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**MAKING A DIFFERENCE BY BEING DIFFERENT: AN EXAMINATION  
OF FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO STUDENT SUCCESS IN  
ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

Elizabeth Dragone

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MAKING A DIFFERENCE BY BEING DIFFERENT: AN EXAMINATION OF  
FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO STUDENT SUCCESS IN ALTERNATIVE  
EDUCATION PROGRAMS

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

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of

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at

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

New York

by

Elizabeth A. Dragone

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\_ Elizabeth A. Dragone

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\_ Dr. Catherine DiMartino

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **MAKING A DIFFERENCE BY BEING DIFFERENT: AN EXAMINATION OF FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO STUDENT SUCCESS IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

Elizabeth A. Dragone

Alternative education can provide a pathway to success for students who require a nontraditional approach. Alternative education is neither general education nor special education; rather, it is a setting or program where instruction is provided outside of the traditional school setting, with modifications made to class size, school day and/or delivery of instruction. Research on alternative programs is limited, and further investigation of factors that contribute to the success of students in alternative settings is warranted. New York State has lagged behind many other states in defining alternative education and providing alternative education options for students. The purpose of this comparative case study is to examine and identify factors that contribute to an effective alternative education program by examining existing programs and to address a gap in the research regarding alternative education programs specifically in New York State. After identifying two different established alternative programs that are considered to be effective, the researcher conducted observations, interviews and a document review in order to identify key effective practices. Three common themes were identified across both settings: collective commitment, embracing evolution and advancing advocacy.

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to my five beautiful nephews: Dexter, Simon, Cameron, Harrison and Miles. You are the source of my greatest joy and I love you all beyond measure. Dream big, work hard, and be kind and you will find all things are possible.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I feel so incredibly grateful to work with a wonderful group of people, who started out as colleagues but turned into friends. Thank you to my fellow psychologists, as well as the counselors, social workers, speech pathologists and teachers who have offered encouragement, a listening ear or a proof-reading eye throughout this process. Thank you to my amazing administrators; I have learned a lot about school leadership on paper over the past several years, but I am so glad to have learned about school leadership in action from the best possible role models. You are a group of people with some of the brightest minds and kindest hearts that I have ever known.

Last but not least, I must acknowledge all of the support and contributions from my family. To my grandparents, you have offered the spiritual, emotional and financial support that has made this endeavor possible. I hope I have made you proud. To my parents, who gave me life and then made life good, thank you for everything. To my best friend Matt, who makes me laugh every single day, thank you for all of your support. To my siblings: Christine, Angela, Steven and Cassie, you are my family and my friends. Thank you for bringing Sean, Jeremy, and my nephews into my life. To my faithful companion, Bailey, thank you for being there every step of the way. I am so grateful to be a member of this clan.

A dissertation is a task that is daunting enough on its own, but trying to complete a dissertation in the middle of a global pandemic has seemed, on occasion, almost impossible. I have been delayed, distracted, discouraged, and diverted, but never deterred. I am in awe of all the ways that so many people have gone above and beyond, in extraordinarily challenging times, to help me reach this goal. I am forever in your debt, and my promise to all of you is that I will pay it forward.

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# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

Alternative education can provide a pathway to success for students who require a nontraditional approach. Alternative education is neither general education nor special education; rather, it is a setting or program where instruction is provided outside of the traditional school setting, with modifications made to class size, school day and/or delivery of instruction. Although there is no widely-agreed upon definition of what constitutes alternative education (Fox, 2013; Grant, 2009; Lehr & Lange, 2003), the United States Department of Education (USDE) defines an alternative education school as:

a public elementary/secondary school that (1) addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, (2) provides nontraditional education, (3) serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or (4) falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education (Keaton, 2012, p. B-1).

Porowski et al. (2014) point out that forty-three states and the District of Columbia (not including New York State) have formal definitions of alternative education and indicate that the definition of alternative education should include “target population, setting, services and structure” (p. i), which is not yet the case for all of the states with currently adopted formal definitions of alternative education.

The current American educational system began at the start of America herself, with the first colonists in New England establishing common schools that provided rudimentary academic skills to their children (Cremin, 1970). Within just a few decades after their arrival, these colonists passed compulsory schooling laws and established

institutions of higher learning (Chicosky, 2015). Organized school systems were more slowly established in other areas of the country, particularly in the South, which did not have a cohesive school system until after the Civil War (Bernard & Mondale, 2001). In the period between the Reconstruction Era and the 1960s, there were typically two tracks for American school students: an academic track which continued through high school and into college, and a vocational preparation track, which involved practical education and career readiness skills (Cremin, 1980; Ravitch, 2010). As an academic preparation track has become more universal, alternative options have developed to assist at-risk students in meeting new graduation requirements (Ravitch, 2010; Raywid, 2001). The philosophical debate over the purpose of education continues today, despite findings that indicate that this debate may be moot; Kuzmina and Carnoy (2016) revealed results from an international study that indicated that there was no significant difference in academic achievement between vocational and academic track students on the Program of International Assessment or PISA.

New York State is one of seven states that do not have a definition of alternative education codified in state statutes or codes. Although alternative education is not defined within state statutes or Part 100 regulations, the New York State Department of Education (NYSED) does provide a definition as follows:

New York State alternative education provides options for students who are at risk of dropping out of school to remain engaged in an alternative learning environment that focuses on their particular skills, abilities and learning styles. Alternative education programs have for decades provided

additional pathway for students to complete their secondary education and transition to a post-secondary or career option (p12.nysed.gov, 2010).

NYSED specifies that alternative education may include high school equivalency preparation programs and the education of incarcerated and/or court-placed youths (p12.nysed.gov, 2010). According to the New York State Office of State Assessment, the New York State Board of Regents initially set forth requirements for statewide exams in 1864, with the first of these exams administered to eighth grade students in 1865 for the purpose of identifying students who would be placed on an academic track for high school. Beginning in 1878, a series of examinations were administered to high school students as part of graduation requirements (p12.nysed.gov, 2010). In New York State, Part 100 Regulations detail the current requirements for graduation; in addition to the accrual of a total number of credits across specific subject areas, students must pass a total of five Regents exams in the core academic areas of English, math, social studies and science in order to obtain a Regents diploma. More recently, New York State has added some additional pathways towards graduation, including the option to replace one of the five required Regents exams with a career and technical education (CTE) pathway assessment (p12.nysed.gov, 2019) while the Board of Regents has been reconsidering graduation requirements, including the possible elimination of Regents exams (Silberstein, 2019).

Nationally, alternative education options are expanding, with 64% of all districts reporting the provision of at least one alternative program for students at risk of not graduating, administered by the district or another entity (Carter et al., 2010). Nowicki (2018) reported that in the 2015-2016 school year, 1.1% of all students nationally

attended an alternative school (p. 47). However, New York State has many fewer alternative education options for students than the national norm. According to the NCES out of a total of 836 high schools, there were only 12 classified as an alternative/other school in all of New York State in 2016-2017, the most recent year for which statistics are available (NCES, 2019). The number of alternative programs housed within district schools in New York State is not entirely known, as districts are not required to report on the existence of such programs separately. Regardless of the current availability of alternative education options in New York State, it is essential to study the factors that contribute to student success in existing alternative education setting.

### **Purpose of the Study**

An examination of the factors that contribute to successful alternative school programs is important. Although empirical research into academic alternative schools is limited (Hall, 2019; Lehr & Lang, 2003; Quinn & Poirier, 2006) and into multi-age, small school systems in general (Ronskley-Pavia et al., 2019), existing research has identified some effective practices, including but not limited to: small class size and small student body, student inclusion in the decision-making process and flexibility (Maillet, 2017; McGee & Lin, 2017; Quinn & Poirier, 2006). McGee and Lin (2017) stated that while alternative programs are not new, there have been limited practical applications from research because these types of programs vary widely, with vastly differing state mandates for alternative education and no national protocol for determining success. The purpose of this study is to examine and identify factors that contribute to an effective alternative education program by examining existing programs and to address a gap in the research regarding alternative education programs specifically in New York State.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Popkewitz et al. (1982) characterize institutions as technical, illusory or constructivist by examining (1) style and patterns of work, (2) nature and conceptions of knowledge and (3) ideology of professionalism (Popkewitz et al., 1982). An explanation of this framework can be seen in Table 1. In addition to examining an institution through the lens of technical, illusory or constructivist model, it is also important to examine the relationships within the setting. Erickson (1950) and Maslow (1954) discuss the importance of trust as a foundation for learning, relationship-building and self-actualization.

## **Significance of the Study**

Alternative education needs to be studied in order to determine the qualities that exist within effective programs, as well as to justify the need for continuation and expansion of these programs, if warranted. Understanding the factors that contribute to desired outcomes for students will lead to the development of more effective alternative education programs.

According to the most recent Current Population Survey (CPS) in 2016 a total of 2.3 million young adults, or 6.1% of those aged 16-24, were classified as a high school dropout, meaning that they were not currently enrolled in school, and had not earned either a high school diploma or equivalency credential (NCES, 2019). It is important to consider the characteristics of those students who are not successful while in a traditional school environment and determine what types of programs will meet their needs and assist them in obtaining a high school diploma. Traditional school settings are not always equipped to address the growing mental health concerns in the adolescent population.



One in five children have a diagnosable mental, emotional or behavioral disorder, but only 20 percent receive treatment (Mojtabai et al., 2016). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) have tracked rising rates of anxiety and depression among adolescents over the past ten years. The sharpest increase in rates of depression and non-fatal self-injurious behaviors (which are associated with anxiety and depression) were found in adolescent females. Specifically, a 37% increase in depression was reported in those aged 12-20 during the study period (Mercado et al., 2017). In addition to an increase in anxiety, suicide rates in early adolescents ages 10-14 tripled between 2007 and 2017; rates of suicide also increased for older adolescents aged 15-19 and 20-24 during this same time period (Curtin & Heron, 2019). There is a need to develop different alternatives to serve a population of students with changing socio-emotional needs.

There has been a greater focus on the provision of social-emotional learning (SEL) as part of the school curriculum for all students; Eklund et al. (2018) conducted a review of SEL standards in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Eklund et al. (2018) noted that many states are basing SEL standards on the five core competencies identified through the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL); New York State has not formally adopted CASEL standards. The five CASEL core competencies are as follows: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2017). Students who are participating in an alternative school setting are more likely to have higher levels of stress than those in traditional settings (Lehr & Lange, 2003), and thus may require even more targeted interventions. In a review of self-reported bullying behaviors, Rubens et al. (2019) reported that more than 50% of students in one alternative setting reported being

either a victim or perpetrator (or both) of bullying, including instances of both physical and relational aggression. Mindfulness-based interventions, even short-term interventions have shown promise in reducing stress levels (Costello & Lawler, 2014; Wisner & Starec, 2016).

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the effective practices that teachers and administrators within an alternative education setting have identified in the domains of school organization, school climate & culture and academics?
2. What challenges, obstacles or barriers are identified in alternative education settings by key educational stakeholders?

### **Design and Methods**

This study employs a comparative case study methodology to examine the perceptions of key stakeholders working in alternative settings. This was accomplished through interviews, surveys, observations and a review of documents. Stake (1995) and Creswell (2015) informed the research approach; Stake (1995) emphasized the importance of flexibility on the part of the researcher, while Creswell (2015) provided the framework for the coding process which eventually resulted in the identification of three themes across both settings.

Interviews and field notes were transcribed in order to be analyzed, and a document review protocol was utilized when reviewing records. Initial codes were assigned based upon the theoretical framework and a semi-structured interview protocol developed by the researcher. Additional codes were then added based upon the data. Upon subsequent readings of the data, codes were collapsed into themes.

## **Definition of Terms**

Alternative education: For the purposes of this study, alternative education is defined as instruction delivered outside of the traditional school setting, with modifications made to class size, school day and/or delivery of instruction.

Alternative program: a program providing alternative education that is housed within a regular/traditional school.

Alternative school: housed in a separate facility where students are removed from the regular/traditional school

## CHAPTER 2

### **Theoretical Framework**

Popkewitz et al. (1982) characterize institutions as technical, illusory or constructivist by examining (1) style and patterns of work, (2) nature and conceptions of knowledge and (3) ideology of professionalism. A more detailed explanation of this framework can be seen in Table 1. Generally, in a technical setting, there is strong administrator control, little teacher or student autonomy, and work is completed for the sake of completing work without strong consideration of the larger purpose. In an illusory setting, teachers and administrators are concerned with appearances and pay lip-service to values such as discipline, hard work and productivity without a true concern for actively creating student learning. In a constructivist setting, teachers have more autonomy and learning is student-focused, with an emphasis on developing interpersonal skills, knowledge across disciplines and ownership of one's own education and professional development.

Popkewitz et al. (1982) indicated that the most valuable learning gains are made in a constructivist setting. However, in order for learning to occur for students in alternative settings, there must be trust and relationship-building (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Quinn et al., 2006; Streeter et al., 2011; Wiest et al., 2001). Two major contributors to the field of developmental psychology, Erik Erikson and Abraham Maslow both emphasized trust as a foundational element in personal development. Erikson (1950) postulated that the formation of trust is the first stage of psychosocial development. From infancy through about 18 months of age, the default experience for all humans is a constant state of threat; babies are highly vulnerable, unable to meet their

own needs and will succumb to starvation, injury and death without intervention from a caretaker. According to Erikson's theory, babies learn to develop a sense of trust when adults around them consistently met their needs by feeding, clothing, sheltering and otherwise protecting them from harm. Without developing this sense of trust and security, Erikson believed that all further psychosocial development will be stunted. Maslow (1954) discussed that there are basic physiological needs that must be met for survival (such as food, clothing and shelter) but also purported that there are basic psychological needs, including love and belonging for a person to progress and reach his or her true potential, or self-actualize. Later on, Maslow (1993) distinguished further between deficit needs, which are the basic needs that need to be met in order for a person to feel content, and being values, which are the constructs that allow a person to feel fulfilled and self-actualized, such as truth, justice and playfulness. Maslow and Erikson both emphasized the importance of trust in human development.

Examining the relationships within an alternative school setting is important, as well as classifying the nature of the institution by examining patterns of work, knowledge and professionalism.

Table 1: *Popkewitz Tabachnick & Wehlage Characterization of Institutions*

	Technical	Illusory	Constructivist
Style and patterns of work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* emphasis on repetition and routine</li> <li>* work is fragmented and not related to purposeful activity</li> <li>* procedures are equated with values</li> <li>* work production is important for achievement; ‘busy work’ is rewarded</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* illusion of productivity</li> <li>* instructional processes emphasis student behavior and reward ‘docile’ students</li> <li>*self-discipline is important for achievement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* importance of learning through active participation in school affairs</li> <li>* activities emphasize interpersonal skills and strategies</li> <li>* work is valued across disciplines (i.e. art, music, English)</li> <li>*students are encouraged to take personal responsibility for their learning</li> </ul>
Nature and conceptions of knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* excellence is defined as looking busy and producing quantity over quality</li> <li>* curriculum is standardized so that knowledge can be easily measured</li> <li>* knowledge is absolute</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Knowledge is tangentially related to the formal curriculum</li> <li>* curriculum is secondary to developing controlled and morally correct students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* innovative pedagogy focuses on ways knowledge is created</li> <li>* emphasis on students’ rights, responsibilities and personal knowledge</li> <li>* self-discovery and multiple ways of knowing are encouraged</li> <li>* knowledge is provisional</li> </ul>
Ideology of professionalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* lack of professional dialogue</li> <li>* managerial nature of administration</li> <li>* teachers have limited decision-making and professional autonomy</li> <li>* teaching and learning emphasizes the importance of behavior management and correcting student deficiencies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* teachers are concerned with image and what parents think</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* teachers exercise control by developing relationships with students</li> <li>* understanding of developmental theory exists rather than a fixed notion of achievement</li> <li>* student participation and expression are encouraged</li> <li>* teachers are concerned with students’ intellectual and social growth</li> </ul>

## **History of American Education**

In order to understand the current state of alternative education, it is necessary to understand the history of American education. Cremin (1970; 1980; 1988) provides a useful way of understanding the different eras in the American educational system, from colonial times through the 1970s by conceptualizing these eras as the colonial, national and metropolitan eras. Beginning in the 1908s, Ravitch (2010, 2012) discusses the shifts in accountability standards in education, ushering in the current era of accountability. Alternative education began emerging as an option at the end of the metropolitan era, during a time of innovation and progressivism in education (Cremin, 1988; McGee & Lin, 2017).

Cremin (1970) divided the development of the American educational system into three different eras: (1) the colonial era, which began with the first permanent European settlers in the colonies and continued through the Revolutionary War, (2) the national era, which began at the birth of the United States and continued through Reconstruction and (3) the metropolitan era, which began at the end of Reconstruction and continued through reform movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Based upon the observations of Ravitch (2010, 2012) it can be argued that the American school system is currently in an era of accountability, where academic freedom and effective educational practices are taking a backseat to high-stakes testing and demands for accountability from schools and teachers while ignoring other factors (such as poverty) that impact student achievement.

During the colonial era, Bernard and Mondale (2001) stated that the type of education that students received varied widely depending on the colony in which they resided. In New England colonies, where people tended to live close together in towns

and a high concentration of Puritans placed strong emphasis on education, children of colonists typically attended schools that were supported by the community and taught basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills alongside a strong dose of morality and religious traditions (Watras, 2008). Massachusetts is home to the oldest public school in America, the Boston Latin School (BLS), which was founded on April 23, 1635 and is still in operation today (bls.org), as well as the first institution of higher education in America, Harvard, which was founded in 1636 (harvard.org). Additionally, New England colonies emphasized the importance of education by passing compulsory education laws in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the first of such laws passed as early as 1642 (Chicosky, 2015). The educational system in the Midwest looked similar to that of New England, as settlers from this area migrated west (Bernard & Mondale, 2001).

In the Middle colonies, children often attended church schools, which were supported by local churches but displayed a religious tolerance and accepted most students, including the children of colonists and indentured servants (Cremin, 1970). School was organized around planting and harvest times and was only in session for several weeks to a few months a year (Bernard & Mondale, 2001).

In the Southern colonies, schools were few and far between, and students were typically home-schooled. The wealthiest families hired tutors or sent children back to England for a formal education. Organized schools did not begin appearing in the Southern colonies in large numbers until after the Civil War (Bernard and Mondale, 2001; Cremin, 1980; Span, 2002).

Access to and participation in common schools during the colonial era was also determined by other factors in addition to geographic location. White male children had



the most access to education, followed by white female children (Bernard & Mondale, 2001). Monaghan (1988) reported that while both male and female children of New England-based colonists were enrolled in common schools, the type of education they received was different, as both genders were taught to read but only boys were generally taught to write. Reading was seen an important skill for both genders, primarily to be able to read the Bible, while writing was only deemed necessary for boys who would engage in trades, business dealings and contracts. Thomas Jefferson was a strong proponent of education, but recommended limiting formal education to three years for girls, and advocated against any type of education for enslaved persons (Bernard & Mondale, 2001). Children of color and indigenous children had limited to no access to common schools (Cremin, 1970).

During the national era, Cremin (1980) discussed how education evolved into an institution onto itself. Schools become separate institutions from churches, and began to specialize. Vocational schools emerged, replacing the apprenticeships that were more common in the colonial era. Native American children, formally enslaved children and those in more isolated areas of society were served by their own separate school systems. Females were educated in dame schools and women's colleges began to appear; it was also during this era that teaching in grammar schools changed from an almost exclusively male to an almost exclusively female profession (Cremin, 1980).

In the metropolitan era, schools became the center of socially progressive causes, and education was seen as transformational (Cremin, 1988). Fallace (2011) reported that this era was characterized by the progressive ideas of John Dewey, whom he claimed was "the single most significant thinker in American history" (p. 464) with his ideas regarding

the importance of social and student-centered learning and curriculum design. It was during the early part of this educational era that two prominent African-American figures in education, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, advocated for different educational experiences for African-American students. Washington, a formerly enslaved person, received some basic education in reading and writing by his father's employer and then some formal education through the Hampton Institute, where he learned academics and elements of practical trades. The Hampton Institute became the foundation for the Tuskegee Institute that Washington would later establish. DuBois was born to a relatively wealthy family in Massachusetts shortly after the Civil War; he received a classical higher education. Washington promoted a practical, skills-based education while DuBois believed in the importance of the access to a traditional academic course of study (Frantz, 1997). In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Span (2002) discussed the explosion of educational opportunities for African Americans at the conclusion of the Civil War and during the Reconstruction Era, particularly in the South, and noted "widespread enthusiasm for learning and sharing knowledge" (p. 201). Having formally been denied widespread access to education, many African Americans eagerly flocked to schools, learning together with students of all ages and genders in small community schools as well as larger, more organized schools such as those offered by the Freeman's Bureau (Span, 2002).

During a period of radical school reform in the late 1960s and 1970s, more students were incorporated into an academic track; however, academic regulations, requirements and mandates were decentralized, and students in academic high schools were typically taking a less academically rigorous course of study than previous

generations (Ravitch, 2010). In 1983, the National Commission on Educational Excellence prepared *A Nation at Risk* (ANAR), a bombshell report claiming the erosion of the American educational system, with declining SAT scores, the need for more remedial courses on college campuses and more credits in elective area courses rather than core academics (Ravitch, 2010). Ravitch (2010) stated that the purpose of ANAR was to re-establish higher educational standards, but argued that the singular focus on high school standards meant that initiatives would not be successful, as other areas including earlier school preparation and outside-of-school factors also needed to be considered. Ravitch (2010) postulated that *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), which was passed in 2002 and established accountability for teachers and school systems solely on the basis of test scores, directly resulted in the proliferation of private and charter schools and decentralized the efforts for school reform. The early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, therefore, has seen the close of the metropolitan era and the arrival of the accountability era.

