, and incentive trips.

Implications of Findings

To understand the components of a NYC alternative high school that relates to recent NYC alternative high school graduate's success, this research examined the participants' lived experiences within NYC traditional high schools settings and NYC

alternative high school settings. Major findings emerged from the data obtained in this research study.

First major finding. The researcher found that participants primarily attributed their successful completion of high school to staff relationships and motivation built within their alternative high school settings. Overall, interpersonal skills were developed within the NYC alternative high school sites. The National Association of School Psychologists stated that facilitating social-emotional support for students is a necessary component for at-risk student success because of the link between social-emotional health and academic success (Suldo et al., 2009). The participants reported that alternative high school staff members set high expectations and provided a family feel for the student body. The finding also shows that recent NYC alternative high school graduates appreciate when staff members listened and did not pass judgement. Bryk (2010) posits that respectful exchanges are marked by a genuine sense of listening to what each person has to say, and in some fashion taking this into account in subsequent actions.

De la Ossa (2005) argues:

The personal relationships with teachers definitely had a positive influence in the student's educational experience. These relationships affected students both personally and academically. School size and class size influenced the personal relationships between teachers and students and also affected the personal relationships among students.

This finding from this research project aligns with research findings from a previous research study which examined alternative graduates' perception of the quality of their

high school experience 7 years later (De La Ossa, 2010). De La Ossa (2010) focuses on the perceptions of alternative high school graduates as they relate to the quality of their education 7 years post-graduation. De La Ossa (2010) states graduates explained that the interpersonal skills they learned within alternative schools were more important than the academic knowledge they gained, whether they were working, in college, or raising children. In the previous research, participants were able to relate success academically and success in life overall to the interpersonal skills learned in their alternative school settings. Interpersonal skills are necessary for any form of work or interaction with people in general.

Understanding the importance of interpersonal skills and staff relationships is directly linked to the elements of trust and supportive environment within the Framework for Great Schools. Bryk (2010) stated academic work coupled with support for each student is imperative. The combination allows students to believe in themselves, to persist, and ultimately to achieve. Research by Hoy, Gage, and Tarter (2006) indicates that trust and mindfulness create a climate for success. Participants within the study conducted by De La Ossa (2010) also relate success in overall life to the interpersonal skills and relationships established within their alternative high school settings.

Second major finding. The researcher found that recent NYC alternative high school graduates function best in environments that are smaller in size. School/class size emerged as a category within this study. Participants identified a major difference between their traditional schools and alternative schools were the sizes of the schools or classes. School/class sizes of the participating alternative high schools for this study were substantially smaller than most comprehensive traditional NYC high schools. Participants

of this study commented that because of the large school/class sizes at their traditional schools they lacked one-on-one attention from teachers, an increase in fights and verbal altercations, increased tardiness due to multiple schools entering scanning at once, and negative reprimand within shared school spaces due to trespassing.

Recent NYC alternative high school graduates presented a number of benefits aligned with attending school within a smaller environment. Participants responded being within smaller class spaces helped them to become academically confident. Participants were able to receive one-on-one attention from teachers in class and increase their level of focus with less classroom distractions. Participants posited smaller school sizes built a sense of community and “family” dynamic. De La Ossa (2005) states:

Our society is suffering in terms of the lack of community experiences. Because smaller schools use a community approach, the students who attend these schools learn valuable lessons not available in the larger comprehensive high schools. These smaller schools accept individuals for whom they are and assist students to learn how to get along. Being safe and being accepted as an individual are crucial experiences. As school boards and policy makers grapple with the issue of school violence, the answer may lie in smaller schools that can teach students and faculty members how to be a community. (p.37).

Participants of this study shared similar views with De La Ossa (2005). Some of the categories which emerged from this study were acceptance, judgmental, and school/class size. The alternative high school’s ability to accept students for who they are helped to build a foundation for better interpersonal relationships and an overall supportive environment as defined by the Framework for Great Schools.