Education is a central part of American life. Driver (2018) echoed Adlai Stevenson's claim that "the most American thing about America is the free common school system", noting that on any given day, about 1/6 of the population can be found in a school as a student, teacher or other staff member (p. 7). Attainment of a high school diploma remains critically important for career and financial success; according the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2018 those without a high school diploma earned average of \$553 per week, which is \$170 less than the average for those with a high school diploma and approximately half of the median weekly wage of \$932. Those without a high school diploma also faced the highest rates of unemployment at 5.6% in

2018 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Therefore, a way must be found to educate all students, including through alternative pathways.

### **History of Alternative Education**

The roots of modern alternative education are found in the era of 1960s as part of the civil rights era. In reaction to the rigid and segregationist schools of the 1950s and early 1960s, alternatives were developed with a focus on choice, autonomy, non-competitive evaluation and a child-centered approach (Lange & Sletten, 2002). As alternative education evolved over the next several decades, Raywid (1994) separated alternative education into three types. Type I programs are similar to magnet schools, with specialized or innovative programs to attract students, Type II programs are last-chance, typically punitive schools, where students with poor academic or behavioral records are sent prior to expulsion, and Type III programs, which are supportive settings designed to focus on those students with academic and/or behavioral needs (Raywid, 1994). For the purpose of this study, Type III alternative programs are considered. Throughout the remainder of this study, all references to alternative programs should be considered to be Type III programs, unless otherwise specified.

Historically, there has not always been a positive connotation of alternative education, as this moniker has been applied to schools or programs that housed students (particularly those from vulnerable populations and/or minorities) who were improperly excluded from mainstream settings (Fedders, 2018). Students continue to be involuntarily transferred into ‘alternative’ settings for a variety of questionable reasons, including minor disciplinary offenses such as horseplay, cell phone violations or association with other students who have broken rules (Vogell, 2016). In many states,

students in alternative settings are not considered in district accountability measures such as graduation rates and proficiency scores, so there has been (and remains) a strong push in many states to move at-risk and disproportionately minority students into Type II alternative settings. Most recently this practice has been particularly prevalent in Florida, Texas, Washington and Michigan; students are shuttled into programs that have lower graduation rates and receive less per-pupil spending than those who remain in the traditional school (Vogell & Fresques, 2017). It is important to acknowledge the problematic history and continuing existence of Type II alternative settings, but these types of programs are not the focus of this study.

### **The Need for Effective Alternative Education**

When students are not successful in traditional education pathways, alternative settings may offer a pathway to success (Bullock, 2007; Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Raywid, 2001). Students with significant conduct disorders and highly disruptive behaviors may not be able to be educated within traditional school settings due to safety concerns for themselves or others (Simonson & Sugai, 2013). When behavioral and conduct challenges result in suspension, in most states, schools are still obligated to provide instruction, although there are some exceptions where students can be expelled and are no longer eligible for instruction (Elias, 2011). There is a subset of alternative education programs that are specifically designed to meet the needs of this population of students, and may be included within a juvenile detention center (Quinn & Poirier, 2006). For the purposes of this study, alternative education options for this population are not examined at length; rather the focus here is upon the academic-oriented alternative education settings that support at-risk students who are eligible to participate in a

traditional education setting, but have not been successful in that environment (Maillet, 2017; Quinn et al., 2006; Quinn & Poirier, 2006).

Raywid (2001) discussed the need for alternative programs that can support students who have not be able to thrive in traditional schools, and emphasizes that alternative programs need to not only be different from traditional schools, but different from each other. Raywid noted:

When it comes to schools, one size cannot possibly fit all... What kind of school is needed then? We can't accurately predict the kind, because students - like adults - may thrive in different environments. There isn't one right kind. You need several schools that are genuinely different from one another, among which unsuccessful youngsters and successful ones, too - may choose...Policy works to the contrary notwithstanding, there's no single formula yielding a model (for replication and upscaling) that is an ideal 'School for the Unsuccessful.' (p. 582-3).

In her call for expanding alternative education options for students, Raywid (2001) also acknowledged that this is not a process that can be easily replicated. Each alternative school must be different and tailored to the needs of the students that will be served by its programs. Smith and Thomson (2014) discussed a variety of approaches, including behavioral, cognitive, social-cognitive and motivational, that are employed by different alternative settings in order to increase graduation rates.

Quinn and Poirier (2006) discussed the different philosophies that inform the need for alternative education settings, and note that these can essentially be boiled down into two camps: those who believe there are "broken children" who require specialized

support and those who believe students in need are the result of a “broken system” (p. 1). Popkewitz (1984) noted that organizational biases often exist, in which there is an assumption that the school is effective and failures are attributable to deficiencies in the student rather than the system; he argued that it is important to confront these biases. In their findings, Quinn and Poirier (2006) emphasized that students in alternative settings had an improved attitude and performance, student success was tied to high levels of administrator support, teachers were more likely to be perceived positively by students and teachers were able to see students as individuals separate from their behaviors.

### **Serving at risk populations.**

There is a need to develop different alternatives to serve a population of students with diverse socio-emotional needs. Robinson and Aronica (2015) stated that while alternative programs are often very different from each other, they do have some commonalities, noting they work with students “who are doing the least well in conventional education: the low achievers, the alienated, the ones with low self-esteem and little optimism for their own futures. These programs offer these disaffected young people a different sort of learning experience” (p. 30). Smith and Thomson (2014) report that there are a variety of factors that contribute to the likelihood that a student will drop out, including socio-economic (i.e. poverty, low parental education), personal (i.e. criminal involvement, working more than 12 hours per week) and school related (i.e. poor attendance, previous retention, sense of disenfranchisement). Lehr et al. (2004) report that up to one in eight students in the United States will not graduate from high school, with the highest rates of drop-outs amongst students with low SES, students of Hispanic descent, and students with disabilities, particularly those with learning and

emotional/behavioral disorders (p. 7). In a study of outcomes for students in an alternative school based on a solution-focused, brief therapy framework (SFBT) Franklin et al. (2007) also discussed negative outcomes for students who have dropped out of school, including increased risk of emotional problems, substance abuse and criminal activity, higher rates of unemployment and decreased earning potential. Alternative education students are often at a disadvantage when entering a program, as they tend to be credit deficient and more likely to be disengaged than other students (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

Where traditional education options have failed, alternative education settings are offering hope for assisting at-risk students with attaining a high school diploma; Smith and Thomson (2014) reported some early results regarding a halving of the drop-out rate, (from 6% to 3%), within three years of an alternative program's existence. Quinn and Poirier (2006) also reported increased graduation rates from alternative school settings. Wilkerson et al. (2016) conducted a wide-reaching and longitudinal study of students within alternative settings. Students in alternative settings had fewer disciplinary referrals, although they still earned fewer credits per semester than students in traditional settings.

#### **Benefits of smaller schools.**

While most alternative schools are small, not all small schools are alternative (Quinn & Poirier, 2006). A number of studies have found benefits to smaller schools, although the findings are somewhat mixed. In a summary of existing research, McAndrews and Anderson (2002) summarize the benefits of smaller schools in general, which include: academic, social, attendance & graduation, safety & discipline and



financial benefits and point out that alternative schools often share many, if not all, of the characteristics of a small school. Howley and Bickel (2000) discussed the strong inverse relationship between poverty and school achievement in a wide-ranging study of around 13,600 schools across four states. Through a regression analysis, a power of poverty score was calculated, to explain the impact of poverty on student achievement. Smaller schools were found to cut the power of poverty score by 20 to 70 percent, indicating that the size of the school alone negated declines in student achievement that are strongly associated with poverty levels in larger school settings. Raywid (1997) cited large-scale studies from New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Alaska and an unidentified Western state which all found improvements in achievements and graduation rates for students in smaller schools; these improvements were seen regardless of socio-economic and minority status that are typically associated with lower levels of achievement and graduation rates in larger school settings. However, Lee and Ready (2007) dispute this finding, noting that a smaller school size alone does not lead to improved outcomes for students.

The small schools movement began as early as the 1960s, but took hold in New York City in the 1990s, when the work of breaking up large high schools into smaller schools began in earnest (Bloom et al., 2010). The process of evaluating these changes continues today. In a series of interviews with school leaders who participated in the conversion process, Nehring and Lohmeier (2010) reported that principals remained optimistic about the benefits of smaller schools, and were able to take more instructional leadership tasks, but establishing autonomy remained a challenge. In a review of students from a specific cohort in small schools of choice (SSC) in New York City, Unterman

(2014) reported that when comparing these students to a control group from other high schools, students from an SSC had higher on-time graduation rate, had better college readiness (e.g. earned Regents diploma, achieved mastery on English Regents), were more likely to enroll in college and early results suggest that they are more likely to remain in college.

### **School Organization, School Culture and Academics in Alternative Education**

Existing literature examines school organization (Quinn & Poirier, 2006; Zolkoski et al., 2016), school culture (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Quinn et al., 2006; Streeter et al. 2011; Wiest. et al., 2001) and academics (Davis et al., 2010; Zolkoski et al., 2016). It is important to examine each of the factors in more depth prior to beginning further study of alternative settings.

#### **School organization.**

It is critical to be intentional in the planning and organization of an alternative setting, as simply making a setting smaller does not make it alternative (Quinn & Poirier, 2006). Raywid (2002) discussed different models for creating smaller schools, and singled out the success of one particular method in New York City. Beginning in 1983, NYC was a front-runner in the small schools movement, driven by top-down directives from a central office under the direction of Chancellor Anthony Alvarado; as a result of this initiative, NYC went from 100 alternative settings in 1983 to 425 by 1997 (p. 48). In a decades-long study which tracked NYC high school students in SSCs, Bloom et al. (2010) discussed the cooperation within the New York City Department of Education (DOE), noting that a number of large, underperforming high schools were targeted for closure at the same time that 216 SSCs were created to accept these students. SSCs were

planned in neighborhoods where larger high schools were closing, required the development of an educational philosophy and received the benefits of outside resources and policy protections during the start-up period (Bloom et al., 2010).

Due to smaller numbers of students in each alternative setting, and classes with smaller student-to-teacher ratios, groupings of students are often created differently in alternative settings than traditional settings (Quinn & Poirier, 2006; Zolkoski et al., 2016). In a review of students in small school settings, Ronskley-Pavia et al. (2019) discussed the use of multi-age, ungraded groupings. It was determined that academic progress in multi-age groupings was maintained with the added benefit of more support for students' socio-emotional growth as opposed to more traditional groupings of students by grade level. Davis et al. (2010) discussed the importance of implementing additional measures such as teacher teaming when structuring a smaller school setting.

As part of a proposal for a multidimensional framework that can be used to evaluate alternative programs, McGee and Lin (2017) identified four components to a data-driven decision making process for students within an alternative setting: preconditions (preparing the learning environment), planning (effective teaching), delivery (individualization) and collaboration (evaluation of student progress). This process can be seen in the figure below.

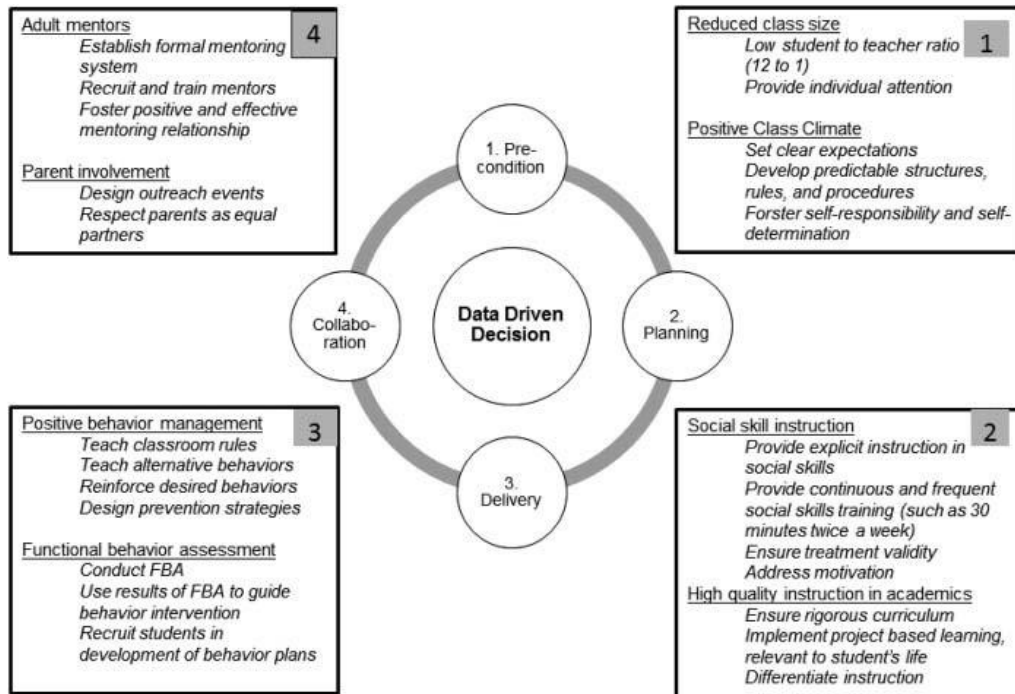


Figure 1. AE Multidimensional Framework. This figure provides a visual representation of a proposed framework for evaluating alternative education programs. Reprinted from “Providing a Supportive Alternative Education Environment for At-Risk Students” by J.J. McGee and F.Y. Lin, 2017; *Preventing School Failure*, 61(2), p. 184.

### School climate and culture.

Existing research emphasizes the importance of relationships for students in alternative settings and suggests that building positive relationships and pro-social skills are critical to the success of alternative school programs (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Quinn et al., 2006; Streeter et al., 2011; and Wiest. et al., 2001). In particular, Edgar-Smith and Palmer (2015) reported that student perceptions of teacher support in an alternative school were positively correlated with GPA and fewer discipline issues. Further evaluation of the factors that contribute to the development of positive relationships is needed. Being able to identify and critically evaluate exemplar alternative schools will assist with the transfer of these effective elements to other

alternative settings. Wiest et al. (2001) noted alternative education students reported improved levels of self-worth and self-esteem that were on par with students in traditional settings, despite higher levels of academic failure and fewer academic coping skills than their peers. Once students have been in an alternative program, they tend to report more positive perceptions of school than they reported within the traditional school setting; students also perceived higher levels of teacher support in the alternative setting, with improvements seen at 4 and then 8 months within the alternative setting (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015).

Wiest et al. (2001) indicated that while alternative education students generally reported lower levels of academic self-confidence, they also reported lower levels of anxiety than students in traditional education settings. In a qualitative study that evaluated the experience of alternative school graduates, Zolkoski et al. (2016) noted that nearly all participants reported negative experiences while they had been in a traditional school setting, but all had uniformly stated positive perceptions of teachers while in the alternative setting. In addition to positive relationships with teachers, alternative school graduates had credited positive disciplinary procedures (i.e. reward systems, restorative practices) and small student-to-teacher ratios with assisting them in developing resilience (Zolkoski et al., 2016).

Riddle and Cleaver (2017) discussed the ways in which teachers in one alternative setting have deliberately engaged students in a different way, including developing relational trust by flattening the hierarchy between teachers and students. For example, the teachers engage in family meetings, where there is an open discussion and decisions

are made jointly, and there are very few established rules, with the expectation that students will behave appropriately (p. 504-5).

### **Academics.**

Alternative education settings should maintain rigorous academic expectations for students while also providing supports and flexibility to allow students to meet academic goals (Carter et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2010; Edwards, 2017; Hall, 2019; Quinn & Poirier, 2006). In an evaluation of academic achievement amongst students in alternative settings, Davis et al. (2010) reported that a decline in academic achievement and student engagement is typically seen in the transition from middle to high school, but the magnitude of this decline was reduced in smaller schools with teacher teaming. Project-based and inquiry learning can often be more easily implemented in smaller, more flexible alternative settings (Carter et al., 2010). Hall (2019) discussed opportunities for project-based learning in alternative settings, specifically discussing the success of an authentic athletic-academic model that can harness a student's interest in sports to teach such varied topics as math and self-efficacy. Edwards (2017) discussed the use of a guided-inquiry design (GID) for an instructional unit with alternative school students, noting that the flexibility of the alternative setting made it an ideal place to utilize GID.

In addition to assisting students with meeting academic demands associated with graduation requirements, Zhao (2012) also points out that while we need to encourage creativity in thinking and learning in order to prepare students for a rapidly changing job market, American schools are actually churning out students who are less creative thinkers, with decreases seen in all categories of the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking over the past 20 years. In order to combat this problem, Zhao (2012) discussed the

alternative paradigm, which is a way of developing a student-centered curriculum. As Zhao pointed out, student-centered learning is not new, but he suggested encouraging entrepreneurship and global cooperation into learning experiences. He gave the example of the Chicken Project, where students from Oxford, England and Cape Town, South Africa teamed up in order to establish a chicken business; both groups of students learned financing, marketing strategies, labor management and work ethic (p. 213-215).

Robinson and Aronica (2015) also affirmed the importance of fostering creativity in students, which allows for innovation, noting that there is a misconception that creativity is inborn rather than developed, and that creativity can only flourish in unstructured settings. Rather, Robinson and Aronica (2015) argued that creativity can be cultivated through careful instructional design.

Quinn and Poirier (2006) pointed out a common theme in effective alternative settings: high expectations for students. In the alternative settings studied by Quinn and Poirier (2006), which were selected via extreme case sampling, high graduation rates were reported, despite a large number of students who entered with poor grades and/or credit deficiencies.

### **Determining Effectiveness and Identifying Exemplar Schools**

The need for alternative programs exists, but there is yet to be a broadly agreed upon set of criteria for what constitutes an effective alternative school. Some common characteristics include small class sizes, student choice and involvement in decision-making, student perceptions of teacher support and integrated socio-emotional supports (Franklin et al., 2007; Maillet, 2017; Quinn et al., 2006, Quinn & Poirier, 2006, Wiest et al., 2001; Wilkerson et al., 2016). Lehr and Lange (2003) pointed out that there is limited

rigorous scientific research on effective programs, but there is a wealth of anecdotal evidence. Franklin et al. (2007) echoed this, citing a lack of rigorous scientific research into academic-based alternative school programs as a justification for their study on the effectiveness of a solution-focused alternative school that was operated on a framework of solution-focused brief therapy (SBFT). SBFT encourages the use of students' strengths and resources and teachers' solution-building skills. The researchers used a quasi-experimental, pretest-posttest design to examine three different factors related to successful school completion: attendance, credit accrual and graduation rates. Results were somewhat mixed, with the researchers noting an initial improvement in attendance that was not maintained, and despite higher rates of credit accrual, there were fewer on-time graduations by alternative school students. However, Franklin et al. (2007) continued to follow students from the alternative school group and it was noted that only a small number of students (3 out of 42) had ultimately dropped out by the end of the longitudinal study; the remainder had graduated or were still enrolled in educational settings. Franklin et al. (2007) concluded that an alternative school based on the SBFT framework "has promise as intervention for reducing drop-out rates for at-risk adolescents and enabling them to earn high school credits and graduate from high school over time" (p. 133).

While Franklin et al. (2007) were able to establish effectiveness with an SBFT framework, it is important to continue to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies in alternative education settings, in order to revise or adjust them when necessary. Randle (2016) noted that in a large-scale study of nearly 1,000 students in various disciplinary alternative education programs (DAEPs), that utilized the Boys Town Educational



Model, there was a decline in academic averages and attendance, and an increase in disciplinary incidents. Despite improvements in other factors, including attendance, self-efficacy and overall achievement, Wilkerson et al. (2016) and Franklin et al. (2007) found that students in alternative settings still lagged behind in credit accrual and on-time graduation rates.

Quinn et al. (2006) offer some suggestions for the study of effective alternative schools, which were designated as “exemplary” by a panel of experts. Quinn et al. (2006) used the Effective School Battery (ESB), administered to students and teachers, to assess the climate and culture within the identified exemplary schools. When compared to the normative group, alternative students across all three assessed sites reported very high (positive) scores regarding four out of six climate factors (belief in rules, fairness of rules, planning and action and respect for students), suggesting that these are important components of an effective alternative program.

In a summary of effective alternative school programs submitted on behalf of the US Department of Education, Quinn and Poirier (2006) reported that “although there is a dearth of rigorous empirical evidence supporting the relevance of particular program characteristics in terms of effectiveness” (p. 16) various characteristics that are often associated with effectiveness in the existing literature include the following:

- (1) small class size and small student body, (2) personalized school environment in which students feel included in the decision-making, (3) choice, (4) high expectations/belief in the students (5) special teacher training, (6) parent involvement, (7) collaboration, (8) flexibility, (9) effective classroom management, (10) community support (11)

administrative leadership (12) targeted to a specific population and (13) transition support.