Third major finding. Consistent with previous research conducted by Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011), the participants' experiences related to their traditional schools were primarily negative. Participants posited poor staff relationships, safety concerns, reactive communication, and judgement as experiences within their traditional school settings. They attributed the lack of personalized attention to teacher characteristics such as insensible attitudes and to educational causes such as large class sizes, overcrowded schools with shared spaces, and the emphasis on standardized testing.

Participants stated that they often felt unsafe or uncomfortable in the traditional school environment. One participant even described the traditional school setting as a war zone and another participant described their traditional school as chaotic. Unfortunately, recent NYC alternative high school graduates viewed their traditional school settings as hostile and unwelcoming. One of the philosophies that is guiding alternative education is the idea that traditional schools are failing to effectively educate the diverse and changing needs of students in today's society because the traditional system is broken (Quinn et al., 2006). The idea of broken students has been made worse due to the fact that educators in the traditional setting have not been able to identify the reasons why students fail to be successful in traditional settings (Beken et al., 2009; Watson, 2014; Quinn, Poinier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006). This study provides insight regarding the reasons students fail to be successful within comprehensive traditional high schools.

Limitations

There are several limitations that should be considered when interpreting these findings. However, there is a strength that should be mentioned in this study. The sample of individuals were recent NYC alternative high school graduates, while previous

qualitative studies on alternative high schools were conducted utilizing the voices of principals and currently enrolled students (De La Ossa, 2001; Dennis-Warren, 2017). The first limitation is that the study is limited to one nonprofit community-based organization in NYC. While the concentrated focus on one community-based organization allowed for a thorough qualitative analysis of the data, the generalizability is limited. Pathways from Poverty is one of the few nonprofit community-based organizations to be contracted to manage approximately 10% of all NYC alternative high schools, yet there are many other nonprofit community-based organizations which manage the additional 90% of NYC alternative high schools. Only having recent NYC alternative high school graduates from one nonprofit community-based organization raises a question regarding organizational approach to the work with students. Each nonprofit community-based organization has its own approach, structure, and areas of support within NYC alternative high schools.

A second limitation was the overall sample size. There was a total of nine participants. The small sample size limits the generalizability of the overall study. Generalization of the data of this study is cautioned due to the small sample size. Having a larger number of participants would have lengthened the amount of data gathered related to the trust, supportive environment, and strong family/ community ties as defined by the Framework for Great Schools. Having more participants might have also revealed some elements that were not as successful. These elements that were unsuccessful within alternative schools could have been shared to prevent alternative schools from replicating these same mistakes in the future.

A third limitation was that the study was conducted only within three of the five boroughs within NYC. Over 95% of all alternative high schools in NYC are located within Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the Bronx (NYCDOE, 2019) yet retrieving narratives of recent NYC alternative high school graduates in Queens and Staten Island may provide different data than the data collected within this study. Including the boroughs of Queens and Staten Island may also change the participant demographic profile. Based on the New York City Department of Education (2019), the alternative high schools in Queens and Staten Island have fewer students eligible for free or reduced lunch and a larger population of Caucasian students.

The final limitation is related to the timing for this study. The researcher distributed the informed consent and letter of introduction to graduates during late August. Many graduates from the programs were returning to college or ending their summer employment duties. As a result of this timing, two of the nine interviews were conducted over the phone. In-person interviews may have added an additional layer of depth to this study.

Recommendations

This section contains a discussion of recommendations for future research and the practice of providing a school environment that yields success for NYC alternative high school students. This study sought to add to the body of literature by qualitatively examining the lived experiences of recent NYC alternative high school graduates as it related to trust, strong family/community ties, and supportive environment as defined by the Framework for Great Schools. The recommendations include creating nonjudgmental and supportive environments in all schools, conduct non-disciplinary contact with student

families, provide community resources within every school setting, and provide professional development for all staff.

Based on the results of this study, the researcher recommends the schools intentionally create a nonjudgmental and supportive environment for all students. Staff connections and motivation played a large role in student success within this study. This is consistent with previously conducted studies that have found a high correlation between staff support and academic motivation, as well as a correlation to overall student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Tuerk, 2005). Participants expressed frustration with the low expectations of teachers within their traditional school settings. Traditional high schools can send staff members to high performing alternative schools to shadow the staff. Shadowing will provide traditional high school staff the opportunity to learn best practices from effective alternative high school staff members. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) posits:

Educators should understand the important roles that they play in these students' lives and their ability to help them to achieve. It is important for educators to refrain from labeling students as troublemakers, focus on student strengths, and take an interest in students' out of school lives. Educators can work with school counselors and social workers when they need assistance with particular students.(p.109).

The quality of the overall school environment played a crucial role in the apparent differences between traditional school settings and alternative school settings. Participants perceived their alternative high schools to be welcoming, nonjudgmental, and “family” like. Developing a system to create a school culture where students feel

safe, welcomes, accepted, and loved will assist NYC high school achieve the element supportive environment as it relates to the Framework for Great Schools.

The researcher also recommends that schools promote conducting non-disciplinary communication and outreach with students' families. Participants reported that traditional schools primarily made contact with their families when they were in trouble. Respondents describe staff in their traditional schools as inflexible regarding disciplinary matters. A perceived difference between the approach of the traditional high school and alternative high school is the communication with families. Recent NYC alternative high school graduates noted that their alternative high school called their homes to inform their families about school community events, workshops, positive improvements, and also to introduce themselves at the beginning of the school year. Schools should employ a team approach when working with families, and by doing so, NYC high schools are implementing the element of strong family/community ties.

A third recommendation of the researcher is to provide student and families with community resources. Participants of this study stated that their alternative high school helped them a great deal by provided their families with resources related to food pantries, mental health services, basic health care services, housing, childcare services, and employment services. Once educators work with student individually to identify personal issues or concerns having an internal community resource guide can help staff members to refer students and families to the appropriate services. Participants of this study shared that many teachers in traditional schools did not care enough about their personal lives to provide help. A portion of the problem may be staff's lack of knowledge

regarding local resources available to students. A creation of a school wide resource guide can help educators assist families and build strong family/community ties.

A fourth recommendation of the researcher is to create policy changes within traditional schools related to re-engagement after a long absence or suspensions and policies related to disciplinary actions related to attendance. Participants within the study discussed a feeling of separation when they returned to their traditional schools after suspension or long absences. The researcher suggests schools create a policy related to re-engaging and reacclimating students who have not been within the school community for a long duration of time. Participants also stated they received disciplinary actions for reasons related to lateness or attendance. In traditional school settings students discussed overpopulating due to shared campuses, long lines during scanning, and strict suspension policies related to lateness. Schools should create disciplinary policies that do not take students out of additional days of school or class time.

Lastly, the researcher believes that all staff members should receive ongoing mandatory professional development. Professional development for teachers, counselors, and school leaders will aid in building overall knowledge regarding working with at-risk youth, cultural competencies, and equip school staff with ever-changing information related to sexuality. Educators can also teach each other as professional development by presenting case studies of students. One educator can assist another educator by conducting in-service trainings or by conducting one-on-one tutorials related to the best techniques to utilize when working with at-risk youth. Creating this form of educational system will help to increase trust among administrators, teachers, and eventually staff and students.

Suggestions for future research. There are six recommendations for future research:

1. This study was conducted utilizing only one nonprofit community-based organization which represented approximately 10% of the overall NYC alternative high school population. A future study can be conducting utilizing several community-based organizations throughout NYC.
2. The researcher recommends that this study be replicated with more balanced interview questions. The interview questions were reviewed only by program managers from alternative schools. Interview questions in the future study should be balanced to yield both positive and negative responses from participants related to traditional and alternative schools.
3. The researcher recommends that a study be conducted of NYC alternative high school graduates who identify with races other than African American or Hispanic. In this study, all participants identified as African American or Hispanic.
4. The researcher would like to recommend a longitudinal study utilizing the narratives of NYC alternative high school schools from the time of enrollment, recent graduate years, and post-graduation. This study would provide the field with a new perspective of alternative schools' students at different entry points.
5. This study was conducted utilizing three of the six elements of the Framework for Great Schools. A future study utilizing the remaining elements would add to the empirical research related to alternative high schools in NYC.