Streeter et al. (2011) used concept mapping in order to evaluate a solution-focused alternative school. Initially, statements were gathered from students, teachers and other school staff members, and computer software was used to create cluster maps, which showed levels of agreement on various aspects of what makes the setting effective. 15 clusters were developed, and four of these clusters (Respect Evident Throughout the School, Sense of Community, Student-Student Interaction and Empowering Culture) emphasized relationships. Groups of students and teachers agreed that the relationship-focused clusters were the most important to school success.

Maillet (2017) identified six powerful practices that he claims to be essential in alternative education programs. These include: (1) provide active and creative instruction, (2) integrate service learning opportunities into all aspects of the program, (3) accelerate student learning, (4) build time into the schedule to connect with kids, (5) have a plan B (and C) for every student every day and (6) utilize college students and community members. Murray and Holt (2014) also examined effective program factors which include: (1) small student-to-teacher ratio, (2) strong social and emotional support, (3) caring and committed staff, (4) family involvement, (5) individualized education planning and (6) belief in student self-efficacy.

Successful practices in alternative education can be examined in three different domains: school organization, school climate and culture (which includes a focus on socio-emotional competencies) and academics.

## Summary

Existing research into alternative education indicates that alternative programs provide support for at-risk students (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Quinn et al., 2006; Streeter et al., 2011; Wiest. et al., 2001) and can improve graduation rates (Smith & Thomson, 2014; Wiest et al. 2011; Zolkoski et al., 2016). While the research remains quite sparse, there is some overlapping agreement regarding the factors of effective alternative programs, including smaller small/class sizes (Davis et al., 2010; Murray & Holt, 2014; Quinn & Poirier, 2006), positive relationships with teachers (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Maillet, 2017; Murray & Holt, 2014; Quinn & Poirier, 2006; Quinn et al., 2006; Riddle & Cleaver, 2017; Streeter et al., 2011; Zolkoski et al., 2016) and academic flexibility that allowed for student interests and/or student choice in educational planning (Maillet, 2017; Murray & Holt, 2014; Quinn & Poirier, 2006,). Continuing to examine school organization, school climate and academics in alternative education settings is important in order to contribute to the existing body of research. There is also a need for additional study and examination of programs particularly in New York state, where alternative education is not explicitly defined in state statutes or codes and there are fewer programs in existence that are available for study.

## CHAPTER 3

### Research Design

This chapter provides information about the methods and procedures for data collection and analysis for this study. This comparative case study (Stake, 1995) contrasts two alternative education settings in suburban New York State. Stake (1995) stated, “the real business of case study is particularization, not generalization” (p. 8), emphasizing that researchers are seeking to better understand a case or situation. In this study, two different case studies were undertaken and compared. Stake (1995) discussed the use of a collective case study, in which two (or more) different case studies are undertaken in different settings and then compared; this allows for triangulation of findings, but Stake still cautions against the generalization of findings even in a collective case study due to the relatively small sample size. A case study was the appropriate method to use in order to answer these research questions, as the goal of this study is to better understand the particulars of an existing alternative education program. In this comparative case study, the researcher sought to fully understand each setting in order to determine effective factors, and in order to accomplish this, there needed to be an opportunity to allow for free responses from participants during interviews. Observations and document review served to triangulate findings and establish trustworthiness.

There is a paucity of research on alternative education settings in general, and specifically in New York State, where fewer alternative education settings exist than in many other states. Research was conducted within two different alternative education programs, Summit and East Hamlet, (both pseudonyms) in suburban New York during the Spring 2020 semester. Procedures included classroom observations at Summit,

interviews with teachers and administrators from both settings using a semi-structured interview protocol and a review of artifacts from both settings. The case study took place later in the spring semester, as both programs tend to accept more students in the fall semester, and the student populations tend to be more stabilized in the second half of the school year. The data collection and analysis identified in this chapter provide the basis for the findings and conclusions detailed in chapter 5 of this study.

## **Methods and Procedures**

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this case study is to examine and identify factors that contribute to an effective alternative education program by examining existing programs.

1. What are the effective practices that teachers and administrators within an alternative education setting have identified in the domains of school organization, school climate & culture and academics?
2. What challenges, obstacles or barriers are identified in alternative education settings by key educational stakeholders?

### **Setting**

The setting is two different alternative education sites in suburban New York State: Summit Academy and East Hamlet Institute (pseudonym). Sites were selected via purposeful case sampling, which is used when there are limited cases available and an information-rich setting is required to answer the research questions (Wiersma, 2000). Only a small number of alternative education programs exist in New York State, therefore this is a justification to use purposeful case sampling in this situation (Creswell, 2015). Potential programs were identified via the regional alternative education

association and were then narrowed down to only consider programs that have been in existence for five years or longer, have a permanent student population (as opposed to programs that serve students temporarily, such as during a suspension) and are willing to participate in the research process. This researcher had access to faculty/staff in each setting through mutual membership in the regional alternative education association. Approval to conduct this study was granted through written permission from the respective Assistant Superintendents of Instruction in each setting.

Summit and East Hamlet are both alternative education programs that are housed under the auspices of two different public school districts in suburban New York. Demographics are provided in the table below.

Table 2: *Description of Alternative Education Sites for Study*

	<b>Summit</b>	<b>East Hamlet</b>
<b>Time in Existence</b>	13 years	7 years
<b>Location</b>	Separate building on high school campus	Shared space in administration building; no other students on campus
<b>Staffing</b>	One full-time lead teacher One full-time teaching assistant One nearly full-time (.9) school psychologist Several teachers shared with the high school (rotating basis) One shared administrator housed at the high school	Three full-time teachers, including one lead teacher Six part-time teachers One full-time school psychologist One full-time school counselor One full-time principal
<b>Student Population</b>	23 full-time students	40 students; close to half attend part-time and participate in PM tech program or main high school
<b>Cross-Contract</b>	Yes- 50% of student population is out-of-district	Yes- 6 spots reserved for out-of-district students
<b>NYSED Demographics Info (2018-2019)</b>	3, 141 K-12 students in 4 schools 70% White 99% proficiency on ELA Regents 97% proficiency on Algebra I Regents 97% graduation rate Spending per pupil: \$17,843 (general education) \$64,692 (special education)	6,131 K-12 students in 8 schools 80% White 95% proficiency on ELA Regents 92% proficiency on Algebra I Regents 96% graduation rate Spending per pupil: \$15,400 (general education) \$41,372 (special education)

Summit and East Hamlet both have their roots in the same alternative school, Southbrook School, which is located in suburban New York State and operates under its own charter. The administrators involved in the founding of both Summit and East Hamlet had worked with the former principal of Southbrook, and many aspects of the Southbrook program were initially borrowed by Summit and East Hamlet.

## **Limitations**

Limitations include a small population from which to sample, as there are fewer than 15 programs in this region of New York that meet specified criteria. Gaining access to both sites was time-consuming, as both districts had their own guidelines regarding access for visitors and conducting research. Additionally, the research process was interrupted by mandated school closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic. One on-site visit to Summit had been achieved prior to school closure, but all planned research was not completed prior to mandated closure. Due to the closures, on-site access was not possible at East Hamlet; therefore, all research from East Hamlet involved phone interviews with participants and a review of existing records.

## **Participants**

The study included eleven participants: six from Summit and five from East Hamlet. Participants were selected via purposeful sampling, based upon their involvement in an alternative education program (Creswell, 2015) and recruited via email and/or in person request. Interview requests were made to all staff members in each setting, with exclusion criteria for teachers who have taught less than one full academic year or ten calendar months in an alternative setting, and for those who participated in the alternative setting less than 20% of the day. All participants were licensed educational professionals. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality has been maintained, so responses are likely to be valid reflections. Interviews with students were planned, but could not be completed due to mandated school closures. Permission to interview students at Summit was rescinded, due to difficulties with connecting with students during virtual learning, and permission to interview students at East Hamlet was not



granted as per the district’s own IRB process.

Table 3: *Description of Participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Total Years of Education Experience</b>	<b>Years of Alternative Education Experience</b>	<b>Subject(s) Taught</b>	<b>Full Time/Part Time in Program</b>
<u>Summit</u>				
Joe	10	10	School Psychologist	Part Time
Kristen	14	4	Teaching Assistant	Full Time
Warren	39	13	Administrator	Part Time
Andrew	11	9	Math Teacher	Part Time
Jill	20	8	English Teacher	Part Time
Nancy	26	13	Lead Teacher	Full Time
<u>East Hamlet</u>				
James	29	9	Administrator	Full Time
Michelle	16	7	Lead Teacher	Full Time
Sandy	1	1	Teaching Assistant	Full Time
Charlie	17	4	Spanish Teacher	Part Time
Ruth	5	5	School Nurse	Full Time

The sample of volunteer participants represented differences in terms of years of experience in education, years of experience in alternative education settings, and roles within the alternative education program. All of the full-time staff members at Summit were interviewed; interviews with all of the full-time staff members at East Hamlet were attempted, but two of the full-time staff members were not available for participation. A semi-structured interview protocol was utilized for each interview; responses were audio-recorded with the knowledge and consent of participants, and then transcribed for further evaluation. Interviews were conducted in a variety of formats, including in-person (prior to mandated school closure), phone calls and video-conferencing.

## **Data Collection and Procedures**

### **Data collection methods and sources**

Data was collected via observation, semi-structured interviews and a review of documents.

#### **Observation.**

An important aspect to a case study is observation of the setting. Stake (1995) reported that the researcher is an interpreter, and when observing, must objectively record happenings while simultaneously examining meaning; as part of this process of interpretation, research questions may be refined or even replaced during the course of the study. One full-day site visit occurred at Summit; it was not possible to visit East Hamlet during the research phase due to mandated school closures, however, this researcher had previous familiarity with the program and had been on site at East Hamlet for a previous visit and a conference. During the site visit to Summit, field notes were recorded. Field notes describe the setting and situation as comprehensively as possible, and include both (1) descriptive information about what has been seen and heard and (2) reflective information that captures the researcher's personal reactions and reflections in the moment (Stake, 1995). An observation protocol, informed by Stake (1995) was created for this purpose and is found in Appendix B. A total of three instructional periods were observed during the site visit to Summit. In addition to structured classroom observations, the researcher was invited to informally observe unstructured times, such as lunch periods and dismissal. The researcher was granted access to the entire building, including classrooms, lounge spaces and staff offices.

### **Interviews.**

Interviews were conducted with nine teachers and two administrators across the two sites. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. A semi-structured interview protocol was utilized, as the pre-planned questions were important for gathering information on targeted topics, but this mode of interviewing also allowed for additional input and clarification (Creswell, 2015). According to Stake (1995), it is easy to find willing interview subjects, but difficult to conduct an effective interview. Stake (1995) suggested the use of an interview protocol to assist with keeping the interview process on track. Building rapport and engaging with interview subjects is important in order to get useful information and insights (Stake, 1995).

In the development of the semi-structured interview protocol, questions informed by the Effective School Battery (Gottfredson, 1999) and the Advocacy Design Model (Smith, 1990) were grouped into three main domains: school organization, school climate & culture and academics. In addition to these three domains, basic demographic information was also collected.

Table 4: *Interview Protocol Questions*

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Teacher Protocol</b>	<b>Administrator Protocol</b>
School Organization -Organization, Governance and Accountability (Smith, 1990) -Belief in Rules, School Rewards, and Avoidance of Punishment from Student ESB scale; Classroom Orderliness, Professional Development, Planning and Action, Fairness of Rules and Student Influence from Teacher ESB scale (Gottfredson, 1999).	>How are students selected/identified for this program? >How is the school schedule created? What do you think about the school schedule? >How are decisions made? Who has the power to make decisions? Veto decisions? >What are the rules in this setting? What happens if a student breaks the rules? What is your involvement with discipline? >What types of professional development are offered?	>Tell about the application process (if applicable). >How is the school scheduled created? What do you think about the school schedule? >How are decisions made? Who has the power to make decisions? Veto decisions? >What are the rules in this setting? What happens if a student breaks the rules?
School Climate & Culture -Governance (Smith, 1990) -Safety, Attachment to School, Interpersonal Competency from Student ESB; Safety, Respect for Students and Morale, Teacher ESB (Gottfredson, 1999).	>How do you think students perceive this setting? >Tell me about working with your colleagues. Describe the relationship you have with colleagues. >What are the attitudes of your students regarding school? >What is your general attitude regarding work?	>How do you think students perceive this setting? >Tell me about the process of working with teachers. Describe the relationship you have with colleagues, teachers and/or other professionals in this setting. >What are the attitudes of your students regarding school?
Academics -Instruction (Smith, 1999) -School Effort, Attachment to School on Student ESB Scale; Avoidance of Use of Grades as a Sanction, Resources, Planning and Action on the Teacher ESB (Gottfredson, 1999).	>How are grades determined? Does behavior have an impact on grades? >Describe the process of lesson planning? Do you work in collaboration with colleagues on academic planning? >How do students demonstrate what they know? >Are students' interests considered in academic planning?	>How are grades determined? What do you think of grading procedures? >How do students demonstrate knowledge? >Are students' interests considered in academic planning?

### **Document Review.**

Observations and interviews were supplemented with a review of documents and artifacts, such as mission statements, websites, policy manuals, and applications.

Although Stake (1995) emphasizes the importance of direct observation and/or interviewing as part of the case study process, he also notes that document review serves an important purpose as it can serve as a substitute for activity that the researcher could not observe directly. A review of documents can also provide an important source of triangulation (Creswell, 2015). A document review protocol, informed by Bowen (2009) was developed from this purpose. Documents were summarized and then codes were utilized in order to identify key ideas and themes.

### **Research Timeline**

The first stage of research permission involved approval from St. John's University, including IRB approval, letters of introduction, letters of informed consent, procedures for site observations, semi-structured interview protocols and written approval from district administrators in Summit and East Hamlet. This stage took six weeks, including wait time for approvals, and was within the expected timeline.

The second stage involved data collection. This involved site visits, interviews and records review. This stage took nearly five months, and took longer than expected, due to unanticipated delays related to COVID-19. Research was paused after the initial school closures, and revised procedures and protocols needed to be approved by the St. John's IRB prior to research resuming in an amended format. Changes included abandoning plans to interview students and site visits to East Hamlet, and a change from

in-person interviews to phone/video conferencing. There was a six-week delay in research due to COVID-19 closures and restrictions.

This third stage involved data analysis. There is some overlap in the timeline between the second and third stage, as some preliminary data analysis took place at the data collection level (e.g. initial coding). This stage took a total of five months, considering time for review of drafts by the dissertation mentor and editing process.

### **Trustworthiness of the Design**

Trustworthiness was established via several methods. Guba (1981) discussed four ways of establishing trustworthiness: (1) credibility, (2) transferability, (3) dependability and (4) confirmability. Shento (2004) enumerated various methods that can be used to establish trustworthiness in each of the four areas identified by Guba.

Regarding the establishment of credibility (i.e. internal validity), Shento (2004) noted several possible strategies including but not limited to: use well-established research methods, develop an early familiarity with the culture of participating organizations prior to beginning the actual work of the study, use a random sampling of participants, use triangulation, and complete member checks (Shento, 2004). In this study, the researcher did utilize established qualitative research methods, and also utilized established surveys such as the Effective School Battery (Gottfredson, 1999) and the essential questions from the Advocacy Design Center (Smith, 1990) in developing the semi-structured interview protocol used in this study. The researcher also had prior familiarity with the alternative education sites within this study due to mutual membership in the regional alternative education association and previous professional involvement with alternative education settings. A random sampling of participants is

recommended by Shenton (2004) but was not possible in this comparative case study due to the very small size of the population; all participating members of both sites were recruited for this study. Triangulation, which Stake (1995) defines as the “search for accuracy and alternative explanations” was completed through comparing results from observations, interviews and records reviews to compare emergent themes (p. 107). Member checks involved asking interviewees to review rough notes with the researcher, immediately following the interview, in order to ensure that answers were recorded accurately and there is agreement regarding what will be included for analysis in the transcript (Stake, 1995). Member checks were completed immediately upon completion of the interview process, and, in several cases, a follow-up member check was conducted several days to several weeks after the interview process. This follow-up member check was completed for those participants who asked for redactions of information.

Regarding transferability (i.e. external validity), Shento (2004) discussed that there are conflicting views amongst qualitative researchers regarding the appropriateness of any transferability or generalization to another context, because of the particularness of an in-depth study of one specific setting or a small group of individuals. However, Shento (2004) does agree with Stake (1995) that because each group or setting is part of a broader group, there may be some limited applicability, if applied with caution. In order to be able to have any transferability, it is important to include very detailed background information on the setting and participants, as well as contextual information about the setting for study (Shento, 2004; Guba, 1981). In this study, the researcher provided extensive background information and relevant details regarding the site and the participants, to the greatest extent possible without violating confidentiality.

When considering dependability (i.e. reliability), Shento (2004) stated that it is important for the researcher to fully describe the research methods and procedures, operationally define the ways in which data was collected and engage in a reflective appraisal of the study, including evaluating effectiveness. In this study, the researcher fully defined described research methods and procedures, including data collection, and engaged in the process of evaluating the results, including a specific delineation of limitations and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the research process and findings.

Confirmability involves the researcher's ability to maintain objectivity and continually evaluate findings to ensure that the researcher's own bias did not influence findings; Shento (2004) reported that triangulation is important to ensure confirmability, as is an audit trail. An audit trail is created by the researcher by tracking how the data was collected and analyzed, and ultimately led to the conclusions and recommendations (Shento, 2004). Although the researcher did not formally complete an audit trail according to Shento's (2004) recommended process, the researcher did utilize multiple drafts and periodic consultation and advisory with a mentor in order to maintain objectivity.

### **Research Ethics**

In order to gain access to the site, appropriate approvals needed to be in place from St. John's and the school districts that house the selected alternative education programs. Participants at selected sites were recruited via email and in-person requests at Summit. This researcher proceeded with caution in an attempt to avoid the perception of persuasion/influence, as a family member is associated with one of the sites (Summit) in



a professional capacity, and several persons of influence at East Hamlet have known professional and personal relationships with family members of the researcher. Additionally, this researcher had pre-existing professional relationships with several participants, as a result of mutual membership in the regional alternative education association. Informed consent was obtained to ensure that participation is voluntary and participants are fully informed regarding the risks and benefits of participation in this study. There were no foreseen risks for participation, and no personal benefits. However, participation in this study did contribute to the body of knowledge regarding alternative education. Confidentiality of participants has been maintained via the use of a coded system for participants, who were identified via unique identification number rather than name during the data collection process, and are identified in this study via pseudonym. No details that could potentially identify individual participants are published. Settings are identified only by region and a pseudonym. The collected qualitative data was stored securely, with password protection, in the computer program Dedoose.

### **Data Analysis Approach**

Creswell (2015) outlined six steps for qualitative data collection and analysis, which he cautioned are not linear steps. These steps are seen in Figure 2. Initially, data was collected through observations, interviews and document reviews. Then data was prepared for analysis through transcription and field notes, which was then read through several times to obtain a sense of the material.

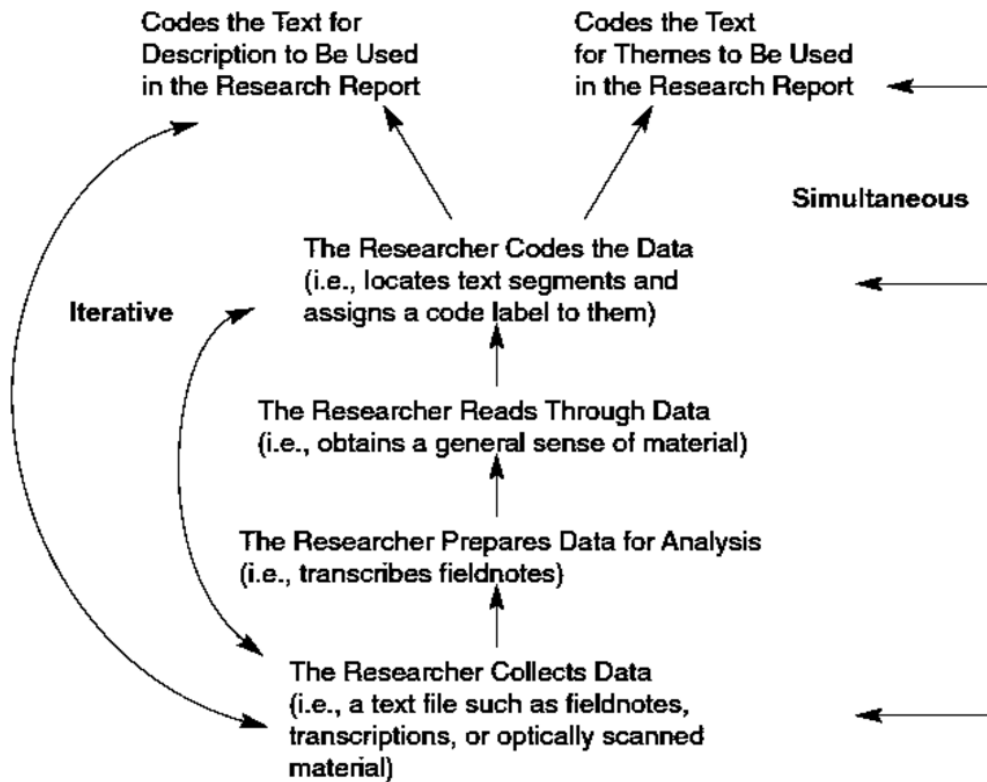


Figure 2. The qualitative process of data analysis. This figure displays the process for reviewing and analyzing qualitative data. From *Educational research: Planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (5<sup>th</sup> ed) by Creswell, J. (2015).