6. The researcher recommends a study of immigrant recent of NYC alternative high school graduates. This study will provide information regarding the persistence and completion rate of immigrant enrollees. In this study, the only immigrant graduate had the shortest duration of time enrolled in a traditional and alternative high school collectively.

Conclusion

Using a lens of recent NYC alternative high school graduates, the perspectives of nine eligible recent graduate were obtained to explore the perceptions and experiences of recent NYC alternative high school graduates related to the three elements of trust, supportive environment, and strong family/community ties as defined by the Framework for Great Schools Collecting the perspectives of recent NYC alternative high school graduates were crucial to answering the following research questions.

1. How do recent New York City alternative high school graduates describe their lived-high school experiences before attending a New York City alternative high school?
2. What specific components and experiences within a New York City alternative school do recent high school graduates identify helped them achieve academic, social, and personal success during their high school years?
3. What specific components and experiences within a New York City alternative school do recent graduates identify helped them earn their high school diploma?

The results of this research study demonstrated that recent NYC alternative high school graduates believe that they have truly benefitted by attending a NYC alternative high school. They were able to share their boost in confidence by changing school

environments. Participants were able to provide the researcher insight into problems that are within NYC traditional high school settings. In addition, recent NYC alternative high school graduates were able to provide possible solutions to how traditional high schools can better support at-risk within a traditional school setting. The information that participants provided were directly aligned with the research provide by Bryk (2010) and the New York City Department of Education (2019) Framework for Great Schools. The results of this study should not be generalized due to the small sample size.

Results of this study were consistent with results from studies by De La Ossa (2005) and Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011). For example, participants of all three studies identified negative experiences when discussing their traditional high schools. All studies also identified school/class size, lack of individualized attention, and stringent disciplinarian regulations to be major issues within traditional high school settings. Participants of this study and the studies conducted by De La Ossa (2005) and Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) found alternative school setting provided supportive environments, strong family/ community relationships, trusting relationship between staff and students,

The difference between the results of this study and the results of the studies conducted by De La Ossa (2005) and Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) was that participants stated that access to resources was an important component to their success. Participants posited that resources such as internships, college exposure trips, incentive trips, mental health services, family counseling services, food pantries, and housing options helped them during their enrollment and after graduation.

To understand the components of a NYC alternative high school that relates to recent NYC alternative high school graduate's success, this research examined the

participants' lived experiences within NYC traditional high schools settings and NYC alternative high school settings. Major findings emerged from the data obtained in this research study.

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Appendix A

Letter of Support



Letter of Support

Re: Beating the Odds: The Exploration of the Lived Experiences of New York City Alternative School Graduates

Dear Edrick R. Johnson,

This correspondence is to grant permission for the utilization of the Efforts to Outcome database for your doctoral dissertation research at St. John Fisher College. I am pleased you are interested in using the Efforts to Outcome database to locate graduates of alternative high schools in New York City.

This study's findings will contribute to the alternative education literature, as well as provide insight to community-based organizations that serve academically disadvantaged youth. This permission letter allows you access to the Efforts to Outcomes database and communication with Program Managers of the Learning to Work programs managed by New York City Mission Society. The organization understands that you will use the pseudonym "Pathways from Poverty" to represent New York City Mission Society within the written study, to maintain the anonymity of the organization.

Thank you for your interest in our organization. Should you require any additional information, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Elsie McCabe Thompson
President

New York City Mission Society

New York City Mission Society
646 Malcolm X Blvd
New York, NY 10037

T: 212-674-3500
F: 212-979-5764
nycmissionsociety.org



Appendix B

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION GRADUATES



February 11, 2019

Re: Beating the Odds: The Exploration of the Lived Experiences of New York City Alternative School Graduates by Edrick R. Johnson

Dear Graduate,

My name is Edrick R. Johnson and I am contacting you today on the approval of New York City Mission Society. I am doctoral student at St. John Fisher College, Ralph C. Wilson School of Education and as a part of my dissertation I am conducting a study. The study proposes to explore the lived experiences of New York City alternative high school graduates.

I am seeking your assistance for my study titled above. I would like you to participate in a forty-five-minute audio recorded interview.

Your agreement to participate in this study is voluntary. You can drop out of the study at any time. However, if you agree, I am asking you to sign an **Informed Consent Form** which will be provided prior to your scheduled interview. Your participation in the study will not have any impact on alumni services you receive from New York City Mission Society. The findings of the study will be beneficial to the New York City Department of Education, alternative schools nationally, and non-profit organizations who provide services to alternative school students.

Sincerely,

Edrick R. Johnson, Doctoral Student

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr., School of Education, St. John Fisher College, Rochester, NY14618

Appendix C

STUDENT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Transfer School Location: _____

Graduate Name: _____

Graduate Pseudonym:

Description of the Study: The study is being conducted to explore the lived experiences of New York City alternative high school graduates.

WHY: The study is being done by a doctoral candidate who will be working towards an understanding of New York City alternative high school graduates lived experiences. The findings of the study will be beneficial to the New York City Department Transfer high schools and non-profit organizations who provide services to transfer high school students. The researcher hopes to identify resources and supports provided by alternative schools that yield success for students. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please contact, Edrick R. Johnson at erj03675@sjfc.edu or at (347)463-5961.

WHAT: The name assigned is *Beating the Odds: An Exploration of the Lived Experience of New York City Alternative High School Graduates*

HOW: The study will require the following task from you:

- a) sign informed consent form
- b) attend a 45-minute audio recorded interview

WHO: Person from the study with whom you will interact will be the researcher.

Audio Tape Consent:

The interviews will be audio recorded so I will have a record to help me remember what participants said. I will also write down things that were said at the meetings. Personal information, such as names, will not be identified in these records. Your audio may be reviewed by selected research assistant to transcribe the data. In regard to providing

consent to access to audio record, you may change your mind at any time by contacting the researcher listed above.

By signing this form, you acknowledge and give us permission to include your interview in the audio recording session for our study.

Confidentiality

I will keep your personal information confidential. The participants will be granted pseudo names to protect you. If results of this research are published or presented in a talk, information that identifies you will not be used. The transcription of the information from your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you will have the option of terminating your participation at any time without any penalty. Additionally, your participation will be confidential. Your institution will be assigned a pseudonym as further effort of protecting privacy.

All documents collected or analyzed for this study will be kept in a secured locked file cabinet that only researcher has access to. These documents will be maintained for two years after the completion of the study after which time, all information will be destroyed by erasure and shredding disposal.

PLEASE CHECK YOUR RESPONSES IN THE BOXES OVERLEAF

Are you willing to sign an inform consent for the research study? YES NO

Are you willing to participate in an audio recorded one-on-one interview?
YES NO

Participant's signature:

_____ Date: _____

Participant's print name:

_____ Date: _____

Investigator's signature:

_____ Date: _____

Thank you for your cooperation.

Edrick R. Johnson

Ed. D. Doctoral Candidate, St. John Fisher College

Cohort 9

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

Introduction & Key Components

Interviewer: I want to thank you for taking time to meet with me today.

My name is _____, and I would like to talk about your experiences as a Transfer high school student. You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as a graduate of a Transfer High School. This research project as a whole will focus on the lived experiences of New York City alternative high school (transfer school) graduates. The study also aims to identify the supports, structures, and/or resources that led to your success as a graduate

Duration

The interview should last approximately one hour – give or take 15 minutes.