Field notes and interview transcripts were hand-coded to evaluate for emerging themes. Creswell (2015) defined a code as “a label used to describe a segment of text or an image” (p. 243). On the first few readings of the data, numerous codes may be assigned (e.g. 30-40), and then these codes can be gradually collapsed into fewer codes upon subsequent readings, and will eventually be grouped into fewer themes (Creswell, 2015). Stake (1995) indicated that a researcher must decide which will bear the conceptual load: direct observations (e.g. a tally of incidents) or coded data (e.g. types of participation). In this case, coded data took precedence, as this allowed for comparison

of emergent themes among observations, interviews and a records review. When evaluating data, Stake (1995) uses the word “correspondence” to represent “the search for meaning...for patterns, for consistency, for consistency within certain conditions” (p. 78). Throughout this case study, correspondence was sought based upon categories known in advance (school organization, school climate and culture and academics) with a focus on looking through the lens of relationships. During this process of evaluation and seeking correspondence, Stake (1995) also cautions to be open to unexpected ideas or patterns. It is important to classify data and look for themes that may not fit into pre-determined categories.

Qualitative data software, Dedoose, was utilized in order to help organize data. Transcripts from interviews, field notes from observations and documents were loaded into Dedoose. In the initial round of coding, the researcher used a pre-determined list of codes, which were created based upon the domains of school organization, school climate and culture and academics that were previously identified by the researcher based upon the theoretical framework of the characterizations of institutions by Popkewitz et al. (1982) as well as the questions from the Effective School Battery (Gottfredson, 1999) and the Advocacy Design Model (Smith, 1990). Within each of these domains, narrower codes were created to classify information. The researcher engaged in multiple rounds of coding. On subsequent rounds of coding, additional codes were added as the researcher read through and made sense of the material. Codes were then organized into themes.

### **Researcher Role**

This researcher is a school professional with an interest in alternative education as a member and a sub-committee chairman on an exploratory committee to develop an

alternative education program in the researcher's current district of employment. The researcher is a member of the regional alternative education association and has volunteered to assist with the establishment of an alternative education association for New York State. The researcher has knowledge of the existing alternative education settings in suburban New York and has professional relationships with many alternative educators. The researcher currently works with teachers, students and administrators on a part-time basis in an alternative program as a school psychologist.

The interpretation of data in this study is through the lens of an educator who has participated in the development of an alternative education program in a different setting. The researcher has a personal belief that alternative education settings offer support to students and allow for a flexibility of approach that is not typically possible in traditional settings, and therefore, the researcher may have a level of bias when examining other programs. In addition to personal biases, several participants in my study have personal and/or professional connections to members of the researcher's family, so very conscientious attempts were made to obtain informed consent and avoid any undue influence/persuasion for participants. In an attempt to avoid even the perception of influence or persuasion, recruiting efforts were perhaps less vigorous than they otherwise might have been, if there were no shared personal or professional contacts between the researcher and participants.

In order to mitigate personal biases and possible conflicts of interest, the researcher has obtained informed consent, employed member-checks with interview participants, worked with a mentor to process the data and openly discuss any possible biases. The researcher has self-disclosed a personal interest in alternative education and

involvement in the development of a different, younger alternative education program that is not involved in this study. It is important to continually address possible biases in order to maintain objectivity as a researcher (Creswell, 2015).

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine effective practices in existing alternative education programs. This study utilized observations, records review and interviews with teachers and administrators who work in an alternative education setting. This chapter provides analysis of the collected data according to themes that emerged within the context of the research questions.

There were three overarching themes that emerged from the analysis of the collected data from the study. These themes were identified and defined by the researcher. The first theme has been defined as collective commitment, meaning that the members of the program recognize a universal commitment to shared goals. Participants discussed the importance of voluntary participation in the community, an alignment with the mission/vision of the program, and embracing community norms. The second theme has been defined as embracing evolution, meaning that the participants understand and embrace the process of change, seeing it as necessary for growth and development. Participants discussed the need for flexibility, demonstrated an understanding that regressions/setback will occur as part of the growth process and acknowledged that change is a constant state. The third theme has been defined as advancing advocacy, meaning that there is a commitment to prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable or disenfranchised members of the community. Participants discussed the need to overcome stigma associated with an alternative setting, advocating for vulnerable populations, encouraging personal growth and responsibility and providing autonomy to teachers in

decision-making. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings according to the research questions of the study.

## **Findings**

### **Theme 1: Collective Commitment**

The first overarching theme that emerged during the analysis of the collected data was collective commitment. The researcher has defined this theme as a universal commitment to shared goals. Sub-themes include the importance of voluntary participation in the community, an alignment with the mission/vision of the program, and embracing community norms.

#### **Voluntary Participation**

The first sub-theme to emerge was the importance of voluntary participation in the alternative education setting. Nearly all participants emphasized the importance of having students and teachers who want to be in the alternative program. Participants from both Summit and East Hamlet discussed the screening process for students and the appointment process for teachers, which each seek to establish voluntary participation in the respective alternative programs.

Summit and East Hamlet have a similar screening process for prospective students. Summit requires that the parent and student fill out an application; both the parent and student versions of the application include a question that asks the respondent to explain why the student wants to attend and why the student would be a good fit for the program. The parent is required to answer, “Why do you feel that your child would be successful at [Summit]?” while the student is required to answer “Why do you think you would be successful at [Summit]?” East Hamlet does not have a formal written

application, but James, administrator for East Hamlet, explained that after receiving a referral from the Committee on Special Education, the building-level support team and/or a request from a parent, “we schedule a meeting with the parent and do an intake as part of the screening.” As part of the intake process, James explained that the team will discuss the current needs, including asking about family dynamics, outside supports (such as counseling) and the goals for the student, including socio-emotional, academic and career goals. Both programs have incorporated a requirement into their screening process that a student cannot attend unless there have been three ‘yesses’ - the school team, the parents and the student must all agree that the alternative program is the right placement.

The members of the core screening team at Summit include Warren, the administrator, Joe, the school psychologist and Nancy, the lead teacher. When describing the screening process, each of them stated that after the application process and paper screening, the student comes for an initial visit/tour with their parent(s), and if they agree after that tour, a two-day trial is set up so that the student can experience Summit before making a final commitment to the program. Joe explained why the ‘yes’ from the student is so important, stating that “the number one thing that predicts everything is that you [the student] has to want to be here.” Warren reflected on the importance of the screening process, recalling:

In years one, two and three, I think we took a lot of wrong kids.... [It] matters, the mix of kids. We will not take a child that we can’t help, because we know that if we bring them in, it’s not going to be good for anyone.

Warren noted that it is difficult to say that the program cannot help a student, but the screening team has found that it is necessary, at times, in order to maintain the integrity



of the program and be able to help all of the other students. Andrew, a teacher from Summit, supports the screening process and believes that it is effective:

I think that we select the right kids. There's a reason that they're here in the first place. They take ownership of that building and they feel very comfortable there, possibly comfortable in a place for the first time in their academic lives.

Michelle, the lead teacher from East Hamlet, discussed the importance of seeking a consensus during the screening process regarding an agreement to attend their program:

We really stick to this three-prong formula, where the kid has to think it's a good fit, the parents have to think it's a good fit and we [the staff] have to think it's a good fit and that we can meet their needs.

Ruth, the school nurse at East Hamlet, stated that most of the students do typically enjoy attending the East Hamlet program, saying, “if you asked each student to rate it here, most would rate it an eight or a nine.” She did admit “there are some students who will say that they hate it here, but you know what? They weren’t coming to school before, and now they are, which says something.” Ruth went on to explain that she also notices that even the students who express that they do not like school do make a connection with the people in the setting, reporting, “they’ll say things like, ‘Have a nice day off tomorrow’ or ‘Isn’t it your birthday this weekend?’ The connection is there, so I think they really do like it.”

Participants from both settings discussed the importance of obtaining the agreement from all of the stakeholders: educators, parents and student, prior to the student attending the alternative program.

Selecting teachers who want to participate in the alternative program has been a challenge for administrators, although both administrators did report that it has become an easier process over the years. Initially, it was difficult for both administrator

participants to find teachers who wanted to work in the alternative setting, and the teachers who were assigned there were often inexperienced and lower in seniority, as well as being unwilling. Warren, the administrator for Summit, reflected on the process of recruiting and selecting teachers for the program, noting that it took a number of years to build up a relationship with the district chair people who are ultimately responsible for assignment of the content area teachers. Warren stated:

I used to have to advocate for which teachers but now they kind of know who we need up there...but we're in this good groove now with the chair people, they know which teachers we are looking for. Like the English department, those teachers are with us because they want to be there. The social studies department, that took the longest, they're our most challenging department, but now we've got one teacher up there who's been our cheerleader. We have a long-standing math teacher who has been great.

Nancy, the lead teacher from Summit, noted that most of the staff in the setting are part-time, which can present challenges with a lack of common planning time and opportunities to collaborate, but can also provide a benefit. She noted, "the benefit of having teachers part-time is that there's not a lot of burnout, and we get the best teachers to come over here." Nancy noted that teachers are more likely to commit to teaching one course over at Summit, rather than multiple courses, and will then remain in the alternative setting over a number of years.

James, the administrator for East Hamlet, echoed Warren's reports about the teacher recruitment process. In the early years of the program at East Hamlet he found that he was given teachers who had little experience and low seniority status, stating, "when we first started, whoever was lowest [in seniority] got sent over here and that didn't work." He went on to explain that now staffing is continually evaluated with the assistant superintendent, saying, "we meet once a week... [to discuss] who's working, who's not working, what kind of training do we need to do... and he's always on board."

Participants from East Hamlet discussed some of the early challenges with staffing the program, but also noted improvements in the process of selecting teachers for the setting. The East Hamlet program is housed in an administration building, and requires teachers to travel during the day, which contributed to making the position undesirable. Additionally, some teachers assigned to the program did not want to work with the alternative student population or were just not the right fit for the alternative setting. When describing the early years of the East Hamlet program, Michelle, the lead teacher, stated:

I think the core team [full-time staff] all came in with the same philosophy and the same work ethic. I think because in the beginning, the content area teachers sometimes weren't given the opportunity to want to come... they were forced to come based on seniority at one point but they came in with a different feel. What you need to put into alternative education is a lot sometimes and I think it just wasn't there for some people. If it's not somewhere that someone wants to be it is noted. Not only by the professionals that you're working with, but by the kids, so I do think you need to be careful of that.

However, the perception of the program has changed over the years. James noted that now “a lot of teachers will say to me, teaching here made me a better teacher”, and once they find it to be so rewarding, they will encourage their colleagues to try it out. James stated that the first teacher to petition him for a position at East Hamlet was Charlie, a Spanish teacher who has been there for four years. Charlie stated, “I texted him [James] one day and said please let me come over there.” Charlie reported:

I think the main thing when you're opening an alternative program is that the people who are there have to really want to be there. They can't be forced there because they just had a spot open in their schedule or they needed a place to put someone who wasn't working out someplace else, or they were low [in seniority].

Charlie subsequently went to East Hamlet, and encouraged his best friend to also voluntarily take a position there. James indicated that currently, most of the staff members are at East Hamlet voluntarily, and credited Charlie and a handful of other

teachers with initially “turning the tide” and making East Hamlet a desirable teaching assignment.

### **Alignment with Mission**

Participants from both settings often either directly quoted or alluded to the mission statement of their respective program; the mission statements are very similar across the two settings. The high degree of correspondence between the mission statements is not a surprising finding, as both programs have their roots in the same program at the Southbrook School, which is located in suburban New York State and operates under its own charter. The administrators involved in the founding of both Summit and East Hamlet had worked with the former principal of Southbrook School, and many aspects of the Southbrook program were initially borrowed by Summit and East Hamlet. Through the utilization of document comparison software, the mission statements were determined to be 43% similar, with identical language in many portions of the statements. During the site visit to Summit, Joe pointed out a piece of student-created artwork to the researcher. The artwork is a painting of interlocking puzzle pieces, with a motto for the program, and is on the wall in the main area of the Summit building. He stated that the piece was created with student involvement during the first year of the program, and it became part of their branding. The artwork is also displayed alongside the written portion of their mission statement on the Summit website, and according to Joe, the psychologist, is a daily reminder of the mission. Participants from East Hamlet also specifically referenced their mission statement, including James, the administrator, who was referencing the mission statement when he stated, “we really do try to do all of those things that we say.”

Summit and East Hamlet both note the importance of small group learning and individualized teacher support in their mission statements. The Summit mission statement notes that the program offers an intensive “teacher-to-student ratio within a small classroom setting” while East Hamlet mentions a “small group setting” or “small classroom” three separate times throughout the mission statement. Participants from both settings frequently brought up the importance and benefits of the small setting. Summit is a smaller program overall, with 23 students compared to the 40 students enrolled at East Hamlet, but class sizes were generally similar across settings, with typical groups of 4-10 students in a class. When discussing both class and program size, Nancy, the lead teacher from Summit, reported, “the students who come to us are looking for something smaller.” Jill, a teacher from Summit stated, “I just love having that moment with such a small class” and noted that it makes discussions more meaningful. She reported that the opportunity to work with a small class is one of the main benefits she sees to teaching at Summit. Andrew, a teacher from Summit, also discussed the benefits of a smaller setting for students, where they can receive more intensive supports:

They have just had problems getting through their traditional high school setting.... If they're one kid like that in a class of thirty kids, seven or eight times a day, they fall through the cracks. They can't function. That's how a lot of kids come to us, they're looking for something smaller and more intimate.

The participants at Summit emphasized the importance of the small classes and small overall size of the program in supporting students.

James, the administrator from East Hamlet also discussed the importance of a small school size and personalized approach:

We keep the number of kids here at 40, because so many of these kids have personal concerns. It allows us to not have a one-size-fits-all approach, which is important. There are some schools that will have 100 or 120 kids and call

themselves alternative. That's a hard thing to manage. We find it's very effective to keep it at 40.

Ruth, the school nurse at East Hamlet, said “it’s perfect- we have the right number of kids in each classroom.” She emphasized that she would not change the class size, stating that it’s “important to keep the kids to 4-7 in a class.” Charlie, a teacher from East Hamlet discussed the benefits of a smaller setting, saying:

It’s great because they are getting that individualized, one on one, very personalized approach... I love this about [East Hamlet] because there’s so much downtime and they’re talking to you about your life and this and that, whereas in a class of 30 at [the traditional school], maybe I get to talk to 2 kids before the bell rings, so I don’t even talk to each kid every week. Like personally talk to them, outside of the academics.

Michelle, the lead teacher from East Hamlet, also extolled the benefits of a smaller setting for students, stating, “because it's a smaller class setting there's definitely more class participation and the kids feel more comfortable participating... and that is priceless in gaining a sense of their understanding of a topic.” Michelle did offer a note of caution, stating that, “the best thing about us is that we are small...and sometimes the worst thing about us is that we are small.” She explained that if students do have a conflict, they can’t easily escape or ignore each other. However, she stated that “we have to do interventions so that we can peacefully co-exist.” The consequence of the small setting is that the students learn conflict resolution and will need to work to maintain relationships. Participants were in agreement regarding the benefits of both small classes and a small overall program.

East Hamlet and Summit’s mission statements both contain the same statement regarding a focus on academics that are “relevant to the students, complement their life experiences and build on their strengths.” Charlie, a teacher, discussed that students are

offered relevant life experiences through the many field trips that are offered through East Hamlet:

We do a lot of team building field trips, at least once a month...they need that. A lot of times, you forget... we might take something like pumpkin picking for granted because we've done it every year since we were kids, but these kids may never have been to a pumpkin farm in their entire lives.

Charlie went on to note that they will also teach life skills such as cooking, stating, "we will plan a menu, and then cook together." Nancy, the lead teacher, discussed the development of seminar programs at Summit, which are focused on teaching real-world skills. She reported:

We have this situation where we [parents] are worried about grades and we don't have the time or energy to worry about these other things, like can you do your laundry? Can you write a check? These kids didn't know how to cook, sew or do their own laundry. Except for the kids who live across the street in the Section 8 housing- they have been expected to do those things. Those kids have some basic survival skills. But a lot of them don't know the basics of etiquette, handling yourself on an interview or in a restaurant.

In response, she worked with the team at Summit to develop a Senior Seminar, which focuses on teaching real-world skills such as cooking, sewing, basic etiquette, financial management and interviewing skills. Andrew, a math teacher from Summit, stated that it is very important to him to make content "relatable" and "relevant" to his students. He indicated that he personalizes the lessons by "putting all of their [the students'] names into the worksheet", and will "incorporate a particular interest as well", noting that he has one student who loves robots and another who loves guinea pigs, so he "will just swap out the items in the question."

Both mission statements refer to "motivating the disenfranchised student."

Participants from both settings discussed that one of the goals of their respective program was to re-engage students in a school setting. James, the administrator from East Hamlet,

noted that his program has been able to serve students who have had chronic attendance issues:

For our attendance kids, a lot of them had difficulty with negotiating school because of the big crowd so we can help with that issue. We [ease] them in, usually starting with a partial day. I also do the home instruction for the district so I can really help with this piece and build a bridge to getting them here full time... Maybe we'll have them come in for one class at first, and then increase that so that they are only doing one class on home instruction or are in here for a full day. Then from here, we will start weaning them partial days into the other building. There's a lot of patience involved. We've greatly reduced our home tutoring dependency, and the kids get to come here and interact, which is nice.

James went on to note that he relies heavily upon Ruth, the school nurse, who makes connections with families and stays on top of attendance. He reported, "once we notice an attendance issue, we are on top of it", whereas "in the larger building, it could go unnoticed for weeks." He discussed the role that Ruth plays:

My school nurse calls every morning for attendance, and she's a great resource. It's not just a clerical aspect of it, but she will be the main point of contact for a lot of these families - more important is the conversation that she has with these families, and then she relays that information to us.

James went on to note that the team at East Hamlet will work closely with the family to get the student back into school. Similar to the reports from East Hamlet, Joe, the psychologist from Summit, reported that they are seeing "a lot of school anxiety and school refusal" and many of the students coming to their program have had a history of chronically poor attendance. Nancy from Summit seconded this, stating that "attendance is a HUGE issue for alternative students." She reported that some students have arrived with a history of missing 90 days or more, or more than half of the academic year. Nancy discussed the importance of getting students to the building, stating, "if they missed 90 days before, and now they come in here and they only miss 10... well 10 would be a lot of



days for another student but for them that's a huge improvement and needs to be celebrated.”

In both settings, the students who are served by the programs are likely to have difficulties that have impacted their ability to attend and participate in larger, traditional programs. Participants in both settings noted that students have improved attendance and engagement in the alternative setting as opposed to the traditional setting.

While the mission statements of the Summit and East Hamlet programs do have many similarities, there are some key differences. Most notably, the Summit mission statement contains additional references to academic achievement, while the East Hamlet mission statement makes additional references to academic flexibility and individual learning styles. The Summit mission includes a goal to “instill in every student a passion for knowledge and life-long learning.” Joe, the psychologist from Summit, discussed various academic opportunities that are available through the Summit program, noting that students are working “towards a Regents or an Advanced Regents [diploma]... and this is an off year for this, but we usually have some kids who are taking AP classes.” Warren, the administrator at Summit, also reported that the academic expectation for Summit students is a Regents diploma. The students at Summit all participate in a full day of academics; Joe reported that although it is not entirely outside of the realm of possibility, the students currently enrolled in Summit are not participating in tech or vocational training programs. In contrast, the East Hamlet mission statement makes reference to “personal strengths” and “individual learning styles” in addition to a discussion of academics. James, the administrator from East Hamlet, discussed that in

early years of the program, students were not typically academically oriented, although that is starting to change:

Initially we didn't have a lot of kids who were looking to transition to college, we had kids who were just happy to get their [local] high school diploma, go to work or the military. But now we have many of our kids, more and more, who are looking to transition to college...people are really seeing that this is an academic pathway.

James noted that East Hamlet students are now put on a pathway towards a Regents diploma, but also cautions the students, “if you want honors, advanced or AP level courses, I don’t have that here.” He went on to explain that in order to differentiate options for students, “around 40% of my students, mostly the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders, will leave around midday to go to BOCES [vocational program]. Some of them will go back to the high school and take more advanced classes like Physics or Algebra II.” He noted that some of the students who are more math and science oriented will go to the high school to take the more advanced classes. Students in the Summit and East Hamlet programs both have opportunities to engage higher-level academics, but East Hamlet offers a wider range of options, including vocational training, to accommodate for more diverse personal interests and learning styles.

### **Acceptance of Community Norms**

Participants from both settings discussed the importance of buy-in, meaning a full commitment to the ideals and expectations of the alternative setting, and embracing of community norms. The ideals, expectations and norms are different across the alternative and traditional educational environments in both settings.