How interview will be conducted

Interviewer: I will be taping this interview because I don't want to miss any of your comments. Even though I'll be taking notes, I can't write fast enough to get it all down.

Please speak up so your comments are not missed. You do not have to talk about anything you don't want to, and you may end the interview at any time.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

Interviewer: I will ensure that the report will not identify you as the respondent. A pseudonym will be used in place of your real name. Your responses will only be

correlated with your pseudonym. Once the interview has begun, I will not use your name during the interview. All responses will be kept confidential. This means that your interview responses and all research data will be kept in password protected files on a password protected external hard drive. That hard drive will be kept in a locked cabinet or safe. As a reminder, you do not have to talk about anything you don't want to. And, you may end the interview at any time

A. Interview

RQ 1: How do New York City alternative high school graduates describe their lived-school experiences before attending the New York City alternative high school?

1. How would you describe your relationship with staff and classmates while enrolled in a traditional high school?
2. Did your traditional high school contact your family? If yes, why?
3. When you were enrolled in a traditional high school did you feel like a member of the school community? Why or why not?
4. Can you tell me about a trusting relationship with a staff member you built while in high school?
5. Please describe your school community in both of your high school settings.
6. Describe the type of support you received from teachers, support staff (guidance counselors, social workers, psychologist), administration (program manager, principal or assistant Principal), or any other staff member at your traditional high school.

RQ 2: What specific components and experiences within the New York City alternative school do recent high school graduates say helped them achieve academic, social, and personal success during their high school years?

7. What types of services in your transfer school if any helped you academically, socially, or personally?
8. Can you recall a time when your transfer school hosted events for families and community members? If so, please provide an example. What impact did this have on you?

RQ 3: What specific components and experiences within the New York City alternative school do recent graduates say helped them earn their high school diploma?

9. Tell me about your mentor?

10. Can you list three things that were great about your transfer high school and why?

11. Would you recommend a transfer high school? Why or why not?

Appendix E

Theoretical Relationship Between Research Questions and Interview

Questions

Interview Questions	Elements of the Great School Framework (Strong Family & Community ties, Trust, and Supportive Environment)	Research Questions
<p>How would you describe your relationship with staff and classmates while enrolled in a traditional high school?</p> <hr/> <p>Did your traditional high school contact your family? If yes, why?</p> <hr/> <p>When you were enrolled in a traditional high school did you feel like a member of the school community? Why or Why not?</p> <hr/> <p>Please describe your school community in both of your high school settings.</p>	<p>Strong Family & Community ties</p> <hr/>	<p>1. How do New York City alternative high school graduates describe their lived-school experiences before attending the New York City alternative high school?</p>
<p>Did you build a trusting relationship with any staff members in your traditional high school? Why or why not?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Trust</p>	
<p>Describe the type of support you received from teachers, support staff (guidance counselors, social workers,</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Supportive Environment</p>	

<p>psychologist), administration (program manager, principal, assistant principal), or any other staff members at your traditional high school.</p>		
<p>What types of services in your transfer school helped you succeed academically, socially, or personally?</p> <hr/> <p>Can you recall a time when your transfer school hosted events for families and community members? If, so please provide an example. What impact did this have on you?</p>	<p>Supportive Environment</p> <hr/> <p>Strong Family & Community Ties</p>	<p>2. What specific components and experiences within the New York City alternative school do recent high school graduates say helped them achieve academic, social, and personal success during their high school years?</p>
<p>Tell me about your mentor?</p> <hr/> <p>Can you list three things that were great about your transfer high school and why?</p> <hr/> <p>Would you recommend a transfer high school? Why or why not?</p>	<p>Supportive Environment & Trust</p> <hr/> <p>Supportive Environment, Trust, and Strong Family/Community Ties</p>	<p>3. What specific components and experiences within the New York City alternative school do recent graduates say helped them earn their high school diploma?</p>