Nancy, the lead teacher, stated that the environment at Summit is different, noting that the students walk in and “immediately notice that it looks different. And if it looks

different, it feels different... It doesn't feel regular to them and students are looking for a change." She went on to explain that the students generally respond very positively to the setting, although there are some complaints as "it is an older building, and there are some leaks here or there." During an observation of the setting, the researcher noted that the Summit program is housed within an actual house that is located on the main high school campus but is separate from the main building. The initial impression of the building is that it is clean and well-kept, but Nancy's comments regarding the age of the building were confirmed, as there were some creaky floors and door frames that exhibited wear and tear associated with age. Evidence of the previous use as an actual house remains in a number of details, including detailed molding, wood paneling and a fireplace mantle in the main room on the ground floor. It is a two-story structure, with the physical layout of a typical house, including a kitchen space, single-occupancy bathrooms, and rooms that resemble a dining room and living room in addition to traditional classroom spaces. Student artwork dominates the space, including student-created murals painted on the walls and a variety of different student art projects that are on the walls of every shared space in the building. In addition to the student-created art, Joe reported that it's important for staff members to be able to display their interests and personalities as well, as he pointed to a number of stickers and posters in his office that are reflective of his interests. Despite the physical structure of a traditional house, there is little traditional furniture to be found at Summit. Seating options abound, including beanbag chairs, rolling chairs, rockers (a chair with a rounded base that sits directly on the floor), standing desks, and hammock-style papasan seating.

The researcher observed three lessons during the site visit to Summit. Two were held in a large lounge space, and one was held in a traditional classroom, which was outfitted with tables and standing desks. Following the observation in the classroom setting, the teacher explained that the students were permitted to choose the seating option that is most conducive for them, pointing out that several of the students seated at table in the front row preferred to work together, and students using the standing desks in the back row prefer to have options to stand and use the fidget bar, or sit on the high stool that is provided for the desk. The classes held in the large lounge space also used non-traditional seating. The room has elements of a dining room and living room, with a large table, a fireplace and several couches in addition to smaller tables and a number of different types of chairs. During the English class that was observed, students chose from couches, rocker chairs that are placed directly on the floor and traditional chairs. Some students utilized a table and others held books or a computer in their lap.

The East Hamlet program is housed in a traditional school. The larger building is a former elementary school that has been converted to district offices, with one wing of the building dedicated to the East Hamlet program. There are four classrooms right next to each other, with offices for the additional personnel including the psychologist, counselor, nurse and principal located nearby. There is modular furniture, including tables on wheels that can be rolled together to make work stations or set apart to function as individual desks or tables. The classroom spaces are large, bright and clean. Decorations include posters with inspirational quotes, calming pictures and anchor charts. There is evidence of student-created work, including constellations that were painted on ceiling tiles. Michelle, the lead teacher, explained that this project was the “result of a

collaboration between the art and science teachers.” Although the setting looks very much like a traditional school, a number of teachers from East Hamlet discussed the importance of having a different experience in the alternative setting as opposed to the traditional setting. Michelle reported:

We look at our kids as kids and know that system [at the traditional school] has not worked for them, so why do we think things like a dean and a strong punishment system is going to help us here- it's not.

Charlie from East Hamlet noted that the students who are arriving from the traditional school have “bucked that setting- it didn't work for them.” He noted that the rules at East Hamlet tend to be fewer and less delineated, but are instead “general expectations based upon a culture of understanding and respect.”

Participants from both settings discussed the family-style atmosphere in the alternative setting. Warren, the administrator, described himself as the “grandfather” of the program at Summit, while Joe, the psychologist, explained that the staff “is family... we are all here to help kids... and I think once the kids feel that, they will know that they are part of our family.” Kristen, a teaching assistant at Summit, characterized the relationship between students as similar to siblings, saying “the older students are like bigger brothers and sisters to the younger students.” Andrew, a teacher from Summit, also expressed, “I'm not a parent, but I feel like one- it's a pseudo parent or maybe an older sibling relationship with these students.” Andrew also believes that the small class size impacts the dynamic as he noted, “it feels more like a family when there are fewer students in the room.” East Hamlet staff also expressed similar sentiments regarding family-style relationships. James, the administrator, noted that the staff generally got along and was very close, stating, “it's like a family. We all get along and it's pretty agreeable”, but noted there could be occasional discord as he cautioned, “it's like family

at Thanksgiving sometimes.” Ruth, the nurse from East Hamlet, reported that when students come from dysfunctional homes, “we really do become their family”, and also noted, “aside from the students, the staff is a big family”. Sandy, the teaching assistant from East Hamlet, also noted that school becomes a home for many students, saying, “Maybe this sounds cheesy but it’s kind of like a family. And some of these kids don’t really have that family feeling in their own homes, so they find that [comfort] here.”

Relationships are highly valued in both settings. Jill, a teacher from Summit, discussed working with high-needs students, noting that it’s “important that they like you. They need to know that you’re on their side. Completely.” She will occasionally have a student in her class who is not technically enrolled at Summit, but is participating in one class there for credit recovery. Jill noted that there is a distinct difference in the relationship between the Summit students, who tend to “know each other well and will at least tolerate, if not encourage each other” and the other students who are placed there for one class but have not built the same strong relationships. Andrew, a teacher from Summit, discussed the benefits of connecting with students, describing the mutual benefits of personal connection, saying that as a teacher, “an interaction like that [personal discussion with a student] fills you up, like fills the whole inside of you.” He continued, noting that the personal connection is needed by the students as well, saying, “these kids need something more. They can’t just be a face in the back of a room to the teacher. They need that connection to someone.” He went on to note that in his time in alternative education, he had learned to “prioritize the kid before the content.” Charlie, a teacher from East Hamlet, also indicated that the relationship building with students is critical to encouraging desired behavior, saying, “we do a lot of bonding, so they see you

as a teacher-mentor-family member so they don't see the need to misbehave. It's a much more intimate scenario." James, the administrator from East Hamlet, noted that as a general philosophy, "we are not really rule-oriented, it's just about relationships." He noted that in terms of his expectations for the students, "I expect you to be respectful and honest, and constantly working on yourself and growing."

There was universal acknowledgement of positive relationships with colleagues in both settings. Kristen, the teaching assistant at Summit, reported that work "is the best part of my day... the kids are all very kind and the staff is great. I really can't say a bad thing about working here." Joe, the psychologist at Summit, discussed that the staff gets along so well because "we are all a family; we are all here to help kids". Nancy, the lead teacher, had only positive things to say about the staff at Summit, but also noted that "many of the teachers don't interface at all" because they may be teaching only one period in the setting. When teachers are in the Summit building at the same time, Nancy noted that "there is collaboration" and she reported strong relationships with the other full-time staff members. She did express that she would like "to have more input from others [teachers]... to have that full surround so it's not just me and [Kristen] making decisions about things like how the lounge is decorated." Warren, the administrator at Summit, also acknowledged the difficulties that come with having an "itinerant staff", admitting that it can be hard to have clear and streamlined communication when teachers are "always running in and out" and they don't have a common time as an entire staff. Despite the lack of common time with the other teachers in the building at Summit, Andrew, a teacher, reported that it is a very positive atmosphere. He stated:

So luckily this year I have three classes there, which is the first time that I've had most of my classes there. Before [this year] there were times that I would go

early just to hang out over there because I loved it. The chemistry there is really, really good. The teachers have been pretty consistent, it feels like we've had the same group of the staff for a couple years in a row now and everyone is pretty comfortable with each other. I mean, we don't often get a lot of time to talk to each other because we're usually in passing, like you're finishing up in your classroom and I'm going in, but everyone is really great to work with. Anytime I've ever needed anything, like if I need to switch rooms with someone or print something out, everyone is helpful and great. I can honestly say that I have never had a negative interaction with anyone while working there, teacher or administrator. If you're there, you're there for a reason. We bring a different level of patience and professionalism to the setting.

Jill, another teacher at Summit, agreed that there is a positive atmosphere, reporting that, “it’s always been such a positive experience for me.”

The participants from East Hamlet also reported very close-knit relationships with their colleagues. Ruth, the school nurse, described the strong connection between the staff members, noting that their relationships are “phenomenal. We are all very close...some of us socialize outside of work. Aside from the students, the staff is a big family.” Sandy also described a positive work atmosphere, saying of her relationship with her colleagues:

I love it. It’s really easy to laugh and joke. And really necessary, because some of the kids do really have these intense struggles, and it’s easy to get caught up in that negative or that sad stuff. We kind of have this light, fun, friendship with each other that can turn into this serious relationship if we need to for the kids, but it’ll turn back into a fun work environment the second the productive conversation is over, so I really like that.

Charlie, a teacher at East Hamlet, also reported strong relationships with colleagues. He reported that his best friend also works in the program, and stated that “everyone is really great to work with.” He went on to note, “it's a staff that wants to be there, it's a staff that knows what they're doing there and it's a staff that will always err on the side of kids.”

Michelle, the lead teacher at East Hamlet, noted of the team of teachers “we have a really great relationship because you have to work together so closely. We’re lucky to have a



really great team.” The teachers in both settings overwhelmingly categorized the relationships between and among staff members as positive.

In addition to the collegiality between teachers, participants from both settings described positive relationships between teachers and administrators. Participants had a very positive view of Warren, the administrator at Summit. Nancy, the lead teacher, has worked most closely with Warren, and reported of their relationship, “we have had 13 years of knowing each other and exactly what is expected with each other. I know I have an immediate response time [if I need something].” Jill, a teacher at Summit, acknowledged this bond, noting that although she finds Warren “responsive and approachable”, she often just funnels her communication with him through Nancy due to their “super close relationship.” Jill did report that she has experienced some frustrations in dealings with other administrators from the traditional high school who are not directly affiliated with the program, but not with Warren. Warren is retiring and will not be returning to the program next year, and although Nancy described herself as “devastated”, she also indicated that in her first interactions with the incoming administrator:

It’s just going to be a process with someone new. The bonus however, which has definitely become clear over the last two weeks, is that there's already trust there from the new perspective. That's nice to know because you always wonder. There's trust in my ability, trust in my judgment, trust in the process and that has been very comforting.

Warren, in turn, expressed confidence in and admiration towards the teachers and other staff members in the program. With regards to Nancy in particular, he stated, “I’ve really empowered her”, noting that he trusts her to “handle almost everything.” Warren also expressed appreciation for the support that is offered from central office, noting, “the superintendent and board [of education] have always been amazing in supporting us.” He

noted that, “even in the middle of this [mandated closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic], she [the superintendent] wants us to continue with the screening process, which we’ll do over Zoom.” Warren noted the continued support for maintaining and growing the program, even during a time of uncertainty about the future.

There are also strong relationships between the administrators and teachers at East Hamlet. Regarding James, the administrator, Michelle, the lead teacher, stated, “he has a very flexible philosophy and he really works great with the team of teachers. He makes every teacher feel that he values their input and is guided by it.” Charlie, a teacher, explained that he initially requested a placement at East Hamlet because he had “worked with James [at the traditional school] and really just clicked with him.” James was effusive in his praise for the staff members:

The teaching staff is great. They feel like they're hand-picked for a special purpose, which is true and flattering. I think they see the benefits and find this fulfilling professionally... It's like a family, we all get along, and it's pretty agreeable. There's a benefit to being here, and there's this mutual understanding and respect.

The team at East Hamlet described a culture of strong interpersonal relationships and respect.

One of the unique opportunities for bonding at East Hamlet is that all of the full-time staff members and a number of the part-time teachers at East Hamlet have a common lunch period, and they share that lunch with their students. Michelle, the lead teacher, explained that lunch is a shortened period, kept to 30 minutes, and the staff and students eat together. James, the administrator, explained that there is an “unwritten understanding” with the teacher’s union regarding the shortened lunch period, as the school day ends earlier at East Hamlet as opposed to the traditional high school. The

teachers overwhelmingly described this practice in a positive light. Sandy, the teaching assistant, reported:

We all eat lunch together, staff and students, which I really do like, because it is kids who maybe haven't always felt welcome in their school or in their homes, and they haven't always had an easy time meshing with others. It gives the kids an opportunity to get close to us and each other- we're all they've got. It gives them more familiarity with the staff- it's not just someone that you hand in work to.

Ruth, the school nurse, stated, "I eat lunch with everyone, which I love" and noted that it was an opportunity to bond with students and staff. Charlie, a teacher, also reported that he often uses the common lunch period to "play a game of Uno or play volleyball", noting that it is an important opportunity for bonding with the students. James, the administrator, discussed the way lunch is run at East Hamlet, with students and teachers eating together:

The kids see us all the time. We all eat lunch together, and they're up close and personal with their teachers, in a way that doesn't happen in the main building. So, we have a real opportunity here to be a role model.

The participants from East Hamlet reported positive feelings about the common lunch period, and viewed it as an opportunity to bond with students.

Students at Summit generally have the same lunch period, but there is not the same concerted focus on a common lunch with the entire Summit community. Joe, the psychologist, explained the lunch schedule, saying, "we try to have fifth period, which is like 11 o'clock, be the general lunch time for kids but now that we have different groups of kids, based on cohorts, it can be different lunch times." He went on to explain that based upon a student's area of interest, they may be scheduled to take different classes at the main building during their lunch period. Nancy, the lead teacher, also noted that the students can go over to the main building for lunch. During the researcher's site visit to

Summit, Joe and Nancy both explained that they tend to grab lunch when they can, with Joe stating that he will often eat lunch with an individual student, during an informal meeting or a counseling session. Joe did describe one of the ways that the staff at Summit will bond with students as he pointed out various stickers all over his door and pictures in this office. He explained that he and other staff members will personalize their office or classroom space and discuss their areas of interest with the students. He discussed his personal passion for music, and talked about displaying items from his favorite bands or bringing in an instrument. Andrew, a teacher, discussed that at Summit, he is more likely to open up with his students at Summit as opposed to his students at the traditional school. He stated, "I'll show my emotional side more often in front of them. I'm not afraid or feeling like I have to bottle up my frustration or opinions." Participants from each setting described unique ways of bonding with students.

The theme of collective commitment, or a universal commitment to shared goals, was evidenced in both Summit and East Hamlet. The participants expressed an adherence to the mission statement of their respective programs; the two programs have similar mission statements that focus on providing supports within a small setting and helping students reach their individual goals. The Summit program tends to encourage students to pursue more academic rigor, while East Hamlet provides more opportunities for vocational training. Participants from each setting highly value relationships, and each setting has a unique way of encouraging teachers to bond with students, such as eating lunch as an entire community at East Hamlet, or teachers sharing more of their personal interests and viewpoints with students at Summit.

## **Theme 2: Embracing Evolution**

The second overarching theme that emerged during the analysis of the collected data was embracing evolution. The researcher has defined this theme as an understanding and embracing of the process of change, seeing it as necessary for the growth and development of students and the program as a whole. Sub-themes included the need for flexibility, an understanding that regressions/setback will occur as part of the growth process and the acknowledgement that change is a constant state.

### **Flexibility**

Participants across both settings readily agreed that flexibility is required in order to work in an alternative setting. This flexibility is seen in various ways, including unwritten or informal agreements regarding the union contract, a willingness to work outside of their traditional role and a flexible approach to classroom rules and academics.

James, an administrator, discussed that the teachers and staff at East Hamlet make certain concessions to their contract in exchange for other benefits. He explained:

So, there's a compromise. You're not working a seven-hour day, you're working a six-something hour day, so really your lunch is built into the end of the day, like an early release. There's an understanding. We eat lunch with the kids. They have a prep, but the teachers here will forgo their prep, and see the kids then. They might be helping a kid in the lounge, if they're struggling with an earth science lab, or whatever. Some of the teachers will play volleyball with the kids on their prep. Other than the actual teaching, which we do follow closely by restriction to the five [teaching periods], we're not hard and fast with the contract around here, because there is an understanding. There's no duty. Most of my teachers are traveling teachers, so if you're traveling teacher you don't have a duty period. But the ones that are here will be helping kids on a duty anyway. And if you ask me, I would much rather have a teacher who is playing volleyball with the kid on their duty then sitting there every day and running a study hall. If you're in-house I'm expecting that you're helping a kid at some point during the day, not just hanging around with free time, but I'm not checking it off a list.

James went on to discuss, that outside of the flexibility with the contract, “a lot of people will play roles that are not traditional for them. I have a school psych background, and I

will pick up two or three of the kids [for counseling].” He noted that “the school counselor will pick up mandated counseling, which is not usual for counselors in our district” and further explained that many different types of support that Ruth offers as the school nurse, stating that she performs “clerical duties” and is “an important point of contact, having a strong rapport with our families.” Ruth echoed this sentiment, stating, “I call all the parents in the beginning of the year and tell them that this office is not just for band-aids and ice packs”, outlining the ways in which she provides social, emotional and medical support. Ruth noted that she allows students to come to her office for a break, and she is often aware of other situations that the teachers may not be, explaining, “we may have a student who is pregnant, or they have been cutting [self-injury] or maybe their mother’s boyfriend made a pass at them last night.” Ruth stated that she is often aware of these types of situations due to her role as the nurse and because of the frequent phone contact she makes with families. Ruth reported that her colleagues respect her decision-making in regards to having students in her office, saying:

These teachers here respect that if the kid is with me, I know what they need in the moment, and if I can send him back, I will, and if he needs to stay for a while, he stays. We’re all working to get them through the day, to keep them here so they’re not alone at home and they have someone to talk to. The nurse plays an important role.

Ruth explained that this is not always the case in the traditional setting, where teachers may be reluctant to send a student to the nurse or are very concerned about getting the student back to class quickly.

Michelle and Charlie, teachers at East Hamlet, discussed that teachers will display more flexibility with classroom rules in the alternative setting. Michelle said, “for example, in the [traditional high school], the students are not allowed to wear hats. We

don't bother with that rule." Charlie gave the example of the different rules regarding cell phones, stating, "some teachers [at the traditional school] will say, put your cell phone in this bin as soon as you walk in... I don't really bother with that." Michelle went on to explain that the "strict rules and strong punishment system" which are in place in the traditional high school are not reflected in the East Hamlet, where there is "a general expectation of respect." Charlie reported a similar expectation, stating:

There are not many rules because these kids have bucked that system; they didn't do well with that. It's... I don't want to say more relaxed... but there's definitely not like a classroom set of rules posted up on the wall. It's more of a culture established by the classroom teacher. Respect is key.

Sandy, the teaching assistant at East Hamlet, also discussed that there is more flexibility in classroom routines without a rigid bell schedule. She explained that:

The school is so small, so we don't have any passing times, but that makes the day shorter, without the five minutes between all of the classes. It could be a little intense sometimes, if you're just going from one subject right to another without a break, but the teachers kind of feel the energy in the room, and if kids are anxious or they need it, there will kind of be like this slow transition in and out of the lesson that day. It's a healthy balance between structure and just letting yourself go with your gut.

Teachers at East Hamlet consistently described fewer classroom rules than in a traditional setting, but did explain that there is a general expectation of respect. The teachers also display flexibility in terms of the union contract.

While there is not the same flexibility with contractual obligations at Summit as there is at East Hamlet, Nancy, the lead teacher at Summit, explained the ways in which she has been creative in carving out time for the part-time teachers to get together as a team. She discussed the difficulties with the part-time teachers who do not overlap, reporting, "they don't see each other all the time. There is some collaboration sometimes

if they're in the building at the same time, but a lot of our teachers will never cross paths with each other.” In her efforts to find time for collaboration, Nancy said:

I'm not a department chair, so contractually I don't have any time to get people together for a staff meeting. And I still need to go to my own special ed department meeting. We meet individually or in small groups, when people are in the building. Here and there we've been able to get people compensated for an additional meeting. I've tried to be really creative- one thing I've done in the past is to do an internal field trip. So, we got subs for the teachers and we've been able to get together with everyone during the day.

Despite the lack of provisions in the teacher contract that would allow for the team at Summit to have common planning time or attend the same department meeting, Nancy reported that she has been able creatively plan for some collaboration opportunities.

Both of the teachers at Summit who taught in both the alternative and traditional settings discussed that they utilized a more flexible approach in the alternative classroom. Andrew discussed his evolution, noting that he learned to prioritize relationships with his students:

You can't be so obsessed with managing people and sticking to the schedule. Because on any given day one of those kids could just come in and not talk, you know, and you want to give him the chance to say something when they're ready to say something... It is hard to describe but, you're not a manager, you're more just like there to support them, and then learn math on the side, as weird as that might sound for a math class. That's what I struggled with the most for like the first five years I taught there, because I was trying to prioritize the content and I was frustrated that they weren't learning, but then I figured out that it was backwards the way that I was doing stuff. Put the kid before the content.

This sentiment was echoed by a number of teachers, who reported that classroom routines were more flexible in the alternative setting. Joe commended the flexibility that the Summit teachers demonstrate, noting, “my colleagues are great, they're very supportive and very flexible and very willing, and you know, they want to help the kids in every respect.” He also noted, “in terms of rules, we have more flexibility, because we know our kids well. We know where we can push them and where we can't.”



Jill stated, “the benefit to being [at Summit] is that I can have control over the curriculum.” She reported enjoying being able to determine what novels they study each year at Summit, rather than the “packed curriculum” at the traditional school.

Charlie, a teacher, stated that in the traditional setting, he tends to have more structure in his classroom, but at East Hamlet:

You have to be willing to cut a kid some slack every once in a while; it's more important that you have that relationship than trying to plow through that lesson on one day. Because if you have that relationship, ultimately you will get through the lessons that you need to get through.

Charlie explained that he will have close to 30 students in a class in the traditional school. During his first year at East Hamlet, he explained, “there was only one section, and I think every kid who was there in the afternoon was taking the class. I think there were 17 kids, which is huge for an alternative situation.” Charlie went on to report that this class size has been cut in half, stating, “we appealed to central administration, and got a second section, which is much more doable.”

Participants in both settings also reviewed the ways in which there is more flexibility in the alternative setting with regard to academics and control over the curriculum. Teachers in both settings noted that flexibility is required, because students in the alternative setting often have different levels of academic preparation. Jill, an English teacher at Summit, explained that the freedom to determine her curriculum is one of the main reasons that she enjoys her assignment in the alternative setting. She explained:

The curriculum is so much more packed at the high school... Our chairperson will say, if you go over to [Summit], you can teach whatever you want, whatever book you want. So, if I'm teaching juniors, I can pull from the *Catcher in the Rye*, even though that's a tenth-grade book. I can pull from whatever I want, because the chances are that they haven't read it before, even if they were supposed to...

Usually I can pick from almost anything... I do Mitch Albom books, even with seniors, because they love them.

Jill also noted that “there’s this misconception that it’s ‘easier’ over at [Summit]” because of the differences in curriculum and the fact that work is done primarily in class, rather than assigning copious homework. Jill stated that there can be pressure to assign more homework, because parents and even some of the other teachers in the alternative setting think that it is important preparation for college, but it can be counterproductive. Jill explained, “if the homework is to read a chapter, and five out of the six kids don’t read it, you can’t do the lesson.”

Charlie, a Spanish teacher at East Hamlet, discussed the ways in which he has restructured his classes in the alternative setting to meet the needs of students who have different levels of background knowledge in the subject:

My course is kind of unique, because when we brought Spanish to [East Hamlet], the main concern of [James] was that everyone was at a different level with their Spanish and he wanted to know how I was going to do it [the course] ... The way that I do it as I organize it into units: for example, one unit might be hygiene. So, some kids are at a basic level where they are learning the vocabulary. Other kids are starting to have more of a conversation where they can say full sentences. So, we're talking about the same topics but everyone is working at their own level.

Charlie explained that organizing his classes into themes and working on different types of skills within each theme is required, as some of the students are taking Spanish for the first time, and others have a year or more of instruction in the language.

Although participants in both settings discussed that there is generally more academic flexibility in the alternative setting, there was an acknowledgement in both settings that there is less teacher control in classes that culminate in a Regents exam. Joe, the psychologist at Summit, discussed that teachers tend to use more traditional assessments in Regents classes because “that exam is always in the back of their minds.”

Andrew, a teacher at Summit, reported that “75% of graded assignments are traditional tests and quizzes” because students need to be prepared to take these types of assessments. Jill, a teacher from Summit, discussed that she attempted various methods of assessment, including group work or presentations, noting “every year I try it, and every year there’s some reason why it doesn’t work”, and reported that she tends to stick to more traditional writing assignments in her 11<sup>th</sup> grade English class, where students will take a Regents exam at the end of the year. She does maintain the slower pace of the curriculum, noting that it helps to read fewer books together as a class:

I know these kids read those four books with me, and I know that they know them. They will pass the Regents and get the skills, even if you go slower with them, but you know that they will get the skills from that instead of just reading SparkNotes before the class and getting nothing out of the class.

Nancy, lead teacher from Summit explained that the type of course (Regents or non-Regents) will often drive the types of assessment methods that the teacher of courses uses. She stated:

In a Regents level class, because their final assessment will be a Regents exam (well, except for this year) we try to use traditional assessment methods. In some of the other classes, the teachers are more creative. Sometimes it’s essay writing or building a game. Sometimes it’s film yourself acting out Macbeth, or making a commercial.

James, the administrator from East Hamlet, reported that classes are more flexible when there is no culminating Regents exam. He reported, “I combine the English 9 and English 10 classes; there’s no [Regents] test so we can modify the curriculum. English 11 there is [a Regents exam] so I can’t change that up.” Warren, the administrator from Summit, also explained that he can be more flexible with the non-Regents courses, stating that they will offer a “foundational course” in a particular subject, and will be able to re-name it or re-allocate the credit for the student, but this cannot be accomplished

with the Regents courses. Charlie, a teacher from East Hamlet, teaches a non-Regents level course, but acknowledged that his colleagues that are teaching Regents courses will have a different approach to assessments. He stated, “for some of the Regents courses like math or biology, they [the teachers] might have more of a rigorous schedule of tests and assessments, because there is a specific curriculum or labs that need to get done.”

The researcher observed one Regents course, Global 2, during a site visit to Summit. The teacher was leading a lesson on the period of time between World War I and World War II. Students were asked to use multiple sources of information, including an article that they had read together in class previously, in order to complete a worksheet that would ultimately serve as a study guide. The teacher guided the lesson, completing several items as an entire class, and then asking students to work independently or in a small group on one section of the worksheet at a time. She frequently checked in with the entire class, and ensured that students had the correct information. Following the observation, the teacher explained to the researcher that in the traditional setting, she would cover the same content, maybe adding some additional details, but the work would be done independently by the students. She noted that the presented content cannot differ too much between the traditional and alternative settings, as the students will be taking the same Regents exam at the end of the year.

Participants across both settings discussed various ways in which flexibility is demonstrated in the alternative setting. Teachers display flexibility in contractual obligations, classroom rules and the implementation of academic standards.

## **Understanding the Growth Process**

Across both settings, a number of different participants discussed the importance of understanding the growth process as including regression and setbacks. Nancy, the lead teacher from Summit, stated, “I always say, you have to have short-term memory loss to do this job”, explaining that you have to be willing to give each student a fresh start each day. Regarding the process of growth and change, Joe, the psychologist from Summit, explained:

I think this should be a requirement or a rite of passage to being an alternative educator: you need to have a story of how you have overcome. Because how are you going to help these kids to overcome if you haven't?

Andrew gave the example of a student that he has worked with for several years, noting that he likes to “play the class clown” and “can sometimes be disruptive”. He explained that he used to have a battle with him, but eventually:

I realized that some days I just need to give this kid a few minutes to tell his joke. First of all, it's probably actually probably going to be hilarious, and second of all, if I don't, he might ruin this whole class or even this whole year.

James, the administrator from East Hamlet discussed that the alternative program has been a “reset” for students who have been through a trauma, a hospitalization or a gender transition. As part of creating a safe space, the East Hamlet staff adheres to the following philosophy:

You're allowed to have problems; you're allowed to have bad days. You can excuse yourself from class to go get help for something. But you can't be manipulative or negative, if you're taking away from the program, then that's when we need to intervene. We call it a circle of trust.

Charlie, a teacher from East Hamlet, encouraged teachers to embrace the process of change in themselves and their own practice. He stated:

I just want to emphasize that if a teacher does something like this [teach in an alternative setting] it's going to change you as a human being. It's going to make you empathize with others. It's going to make you self-reflect. It's going to challenge you more than any other traditional classroom setting ever will because you are constantly thinking about these kids... You're constantly tailoring things, revamping, revising and self-reflecting on everything that you're doing... less so the longer I've been there, but in the process of trying to figure these kids out you're really doing a lot of self-reflecting and actually learning a lot about yourself and who you are as a teacher and a person. There's a lot of self-discovery. I think you learn more about yourself in this setting than in a traditional setting. I do think not so for our program as much anymore but in general you hear people who say things like 'ugh an alternative setting' or 'aren't you scared?' It's like what are you scared of really? I think you're scared about knowing more about yourself. It might open doors that you didn't even know were there. It has the potential to make you much better as a teacher. But on the flip side it also has the potential to expose you and you have to be willing to be vulnerable. I would really advocate for everybody to think more positively about alternative education. Yes, it's helping kids but it's also opening more doors for you and you're learning about yourself.

Participants from both settings exhibited an understanding that growth and progress will not be linear. Students will have bad days; participants from both settings discussed the importance of a fresh start or a reset for students after a setback.

### **Change as a Constant State**

Participants in both settings discussed that their respective programs have undergone many changes, and continue to evolve. Nancy, the lead teacher at Summit, gave several examples of how the program at Summit has changed over the years. At the start of the program, they borrowed heavily from the practices of Southbrook School, an independently chartered alternative school, after an administrator from Southbrook brought over practices from that setting when he moved to Summit. Nancy discussed initial attempts to institute a credit board, where the students were required to petition the team of teachers for credit, rather than teachers awarding grades:

So, in the beginning, we tried too hard to be [Southbrook]. We have gone from very peace-love-kumbaya, where we used the grading policies from [Southbrook]

where it's credit, no credit, or credit pending to number grades. The kids actually requested that we changed it, because it was difficult for them to apply to college. So, per their request, we changed it to grades. But to try to keep the spirit of alternative ed, we decided to keep participation to 50%.

Nancy explained that ultimately, students were receiving questions from colleges and difficulties with the application process, because they did not have grades on their transcripts. Both Nancy and Andrew, a teacher at Summit, discussed that although teachers began assigning grades, they did keep aspects of the credit board process.

Andrew noted, "we used to have the credit board... they students would have to argue for their grade. We have kept up with keeping participation as half of the course grade."

He went on to explain the various changes that he has made to his grading procedures over the years, including assigning daily points for participation in addition to grades on assignments. Andrew stated, "a student will get a zero, one or two [points] for the day. You get one point for showing up, and two points if you do your work." He explained that the participation points are awarded if work is attempted, regardless of the accuracy of the work. Nancy indicated, "the teachers have control over the gradebook, but we keep that big piece of participation" and also pointed out that teachers can continue to make changes to their policies. Nancy and Andrew both agreed that awarding points for participation is important, especially for students who have tended to have chronic attendance issues.

In addition to the credit board, Nancy gave the example of assigning classroom space, particularly when it came to science classes. She explained, "when we first started, the science teacher brought everything over to Summit", but acknowledged that it was problematic. She admitted:

I was very against this at the beginning, but when we discussed how we would accomplish the labs, we moved all of the science classrooms to the main

building. So, it's still a [Summit] class, but it's in the main building. And it worked out because the teachers have everything right there, they are more comfortable... and the kids can kind of smell that on you- they know the teacher is more comfortable and not as rushed. Those classes are in the wing of the building that is closest to [Summit] so it works. I was so against it... our [Summit] classes are at [Summit], but it was so much easier and so much better.

Nancy explained that although she was hesitant to have Summit classes moved out of the Summit building, the change to holding classes in the main building was ultimately more beneficial for the students and staff members. Nancy went on to explain that now, additional changes are in progress, stating, “now, we are able to do many of the labs virtually, [such as] a virtual dissection lab”, and so now those classes can be held back in the Summit building, as they do not require the specialized equipment in the science classroom. The arrangements continue to evolve based upon the circumstances.

When discussing the grading system, Andrew, a teacher at Summit, noted that there is a constant process of change and revision:

I think that the reason why it's changed so much (and this is not a negative) is that the program was just so young at the time. We were not afraid to throw anything at the wall that would stick. At one point [Nancy] had rewards with the point system; there were privileges, if you accumulated so many points [to be included in grades]. So that's just what we're doing now. But we're still all open to suggestions whatever else people want to try, if it will work for them.

Jill, a teacher at Summit, also discussed the changes in grading procedures, noting that even though the credit board had been dissolved by the time she arrived at Summit, she found the benefit of keeping the high proportion of participation as part of the course grade, and also “overlapping participation” with graded assignments. She explained that students are required to work in a journal, and they receive points simply for completing the writing, not necessarily the quality of the writing.

A number of participants from East Hamlet also reported a similar willingness to evolve and change. Sandy, the teaching assistant, and Ruth, the school nurse, both stated



that the program was pretty perfect the way it is now, but other teachers indicated that they are aware changes will continue to occur. James, the administrator, discussed that there is a constant focus on transitioning the students; even though there is no hard-and-fast rule, the general expectation is that students are in the East Hamlet program for about a year. James stated, "There's constant talk about transition; we never want to just keep them here. Some of the kids are comfortable and they just don't want to leave ever, but that's not in their best interest." Charlie, a teacher at East Hamlet, also explained that there is an expectation that staff will transition as well. He said:

I know [James] and [Michelle] have worked there from the beginning, but a lot of people can't sustain that. I love it but I don't know if I could do the rest of my career there. It's a lot, it takes a lot out of you- it's very taxing. I think we're at a good place now with the staff that is a good staff that wants to be there and is working together really well as a unit. But [James] doesn't want teachers over there who don't want to be there, and he understands and respects that teachers will need a break.

Michelle, the lead teacher at East Hamlet, discussed that there are different courses offered every year, based on the needs of the students, reporting, "it's needs-based, so we look at the needs of the students... we offer everything they will need for a Regents diploma." She went on to explain that the types of classes and numbers of sections are based upon the student population for that particular year. The participants at East Hamlet indicated that there is a general understanding that the program will experience changes in the student population and staffing.

In contrast to the student population at East Hamlet, the student population at Summit tends to be more stable. Warren, the administrator, discussed that there has been a more recent shift towards thinking that students should enter the program at a younger age and then transition out, saying, "I've been trying to get them to send me kids from the

middle school... I always say get them in early and then get them out [back to the traditional school].” However, Joe, the psychologist, and Nancy, the lead teacher, both reported that students tend to come in and remain enrolled in the program. Joe reported, “there’s no timeline” for having students transition out of the program and Nancy explained that many of the students who are doing well and may no longer require the supports will still want to stay in the program. She noted:

There have been students that we brought in as younger students where I thought we will probably only get them for a year... they just need to be here for a while to get their priorities straight, a work ethic under their belts, or feeling that it's a fresh start when they go back. A lot of those students will say I really like it here, can I go back to the high school for some higher-level classes and then stay here as a home base? I tell them that the door doesn't lock closed but it also doesn't lock open. So, no we don't have a specific time frame.

Students at Summit tend to remain in the program over the course of several years, and many will graduate from the program.

Participants from both settings openly expressed a comfort with change, and acknowledged that changes will constantly occur. They expressed a willingness to change procedures such as grading, and understood that transitions out of the setting for students and staff are inevitable. Two of the staff members from East Hamlet, Sandy and Ruth, reported that they would not recommend changes at this time, because they believe that current procedures are very effective, but all other participants from the East Hamlet setting did express comfort with change.

The second overarching theme that emerged during the analysis of the collected data was embracing evolution, which was defined by the researcher as understanding and embracing the process of change. Participants from both settings expressed a comfort with change, and display flexibility in a number of ways, such as accepting a lunch that is

contractually shorter than obligated in exchange for an earlier release from school, less rigidity in classroom rules, or utilizing alternate methods of assessment or grading. In addition to flexibility, participants displayed an understanding of the growth process, and acknowledged that setbacks will occur as part of this process, including a regression in student behavior. There was an acknowledgement by most participants that changes will continually occur; there is an understanding that the makeup of the program will change each year regarding the students and staff, and course offerings will be changed in order to meet student needs.

### **Theme 3: Advancing Advocacy**

The third theme has been defined as advancing advocacy, meaning that there is a commitment to prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable or disenfranchised members of the community. Participants discussed the need to overcome stigma associated with an alternative setting, advocating for vulnerable populations, encouraging personal growth and responsibility and providing autonomy to teachers in decision-making.

#### **Overcoming Stigma**

Participants in both settings acknowledged that there has often been a stigma in alternative education. James, an administrator, explained that East Hamlet has “become a sought after program”, but acknowledged that in the first few years of existence there was some resistance, stating, “parents and students were skeptical of the program because they thought it was for ‘those kids’, they were at risk of dropping out.” Michelle, the lead teacher, noted that there has been a process of students learning to embrace the East Hamlet program. When speaking of their initial impressions of the program, she stated:

I think at first, they can be put off by it because it's not traditional, it's not what they're typically used to. There's this feeling that I don't want to be ‘one of those

kids', but I think once they put that aside and walk through the door they actually realized, 'Wow! I can go to school and I can be successful!'

Charlie, a teacher, also acknowledged the difficulties that that were encountered in the beginning:

I think it's hard in the beginning for a place like [East Hamlet] to get off the ground because there is a stigma. Or was a stigma. Especially [in this area] and especially in a high-performing district, it's probably unusual to offer an alternative setting like this. Working in the other building I had to work to undo the stereotype about a program like this, where I talked to the students about what do you think is going on over there? What types of students do you think are over there? I've also had to talk about it to parents, because they think that maybe it's just for kids you are drug addicted or something like that. But over the past several years, there's definitely been a change and a difference in the way that people think about the program, and I think it's starting to have a really good reputation.

One of the most effective ways that East Hamlet has been able to overcome this stigma has been students who have become ambassadors for the program. As Charlie and James had both explained, the first groups of students were older students who had not graduated with their cohort or were at-risk of not graduating on time. Charlie explained, "those kids came to [East Hamlet], got their diploma, but they never returned to the [traditional high school]". Now that East Hamlet has younger students who eventually return to the traditional high school full time, or students who return to the high school for a partial day, and Charlie explained, "they are actually really proud to be there [at East Hamlet]. They talk it up a lot... I think the kids who go there now haven't internalized those types of things [stigmas]... I think they only see it as a positive." In addition to the students' advocacy, Charlie indicated:

The community has seen the fruits of its labor in terms of the graduation rate... there are kids who are going to college or wouldn't have a job if it wasn't for [East Hamlet]. I think it has taken a little time but now it has turned the corner and people view it as a positive thing.

Participants from Summit discussed a similar stigma in the early years of the program. Jill, a teacher, described these early years and noted that the students were experiencing more struggles and the staff was generally not happy to be placed there, stating:

When they first launched, it became a place in the building where all the kids who were failing, and a lot of them were the minority-based students as well, they were kind of 'dumping' them into the academy. A lot of teachers in my department were not happy teaching over there. The disciplinary issues were out of control over there, according to them, and I think it took a few years to kind of get people to recognize that alternative placement was not just for students who were truant, or failing, or from broken homes... it was for them too, but not only for them- there had to be a very specific mix in the classroom for it to work. By the time I got there, it had started to work.

In much the same way that Charlie from East Hamlet described breaking down misperceptions with his students in the traditional setting, Andrew, a teacher from Summit, discussed the stigma surrounding Summit that remains in the general student population:

In the main building the reputation is... (sighs) well, you know kids. 15 and 16-year-old kids can be mean and if there's something they don't understand and that's different, it may be easy for them to just say 'those kids are like screwed up kids... are messed up kids.' Anytime I hear it I get right on top of it and tell them about it and say, 'You shouldn't say that... You don't know... You can't judge something that you don't know and you've never done.' I'm sure there's talk that goes on in the cafeteria and what not... Within house, [there's a] very positive attitude- those kids seem to love it, but outside there's kind of a negative stigma, sometimes.

When discussing the perception of current students in the program, Andrew stated that the

students generally have a very positive perception:

We luckily very often hear from them the students, about how they feel about this place. They often tell us. I've actually gotten to sit in a couple of the CSEs as well and we point-blank asked them. The answer is always the same. They are always hesitant at first because it's something new but they... adjust pretty quickly and it becomes a home for them. I've never been to a meeting for an existing kid where they were just like, no this isn't right, just get me out of here.

Participants from both settings acknowledged that there has historically been a stigma associated with alternative programs. In each setting, teachers reported that having students and teachers who explained and advocated for the alternative program in the traditional setting has helped to reduce the stigma.

### **Advocating for Vulnerable Populations**

Participants in both settings reported that vulnerable students are supported by the smaller and more supportive alternative setting. James, an administrator, reported that the East Hamlet program has served students who are having an acute issue, such as returning to school after a hospitalization. He also indicated that there have been several students who attended the program during a period of a gender transition. He stated:

We've helped transition kids [gender transition], maybe four or five kids, over the years. We can really help with that; [East Hamlet] is a much more supportive and comfortable environment for them. There's not a lot of judgment here. They're comfortable enough to show up every day, which wasn't happening at the high school.

Jill, a teacher from Summit, also discussed the different types of struggles that students have experienced prior to arriving at Summit:

There seems to now be a mix of students who were discipline problems and suffered because of their home, but there's also a lot of really bright kids who have been bullied or have tried to commit suicide. There's such a mix of students...I came in when they started to really have the groundwork for the type of kid that would fit, or the many types that would fit together in that setting.

Andrew, a teacher at Summit, discussed that prior to arriving at Summit, students tended to have “problems with getting to school in general, school refusal, they just don't show up. Maybe there was bullying that happened, or something at home. There's a lot of families that are broken.” Kristen, the teaching assistant from Summit, noted that the

students who have arrived at the Summit program “tell me that they were lonely in [the traditional school] ... here, they feel like they fit in.”

While the classes within the alternative setting can offer support for disenfranchised students, the entire alternative experience is important, so that a student has the opportunity to become part of the overall community. Jill, a teacher at Summit, had previously discussed that there is a misconception by some at the traditional building that classes over at Summit are easier. She also discussed the difficulties she has experienced with struggling students who are assigned for just one class at Summit. She explained:

Sometimes there are these floating kids in the high school, where they fail out of three classes or so during the year, and maybe they go to a rehab program, and come back, and they'll need a junior credit. And they [administrators at the main building] will throw them into one of the alternative classes....It happens sometimes when they just put these kids into a class at the Academy, because they don't know what else to do with them, and they think it's going to be an easy fix, but it's never an easy fix, you know?

Jill noted that these students are more likely to fail, and she has noted that while the full-time Summit students “appreciate the setting” and tend to do better because “they are not forced into it.” She stated:

It's a real problem when a student is thrown into the one section and they really don't want to be there. Most of the kids who are there for the real reasons, the right reasons, and they need the small setting. They do great.

Students from the traditional high school have the opportunity to take just one class over at Summit due to the location of the Summit program, which is in a separate building that is located on the main high school campus. The East Hamlet program is located in an administration building several miles away from the main high school, so James, the administrator, explained that all students are bussed directly to East Hamlet in the

morning, and about 40% of the students will leave at lunchtime to go to either a vocational program or return to the high school.

Participants from both settings noted that students in the alternative setting tend to have difficulty with attendance and getting to school on time. Joe, the psychologist from Summit, discussed that the master schedule is developed to allow for a later arrival time. When discussing the school schedule, he noted:

I think it's great and it's gotten a lot better. One of the things that our administrator was really supportive about was not having heavy or required academic courses in the morning, so that way if a kid has school refusal or anxiety or whatever, I will make that home visit. Those first two periods are fairly lighter classes, and we start with the major classes by third period, which is like 9:30.

Michelle, the lead teacher from East Hamlet, also noted that the schedule has been adjusted to allow for a later start time. She explained:

We start an hour later than the high school which I think is huge, because our high school starts at like 7:05 and we don't start until 8:00. We are mini bus door-to-door, so our kids get picked up at their front door and delivered right to us. That bus won't come until about 7:30, where the high school bus would come at like 6:00, so I think that helps. And then we end at the same time as the high school- I think they end at 1:55 and we end at 1:59, and we did that because part of our program is to encourage kids to regain the support of the bigger high school and we start with extracurriculars and sports. In order to get them there over back to the high school for the afternoon activities we shortened lunch, so everyone has a half hour lunch at the same time, and we got rid of passing times. We are such a small place we don't need it. So, we start an hour later and end at the same time, but we actually keep a nine-period day.

James, the administrator from East Hamlet, emphasized that, especially when it comes to attendance:

We really need the parents on board. There's a parent education piece... Over the years I have found that the parent is really feeding into the lack of school success, so we need to apply our interventions there [to the parents] as well.

Participants in both settings have found ways to encourage attendance. Later start times were identified as helpful in both settings.



Both administrators discussed ways in which they advocate for their students. Warren discussed the process of building the schedule, reporting that at Summit, “we build the schedule around them [the students] based upon what they need.” Warren stated that they build Summit classes into the schedule early on in the master scheduling process; the courses at Summit are prioritized at the district level. In addition to developing the scheduling based on the needs of the current students, Warren also noted that it was important to build in “foundational courses” within the core academic areas in anticipation of incoming students enrolling later in the year. James engages in a similar process of developing the schedule for East Hamlet, based upon the needs of the students, and noted that, “a lot of kids are out-of-sequence (and credit deficient) so I need to look closely at what courses I should offer...I keep track of what they need for graduation.” In both settings, the needs of students in the alternative setting are prioritized when building the master schedule for the district.

### **Encouraging Personal Growth and Responsibility**

Participants from both settings discussed the goal of helping students personally grow and develop. Kristen, the teaching assistant from Summit, expressed her hopes for the students at Summit:

I would hope they would say that it was a comfort to come to a setting like this and be able to go to class and do their work and succeed. To be able to graduate high school and move on to whatever they decide- to continue with their education or not, at least they have this stepping stone to move on to the next stage of their life. There were always people here who would listen, who cared, there were opportunities to grow as far as relating to other people, or to be able to overcome some of their anxieties or difficulties with school or social settings.

Joe, the psychologist from Summit, shared an example of students taking responsibility for teaching each other, relaying a situation where a number of the students suspected another of stealing property:

This is the ultimate example of socially, just building a family. All of the older kids are in a group chat and start hearing about this [the stolen property] and they're worried about it...they're like, 'Oh my God, this is not right, what are we going to do about this?' So, one of the boys on there is really good friends with this kid [suspected of stealing] and decides that he's going to talk with him about that. So, he, in the most lighthearted way is like, "Look I know what you did and it's not right- you need to give [the property] back." And he gave it back. With no adults involved.

Joe and Kristen both discussed instances where older students at Summit helped to serve as role models for younger students. In addition to describing the same stolen property incidence as Joe, Kristen also noted that the older kids "will encourage the younger kids to do things like go to class, do their work... they've been there are they want them to learn from their mistakes."

Nancy, the lead teacher from Summit, discussed the use of the Senior Seminar class that is targeted each year in order to teach skills that are identified as lacking. The purpose of the class is to help students develop other skills outside of academics, such as how to do laundry or fill out financial aid paperwork. The objectives for the course are developed at the start of each year based upon information that the parents provide about the students' needs. Nancy explained, "the guidance counselor starts a conversation with each set of parents in a closed meeting in her office, asking 'What *don't* your kids know how to do?' and it goes from there." The researcher observed one session of a senior seminar class where Nancy worked with the students on various table settings (e.g. casual, formal) and discussed restaurant etiquette. Following the class, she explained, "some of them will work in a restaurant and will need to know how to do a setting, others

will need to know which fork to use when they go on a date or to a job interview over lunch.” It was noted that one of the students in class seemed rather disengaged at first, but then demonstrated to others in the class how to do a formal napkin fold, which delighted his classmates. Other typical topics include financial skills, from how to write a check to filling out a loan application, and vocational skills such as workplace etiquette and interviewing skills.

Participants from East Hamlet described a close-knit staff, and discussed that the healthy relationships between the staff members are important for the students to observe. James, the administrator, discussed that if there is a conflict between teachers, he will “encourage them to work it out” in front of the students, in order to model conflict management. Sandy, the teaching assistant, believes that eating lunch all together, including teachers and students is important, because the teachers are “modeling healthy relationships.” Sandy also noted that many of the students are “experiencing significant mental health struggles”, and have every reason to dislike school, she is often surprised that the students are “very, very kind about how much they like the school.” She stated that she attributes this to the supportive team at East Hamlet. Charlie, a teacher from East Hamlet, also pointed out that he has undergone his own growth and change through the experiences he has had as a teacher in the alternative program, which has made him more reflective of his own practice. He spoke about working with students who are gender transitioning as an example, stating:

I think about myself and how I deliver information. From something as simple as pronouns- at [East Hamlet] we have some students who are [gender] transitioning or transitioned, and it makes me conscious of it. Like I used to say, ‘Hey guys!’ and now I’m like, ‘Hey, everybody!’. It’s been really good for my-self-reflection and my self-growth.

Participants across both settings discussed ways in which the alternative program has helped students and staff grow and develop. There is a focus on socio-emotional growth, the ability to manage relationships, and acquiring skills outside of academics, such as daily living and vocational skills.

### **Teacher Autonomy**

Participants across both sites discussed the level of teacher autonomy, noting that administrators tend to be collaborative leaders who provide both support and the freedom for teachers to make decisions. At East Hamlet, James described himself as a collaborative leader:

I try to include everybody, and you do get different perceptions on things, but I do try to just make it a team. I'm not a control freak. It's not top-down. I try to make it very collaborative. Some teachers are looking for that top-down directive piece but I don't have it in me. If you're looking for...someone else to handle things for you, this is not the place for you.

Sandy seconded this collaborative approach, discussing how decisions are handled by the core team at East Hamlet:

They're really good at taking feedback...if anyone in the school says something, including me- I'm probably the lowest man on the totem pole- you know, says something, they'll take that into account and discuss it amongst each other and figure out how to attack the problem that way.

James explained that teachers are included in all aspects of the decision-making process, and their perspective is taken into account. He described the process of setting up frequent meetings with the staff:

We do these mini team meetings, with our core teachers. Then I'll bring in maybe one or two of the other teachers each week, and just check in with what they are struggling with and what is going on. We'll tell them about some of the stuff that we're dealing with that they may not know. There's no secret anywhere. they're part of all the planning, and they're important because they're interacting with each kid. Everyone has a voice.

The teachers at East Hamlet reported that they have total control over their gradebooks. Michelle, the lead teacher, stated, “teachers maintain their own gradebooks. It’s all teacher-determined and teachers have full autonomy.” She did note that board policy prohibits assessments from counting as more than a certain percentage of the grade, which is followed. Charlie, a teacher, discussed that the teachers at East Hamlet will follow the same “guiding principles” regarding grades; these guiding principles, which include relying more on participation and classwork rather than tests, are discussed at a staff meeting at the beginning of the year. Charlie explained that he uses “a 10-point grading system. If you’re there and do work, you get a 10. If you show up but don’t do work you get a five. If you’re not there, you get a zero.” He does not give many tests or quizzes, but when he does, he refers to them as “a graded assignment” because he has found that this language “makes it less nerve-wracking for the kids.”

Warren, the administrator from Summit, discussed the classroom rules and grading procedures are “totally teacher determined.” He indicated that teachers make the decision regarding assignments and assessments and then those decisions are supported, stating, “the philosophy is if it was assigned, it’s important and should be done. Teachers can assess the way they want to assess.” Nancy, the lead teacher at Summit, explained that regarding decision-making, “any decisions about grades, classroom policies, the teacher handles most of that in their own classroom but for overarching decisions for the whole school we do involve the administrator in charge.”

Teachers from both settings advocated for others in their profession to work in an alternative setting, if possible, as a way to improve their practice as an educator.

Andrew, a teacher from Summit, believes that all teachers should work in an alternative setting at some point, and asked the researcher to spread that message:

I would say that every teacher has to try it...It's made me a much better teacher. Whoever else you talk to or whatever other audience you have the privilege of presenting your work to, or any of your other colleagues, we got to push this hard. It's made me a better teacher in any context. I coach the drumline as well at the high school, and I've taken things that I've learned at [Summit] and applied it to my job as a drumline coach. I can't really say enough about how an alternative school needs to continue flourishing.

Charlie, a teacher from East Hamlet, also advocated for other teachers to work in an alternative program to improve their overall practice. He stated, "I'll tell you this, I'm a much better teacher over at [the traditional school] in the morning because of my work here at [East Hamlet] in the afternoon." He noted that he has the opportunity to see more people in action and can "evaluate different classroom management techniques."

Across settings, participants reported that teachers have a high degree of autonomy. Teachers are able to make decisions about their classroom rules and academic policies. However, although teachers have freedom to make decisions, administrators still promote a collaborative approach and offer support.

The third overarching theme that emerged was advancing advocacy, which was defined by the researcher as a commitment to prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable or disenfranchised members of the community. Participants discussed the need to overcome stigma associated with an alternative setting; in both settings, participants stated that students and staff who return to traditional setting or the larger community have been highly effective ambassadors for their respective alternative program, and significant progress towards overcoming this stigma was reported. The desire to advocate for vulnerable populations was a common finding in both settings,

with participants discussing supports that have been extended to students who have significant socio-emotional difficulties and have been disenfranchised from the larger school setting. Attendance concerns are common for alternative students in each setting, and there is a concerted effort to re-engage students in a school community. Participants focused on the importance of encouraging personal growth and responsibility, which include developing decision-making skills, the skills needed for college and career readiness, and building healthy relationships. In order to accomplish advocacy on behalf of their students, participants in both setting emphasized the importance of providing autonomy to teachers in decision-making. Teachers and other staff members in each setting are empowered to make decisions, but are also supported by their colleagues and respective administrators.

### **Conclusion**

The first research question in this study inquired about the effective practices in alternative education in the domains of school organization, school climate & culture and academics. Findings were consistent across settings, with participants reporting similar key effective practices. While there were many similar practices across the two settings, participants from each program also discussed some effective practices that were unique to their respective site.

The analysis of the data found that within the domain of school organization, maintaining a small overall size of the program and having staff members and students who are there on a voluntary basis is critical. Participants from both Summit and East Hamlet both reported that alternative students require smaller groupings and an intensive ratio of staff to students. Additionally, participants from both settings indicated that it is

important to have staff and students who want to be in the setting; this is accomplished through administrators collaborating on the assignment of teachers to the program, and having an effective screening process to identify the students who will be best served by the alternative program. As a key factor in this screening process, students must consent to participate in the alternative program; voluntary participation was reported to be a critical factor across both sites. Bell schedules for Summit and East Hamlet program are each adjusted in order to allow students to arrive later to school. East Hamlet has a later start time, beginning about an hour after the traditional high school, and although the Summit program starts at the same time as the traditional high school, courses are scheduled so that electives are offered first and the more rigorous academic classes are later in the morning. The courses at East Hamlet are also scheduled so that students can attend in the morning, and leave in the afternoon to attend a vocational program or return to the traditional high school.

The analysis of the data found that within the domain of school climate & culture, it is important to have an experience that differs from the traditional school, where students had not initially been successful, and having staff members who understand the process of change and growth. In both of the settings, the staff within alternative programs modeled themselves on a family, and engaged in the types of activities that are typically done with the family, such as cooking. The location of the Summit program within a house also contributes to the family atmosphere, as the setting has a very different feel than a traditional classroom and incorporates elements of a home, such as a kitchen area and living room area with couches and a fireplace. Summit also utilizes many flexible seating options and non-traditional types of furniture, which helps make it



clear to students that they are in a different type of setting than a traditional school. East Hamlet utilizes more traditional classroom spaces, but the intimacy of the setting is enhanced by the location of the program in one wing of a school building. A unique aspect of the East Hamlet program is the practice of a common lunch period, where all of the students and the staff eat together. Participants reported that this practice contributes to the family-style atmosphere and allows opportunities for staff to role-model healthy interactions for students. Staff at Summit do not typically eat with students, but participants from the Summit program reported other unique ways of connecting with students, such as personalizing their office or classroom space, and more openly discussing their interests and opinions with students in the alternative setting.

Relationships are highly valued in both settings. Participants from the Summit setting, which is a smaller program where students typically attend over the course of several years, discussed that individual teacher-to-student connections are important, and students are encouraged to take care of and mentor each other, with older students assisting younger students. Participants from the East Hamlet setting, which is a larger program where students typically attend for about one year and there is a larger core team of staff, discussed the importance of healthy relationships between staff members.

Although there is care and concern demonstrated by individual East Hamlet staff members towards students, in this setting, the student participants are more transitory than at Summit, and the focus is on a cohesive staff that can role-model healthy relationships and effective problem solving rather than a concerted effort to build a mentoring relationship between groups of students.

The analysis of the data found that within the domain of academics, it is important to have teachers who prioritize relationships over content and have the autonomy to make decisions about curriculum, grading and assessment practices. When teachers are not bound to a culminating Regents exam, they have more autonomy over their courses and can engage in more creative learning experiences. Teachers in both settings discussed that when preparing students for an eventual Regents exam, they are more closely bound to a prescribed curriculum and are more likely to use traditional tests and assessment methods, as opposed to non-Regents classes, where they have more control over the curriculum and can utilize more flexibility in methods of assessment. Relying heavily on participation points as part of a grading system was found across both settings.

Participants from both settings noted that attendance is typically a significant concern for students participating in an alternative setting, so it is important to demonstrate patience and provide supports for students in order to re-engage them in a school setting.

Participants from Summit and East Hamlet programs did have a common goal regarding progress towards graduation, as students from both programs are put on a track to graduate with a Regents diploma. However, staff from the Summit program discussed a focus on a more rigorous academic track, as students are provided with the opportunity to take advanced coursework, including college-level coursework such as AP classes. Other types of education, such as vocational education, are not typically offered at Summit.

Staff from the East Hamlet program discussed a wider variety of academic options. Close to half of the East Hamlet students will participate in some type of technical or vocational education, while other students will return to the traditional high school for more advanced coursework.

The second research question in this study inquired about obstacles and barriers that exist within an alternative education setting. Participants from both settings indicated that there had been (and sometimes still remains) a stigma associated with alternative education. Staff from Summit and East Hamlet reported that one of the most effective ways to combat this stigma has been for students and teachers to act as ambassadors for the program when they were in contact with others in the traditional school, and to demonstrate success of accountability metrics, such as attainment of a diploma or employment after graduation. Participants from both settings indicated that having teachers shared between the traditional and alternative settings, and students who have the opportunity to participate in the traditional setting either for a portion of the day or return full-time to the traditional setting, has contributed to a more positive perception of their respective programs. Administrators in both settings indicated that recruitment of appropriate staff was initially difficult, but teachers have often advocated to their colleagues and a position at the alternative program is now viewed with more prestige. Participants from Summit and East Hamlet both acknowledged that even for teachers who want to work within the alternative setting, it can be an emotionally taxing assignment and burnout can occur; having staff work part-time in the alternative setting or return to the traditional setting for a period of time was offered as an option for combating burnout. Both settings are high-performing districts, and each administrator acknowledged that it was not a hard battle for resources, but this may be more of an obstacle in other districts where resources are further stretched.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Introduction**

This study was a comparative case study of two alternative programs in suburban New York. This study examined effective practices in two different established alternative education programs at the high school level. This study addressed two research questions. The first question inquired about effective practices in alternative education within the domains of school organization, school climate and culture, and academics. The second research question investigated what types of barriers or obstacles exist within an alternative education setting. Summit and East Hamlet can both be characterized as primarily constructivist schools, as described by Popkewitz et al. (1982), but there are some elements of a technical school culture as well.

The data collected in this study consisted of observations, a records review and interviews. Analysis of the data revealed several key findings that emerged across the two settings: flexibility, autonomy and commitment to relationships. Participants discussed how flexibility is displayed in multiple ways, including flexibility with the teachers' union contract, taking a flexible approach with rules in the classroom setting, and demonstrating flexibility in curriculum, assessments, course assignments and grading procedures. Autonomy is important for both staff members and students; this autonomy begins with voluntary participation in the setting, and once in the alternative setting, staff members are given a large degree of control and decision-making power while students operate under fewer classroom rules. Relationships are highly valued, with participants indicating relationships are prioritized over all other concerns. There were similar obstacles identified in each setting; participants noted that there was an uphill battle to

combat stigma associated with their respective alternative program, especially in the first few years of existence, teachers noted some frustrations with rigid academic requirements, particularly in Regents level courses and administrators reported some difficulties with recruiting and maintaining staff. This chapter will discuss the major findings, from the analyzed data, to address each of the research questions, as well as, connecting the findings to the existing literature and theoretical framework that was reviewed in chapter two.

## **Interpretation of the Findings**

### **Research Question #1**

The first research question in this study inquired about the effective practices in alternative education within the domains of school organization, school climate and culture, and academics. The analysis of the data found that several effective practices that exist across both Summit and East Hamlet under the themes of flexibility, autonomy and a commitment to relationships. Additionally, there are some effective practices that are unique to each setting.

Within the domain of school organization, across both settings, there is flexibility built into the overall program schedule, with later start times at East Hamlet and more academically demanding classes starting later in the morning at Summit. Passing times were eliminated at East Hamlet in order to avoid an abrupt end to classes and reclaim additional minutes within the day in order to start later and end earlier. Summit has a bell schedule that is aligned with the traditional high school, allowing students to take classes in both settings. The schedule at East Hamlet also allows for students to interact with staff at lunch and connect outside of academics. These scheduling considerations are in

line with the practice of purposeful scheduling, one of the six powerful practices of alternative education settings identified by Maillet (2017); it is important to schedule around the needs of students and build time into the schedule to connect with students. Autonomy is important in the selection of students and assignment of staff to both alternative programs; participants universally agreed that voluntary participation is crucial. Choice is a key effective practice in alternative education (Quinn & Poirier, 2006); across both settings, participants reported that all or nearly all participants were in the alternative program voluntarily. Elements of an effective screening process for students include seeking parent input as part of the information gathering/exploratory stage of the process, utilizing a site visit or trial as part of the decision-making phase of the process, and ultimately seeking an agreement/commitment to attend the program from all involved parties, including the school team, the parent(s) and the student. These practices were found in the screening process across both settings. Providing autonomy to teachers also contributes to a desire to work in the program, as teachers across both settings reported that having more control over their curriculum has helped to draw them over to their respective alternative program. Students are provided with ownership in both programs through the display of student-created artwork; student-created displays are prominent in Summit and are also found incorporated into classroom settings at East Hamlet. The administrators in each setting reported that they relied on relationship-building with chairpersons and central office administrators in order to eventually gain more control over selecting staff for their alternative program. The degree of autonomy that has been achieved in each of the studied settings is an impressive finding in light of existing research. Nehring and Lohmeier (2010) reported that principals in alternative

settings found that establishing autonomy within their programs remained a challenge, even when seeing positive progress in other aspects of the alternative program. Finally, there is a commitment to relationships in both settings that is supported by the organizational structure of the school. The physical setting at Summit lends itself to connection between staff and students, with common lounge spaces located between classrooms and staff offices, and the tradition of staff decorating their space in a way that displays personal interests to students. Scheduling at East Hamlet is done with a focus on finding opportunities to connect with students, including the daily lunch period and whole-school activities, such as field trips and site-based activities such as cooking a large meal together as an entire community. Creating opportunities for relationship-building is important; Zolkoski et al. (2016) reported that students within alternative education settings created positive relationships with teachers as one of the most important factors in developing resilience.

Within the domain of school climate and culture, flexibility is displayed in a number of ways. Teachers emphasized the importance of a flexible approach with students in regard to classroom rules; in both settings, teachers discussed that there are fewer classroom rules in the alternative setting in exchange for a general expectation of respect. At Summit, teachers utilize flexible seating options and make allowances for joke-telling or sharing personal stories with the class that would not take place in the traditional classroom setting. While major rule infractions such as drugs or violence are not tolerated, smaller infractions such as not going to class on time are not addressed through a punitive lens. In East Hamlet, students are permitted minor concessions that would not be allowed in the traditional building, such as wearing hats or keeping their

cell phone on their person instead of turning them in to the teacher. Participants from both settings discussed a reluctance to rely on a punitive approach when there are minor rule infractions; instead confrontations are avoided and a more relationship-based and restorative approach is utilized. The reduction in disciplinary incidents through this type of flexible approach is supported by the research. Riddle and Cleaver (2017) reported that a setting with few established rules, but the general expectation of appropriate behavior, is perceived more positively by students.

Autonomy and flexibility are closely intertwined; providing the autonomy to teachers to establish classroom rules and practices also allows them the flexibility to connect with students and develop a positive school climate. Administrators in both settings discussed the importance of empowering teachers to make their own decisions and described a collaborative style of leadership. The autonomy that is provided to teachers and other staff members contributes to making them feel valued and happy to be in the setting, which improves the overall school climate. Participants from Summit reported that the program is a very positive place, and participants from East Hamlet noted that their skills are recognized and valued.

Lastly, relationships are the priority in both settings, as the climate and culture of Summit and East Hamlet are each defined through the lens of relationships. Relationships in both settings are conceptualized as family-style relationships, with participants characterizing their role within the program as parent, grandparent or older sibling rather than a teacher, administrator, psychologist or school nurse. There is a concerted effort in both settings to engage disenfranchised students by creating a comfortable and supportive atmosphere that encourages students to attend and remain in



school. Participants from both settings discussed that the typical alternative education student has a history of attendance issues, possible due to socio-emotional difficulties or other factors that impacted their participation in a larger setting, such as undergoing a gender transition.

The focus on relationships is consistent with the research; Streeter et al. (2011) noted that out of 15 different elements of an alternative program, teachers and students each rated the high quality of relationships within the setting as the most important aspect. Relationships are valued highly in both settings, although the nature of these relationships is different across the two settings. At Summit, participants discussed the importance of individual student-teacher connections, but primarily emphasized the importance of students developing relationships amongst each other, with older students acting as role models for the younger students in the program. The Summit program is smaller, and fewer teachers overlap, meaning that although the teachers generally get along, they are not as cohesive of a unit as the teachers at East Hamlet. Students tend to remain at Summit over multiple years, while students at East Hamlet are typically transitioned out of the alternative setting more quickly, so there is not the same high level of consistency in the student cohorts. In East Hamlet, there are more full-time staff members and more opportunities for staff interaction, and the participants in this setting discussed utilizing their interactions between adults as a way of role-modeling healthy relationships for the students.

Within the domain of academics, flexibility is displayed in a number of ways across both settings, although critically, participants consistently reported less flexibility in Regents courses, which have a more standardized curriculum and culminate in a

Regents exam. Teachers from both settings reported flexible grading procedures, relying heavily on participation and in-class assignments. Edwards (2017) and Hall (2019) both reported that alternative setting is an ideal place for teachers to pilot more innovative instructional practices and alternate means of assessment; teachers in this study indicated that this is done in non-Regents classes within the alternative setting. Teachers in both settings reported that homework is not typically assigned, although teachers from Summit did report that there was some pressure to assign homework. Excluding Regents classes, where students are typically grouped by grade level, students in both programs are likely to be in multi-age groupings or heterogeneous ability levels for at least some of their classes, which is a benefit; Ronskley-Pavia et al. (2019) found that these types of groupings not only help students maintain academic progress, but have an added benefit of more support for socio-emotional growth, due to opportunities for interaction between the different groups of students. Teachers in both settings discussed a more flexible approach to planning and instructing these non-Regents classes. Autonomy is also prevalent in the domain of academics across both settings. Teachers at Summit and East Hamlet both reported that they have nearly complete control over their curriculum in non-Regents courses. At Summit, teachers have created an entire course, Senior Seminar, which is completely and directed targeted to the needs of students. At East Hamlet, teachers plan relevant and engaging activities, including frequent field trips and cooking on-site as an entire school, which provide students with well-rounded learning experiences. Across both settings, teachers did report less autonomy and flexibility within Regents courses, where they do not have the same level of control over the curriculum and are more focused on utilizing traditional tests and assignments in order to

prepare students for a culminating Regents exam. Finally, when considering the commitment to relationships within the domain of academics, there was agreement across settings that relationships are more highly valued than academic productivity. Teachers in both settings indicated that they value relationships over content, and noted that if there is a true effort and focus on developing relationships with students, it will ultimately be easier to teach the content.

Across all three domains of school organization, school climate and culture and academics, participants from both Summit and East Hamlet discussed the importance of advocating for students. The lead teachers and administrators discussed a similar process for developing the schedule; in both settings, the singleton courses that are required are built into the master schedule for the district early on in the scheduling process, in order to ensure that students in the alternative setting have the appropriate courses and the selected teachers are available to teach them. The administrators also both reported that they have a supportive central office administration, so they are able to obtain what is needed for the program in terms of staffing, furniture and supplies. In addition to advocating for their students, teachers also reported that they advocated to their colleagues, encouraging them to try working within an alternative setting. A number of participants reported that working within an alternative setting has made them a better teacher.

Participants from both settings discussed the importance of flexibility, autonomy and a commitment to relationships. These themes are evident within the three domains of school organization, school climate and culture, and academics. Flexibility is displayed through scheduling (such as a later start time), classroom rules and grading procedures

and academic planning. Autonomy is evident in the fact that teachers and students are given the choice to participate in the setting, students feel a sense of ownership through practices such as the display of student-created artwork, and teachers have control over the curriculum. A commitment to relationships is demonstrated through the scheduling process, where time is dedicated for students and teachers to connect, characterizing relationships within the school setting as family-type relationships, engaging disenfranchised students and valuing relationships over academic progress. Participants also discussed the importance of advocacy for alternative education students and programs.

### **Research Question #2**

The second research question investigated what types of barriers or obstacles exist within an alternative education setting. The analysis of the data found that participants in both settings have worked to overcome a stigma associated with alternative education, and have felt constricted with the demands of Regents courses, which have a more standardized curriculum and culminate in a traditional exam. While budgetary issues were not reported as an obstacle for either program in this study, both administrators acknowledged that the high cost of running an alternative program may be a barrier in other settings.

Participants from both settings acknowledged that there was a stigma associated with the alternative education program, particularly in the early years of existence. There was also agreement across settings that the most effective way to combat stigma has been to allow students and teachers to make connections with the general population from the traditional high school and larger community. Teachers advocate for the alternative

setting by discussing the benefits with their students in the traditional high school and encouraging their colleagues to teach in an alternative setting. Students are able to advocate for the alternative program by acting as ambassadors when they return to the traditional setting, either full-time or for a portion of the day.

Teachers reported fewer opportunities for autonomy and creativity in classes that culminate in a Regents exam. In addition to less flexibility with the curriculum, these teachers also reported that they were much more likely to utilize traditional tests and graded assignments in these classes, in order to prepare students for the culminating Regents exam. Without a strictly prescribed curriculum and a looming prospect of a culminating Regents exam, teachers would be afforded more opportunities for creativity in planning, and administrators would have more opportunities to co-seat students, which would allow smoother progress towards attaining graduation requirements. Given more flexibility in a non-Regents course, teachers in both settings described more flexibility and creativity regarding the delivery of the curriculum and the measurement of knowledge.

Administrators from Summit and East Hamlet both acknowledged support from central office administration and the board of education, noting that they typically receive requested funding and staffing. However, both administrators also noted that there is a high cost associated with the program, which may be more of an obstacle for other districts that are not as well funded. As a way of offsetting the cost to the district of operating an alternative education program, both administrators reported that they admit cross-contracted students. These students come from other districts, and their home districts pay tuition to Summit and East Hamlet.

Participants from both settings reported similar types of barriers and obstacles to the operation of alternative education programs. These obstacles include overcoming stigma, working within the confines of rigid academic requirements in Regents courses and making considerations for funding a high-cost program.

### **Relationship Between Findings and Prior Research**

The programs at Summit and East Hamlet can both be defined as primarily constructivist settings, as described by Popkewitz et al. (1982), but there are some aspects of a technical culture within the domain of academics. A number of the effective practices that were identified are in alignment with effective practices that were previously identified from the research.

The importance of flexibility was emphasized across both settings and within all three domains of school organization, school climate and culture and academics. Popkewitz et al. (1982) discussed several ways in which flexibility is displayed in a constructivist setting, including the idea that knowledge is provisional and related to the situation, rather than a fixed notion of absolute knowledge and multiple ways of knowing are encouraged. Regarding school organization, flexible scheduling exists in both Summit and East Hamlet, with more rigorous academic classes starting later in the day at Summit and a later overall start time at East Hamlet. One of the unique scheduling practices in East Hamlet is a school-wide lunch period where all students and staff eat together. When considering the school climate and culture, there is flexibility in classroom rules and a focus on addressing infractions through more relational and restorative approaches rather than a punitive approach across both settings. In relation to academics, participants from both Summit and East Hamlet discussed flexibility is

displayed in the curriculum in non-Regents courses, grading practices and assessments, although teachers within each setting reported that there is much less flexibility in Regents-level classes that culminate in a Regents exam.

Autonomy is displayed across both settings and within all three domains of school organization, school climate and culture and academics; autonomy at both Summit and East Hamlet begins with a commitment to voluntary participation in the alternative setting. This is consistent with the research; Quinn and Poirier (2006) reported that choice is one of the most important elements of an alternative program. Popkewitz et al. (1982) discussed multiple ways in which autonomy is found in a constructivist setting, including that student participation in school affairs is expected, there is an emphasis on students' rights, responsibilities and personal knowledge, and teachers have more autonomy while administrators avoid the type managerial control that is found in more technical settings. Additionally, teachers exercise control by developing relationships (Popkewitz et al., 1982). When considering school organization, across both settings, students in both settings also have a degree of autonomy and ownership of the physical space, which is apparent in student-created artwork in both programs. Administrators in both settings discussed the importance of having control over the selection of teachers for the program, as having the right teachers in place is key to the success of the program. This is supported by the research, as Murray and Holt (2014) identified the importance of a caring and committed staff as one of the most important factors in an effective alternative program. There is a climate and culture at both Summit and East Hamlet where teachers' decisions are supported and respected by administration, and students have the autonomy to make decisions regarding their personal goals and preferences,

such as attending vocational education for a portion of the day or more rigorous academic coursework at the traditional high school. When considering academics, Popkewitz et al. (1982) noted that in a constructivist setting, there is innovative pedagogy, students learn through participation, and students are expected to demonstrate multiple ways of knowing, while in a technical setting, the curriculum is more highly standardized and knowledge is measured in more absolute ways, such as traditional tests and assessments. Participants in both settings reported that teachers are able to exercise autonomy and decision-making regarding classroom rules, curriculum and grading procedures. Teachers in both settings noted that although there is still a degree of autonomy when teaching Regents courses, but they did note that they had less autonomy in these courses, as there is more pressure to cover specified content and utilize traditional tests and assessment methods.

A strong commitment to relationships is found across both settings and within all three domains of school organization, school climate and culture and academics. Maslow (1954; 1993) and Erikson (1950) both emphasized the importance of relationships and trust-building in socio-emotional development. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, trust is built through the fulfillment of basic needs; this trust is needed for a person eventually self-actualize and fulfill their own emotional and spiritual needs (1993). Erikson's first two stages of psychosocial development are focused on the development of trust and autonomy; this is expected to be accomplished in infancy and early childhood within the confines of the family (1950). Participants from both settings reported that the alternative setting functions like a family, and since many of the students who attend have disrupted socio-emotional development, the staff within the alternative setting is



providing the family-style support that was not necessarily provided in the actual home setting. Popkewitz et al. (1982) noted that in a constructivist setting, relationships are valued and teachers are concerned with all aspects of students' growth and development, although the nature of these relationships is different between Summit and East Hamlet. Participants from both Summit and East Hamlet characterize relationships within the alternative setting as family-type relationships. Regarding school organization, the physical structure of the Summit building, which is a converted house, lends itself to a comparison to family, while aspects of scheduling at East Hamlet, such as the common lunch period or family-style cooking events, are more reminiscent of family relationships. The school climate and culture is defined by these family-style relationships, and the importance of healthy, positive relationships was stressed by participants from both settings. This is consistent with the research, which indicates that strong relationships between students and staff in alternative settings yield desired results, as positive perceptions of teacher support were associated with gains in GPA and a decrease in disciplinary incidents (Edger-Smith & Palmer, 2015), and participation in an alternative program ultimately has a positive impact on self-efficacy and self-esteem (Wilkerson et al., 2016; Zolkowski et al., 2016). At Summit, the school culture is focused on developing relationships between groups of students, who attend the program for a number of years and eventually develop sibling-like, mentoring relationships between older and younger students. At East Hamlet, the student population tends to be more transitory, and there are more staff members who are there full-time or who overlap teaching time within the program. The culture at East Hamlet is more focused on nurturing the relationships between staff members, who will then role-model healthy

relationships for the students. Participants from both settings discussed the importance of creating a supportive, welcoming school climate, especially when considering the number of students who are experiencing socio-emotional difficulties that have been impacting their ability to attend school. When considering academics, relationships are valued over covering the content. Teachers from both settings made reference to such concepts as putting ‘kids before content’ or building a relationship first so that you can more effectively cover the content later. The importance of relationships is supported by the research. Regarding a study of alternative school graduates, respondents had an overwhelmingly positive perception of the teachers within the alternative setting (Zolkoski et al., 2016); these strong relationships were identified by the graduates as a key factor in their overall success within an alternative program.

Participants from both settings discussed the importance of advocacy efforts on behalf of students in the alternative education setting. Robinson and Aronica (2015) discussed that alternative programs are serving students who are struggling in traditional education settings, including low achievers and socially alienated students, and students in these settings may perceive a stigma; participants from both settings noted that many of the students in their respective alternative program fit these criteria, but did note that advocacy efforts have decreased the stigma, with both Summit and East Hamlet becoming more sought-after, respected and recognized as a positive place. Murray and Holt (2014) identified the importance of individualized educational planning for students in an alternative setting, as they tend to have unique educational needs. Both programs promote college and career readiness; in the Summit program, students have the Senior Seminar class, which focuses on real-world skills and in the East Hamlet program,

students have the opportunity to attend a half-day of vocational education, and engage in relevant experiences through field trips and on-site events such as cooking together as an entire school. Both programs offer the option for students to pursue higher-level academic classes in the traditional building.

This study supports the existing research literature in that effective practices that were identified by the participants in this study are aligned with those that have already been identified. In addition to reinforcing the effectiveness of previously identified practices, participants from this study discussed the benefits of some additional practices that are not widely discussed in the literature. Most notably, in both settings, the alternative programs are not entirely self-contained; a number of students in both programs travel to the traditional high school or a vocational program, and many teachers are also shared between the alternative and traditional settings. Participants from Summit and East Hamlet both noted that this practice has been helpful in confronting stigma that had been associated with the programs. Each program has also developed unique practices that support student growth and development outside of academics, such as the Senior Seminar at Summit, which individualizes instruction in relevant, real-world skills to the particular students in the program in that given year, or the practice of eating lunch as an entire school community at East Hamlet as a way of connecting and role-modeling healthy relationships.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations include a small population from which to sample, as there are fewer than 15 programs in this region of New York that meet specified criteria. Gaining access to both sites was time-consuming, as both districts had their own guidelines regarding

access for visitors and conducting research. Additionally, the research process was interrupted by mandated school closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic. One on-site visit to Summit had been achieved prior to school closure, but all planned research was not completed prior to mandated closure. Due to the closures, on-site access was not possible at East Hamlet; therefore, all research from East Hamlet involved phone interviews with participants and a review of existing records.

The design of this study is a comparative case study. Case studies have limited generalizability (Stake, 1995). Although the comparative case study does provide more opportunities for triangulation, it is important to note that with these two particular settings, it is likely that such a high degree of correlation between the findings is a result of the programs evolving from the same alternative school. It cannot be said that such strong agreement would be found in comparisons across other alternative programs.

Another limitation of this study is that the majority of the data collection took place during the global Covid-19 pandemic. Since educational policy is ever changing and new waves of educational reforms emerge, the findings within this study may be limited to this one particular circumstance.

A request for participation in this study was extended to all staff members in both settings; follow up requests were made via email to those who did not initially respond. The goal of interviewing all full-time staff members at Summit was achieved, but only two of the seven part-time staff members responded to a request for participation. Interviews with all of the remaining full-time staff members at East Hamlet were completed, but one of the staff members retired and another took a different position during the course of the study. Two of the part-time staff members responded to the

interview requests, but only one interview of these interviews was ultimately completed. The bulk of research phase of this study took place over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, which provided unprecedented challenges with access to participants. The willingness of these professionals to participate in this research during a global pandemic, a time of unprecedented struggle, fear and uncertainty, is an important finding in and of itself and speaks to their dedication and commitment to the field of alternative education. However, it must be acknowledged that these participants may possess positive biases that have impacted the findings of the researcher.

In addition to the possibility that the sample of participants was skewed towards those who have a positive perception of the setting, it is important to acknowledge to impact of a nostalgia effect. Leboe and Ansons (2006) define nostalgia as the “positive sentiment of a prior stage of one’s life” (p. 596), and found that in a series of word-pairing experiments, participants were more likely to recall positive connections as opposed to negative or neutral pairings. Leboe and Ansons (2006) discussed the power of nostalgia in marketing campaigns; this power was further established by Lasaleta, Sedikides and Vohs (2014), who found that consumers were not only more likely to respond to a nostalgic advertisements by making a purchase, they were willing to pay more for the items in nostalgic advertisements as opposed to neutral ones. Dimitriadou et al. (2019) discussed the influence of collective nostalgia, defined as “sentimental longing for events that occurred as part of a group with which one identifies” (p. 445). An individual may experience nostalgia for a specific and personal reason, such as a fond and rosy remembering of the events of a milestone birthday, while collective nostalgia is induced by an associated milestone that is shared with others, such as the first moon

landing. Dimitriadou et. al. (2019) reported that when collective nostalgia regarding national identity is induced, subjects are more likely to show a strong preference for consumer products from their country of origin. During this study period, participants were aware of impending retirements (Warren, the administrator from Summit, and one of the core team members from East Hamlet, who did not participate in this study). Other staff members from East Hamlet were also moving on to other positions within the district. In addition to the changes in the composition of staff members at each site, the participants were facing the changes and restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the knowledge that even with a return to school, their work experiences will likely be very different. The participants were likely to be experiencing nostalgia regarding their experiences in alternative education, and may have been more likely to recall positive aspects of their experiences.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Future studies into effective practices in alternative education could look at other alternative programs. The two programs included in this study were in similar districts, and were both developed by borrowing heavily from the same original program. This limits the findings of this study, but exploring different programs may yield additional information regarding effective practices in other types of alternative programs. Raywid (2001) noted that there is not one “ideal” model for an alternative school; ideally there would be many different types of schools and options, so it follows that other types of programs must be studied in order to more fully understand effective practices across a range of alternative settings.

Another suggestion for future research would be to obtain information from students and parents of students in an alternative education program. Incorporating the perspective of students into this study was initially attempted, but permission to interview students was rescinded following mandated school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly all of the teachers and administrators in this study discussed the importance of students and their parents agreeing to participate in the alternative setting, and many teachers discussed the importance of the home-school connection. Gaining the perspective of these groups of stakeholders would be important to get a more complete picture of effective practices.

Future research could also examine the impact of Regents exam waivers within alternative settings. The New York State Department of Education granted waivers for June 2020 and August 2020 exams as a result of mandated school closures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers have reported less flexibility in the curriculum and greater reliance on traditional tests and graded assignments in Regents courses. It is unknown if exam waivers will continue to be extended in future school years, but there has been discussion about revamping or entirely eliminating Regents exams in New York State (Silberstein, 2019). Considering the participants' reports about the differences between teaching courses that do and do not culminate in a Regents exam, it would be important to examine the impact of removing Regents exam requirements.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought swift and drastic changes to all educational settings, and the lasting impact of COVID-19 closures and restrictions are still unknown. Participants across both settings within this study noted that alternative education students were more likely to have attendance issues and were often more disenfranchised

that other students in the traditional setting. It can be reasonably assumed that remote learning and the in-person safety procedures (use of barriers, distancing and masks) are likely to exacerbate these concerns and lead to further inequities. Alternative education programs, when done effectively, are expensive to run and may be very susceptible to a looming budgetary crisis associated with COVID-19. Future research should examine the impact of COVID-19 imposed changes.

Beyond the limits of alternative education settings, future research could look at these effective practices and their applicability within the traditional school setting. If the practices identified in this study are effective in supporting students in an alternative setting, transferring these practices to a traditional classroom may also support a wider population of students.

### **Implications for Future Practice**

Modern options for alternative education emerged in the 1960s and have continued to evolve. There is a need to identify effective practices in alternative education settings. Table 5 outlines targeted suggestions on ways that each stakeholder group could contribute to effective practices in alternative education.



Table 5: *Suggestions for Stakeholders*

Stakeholder	Suggestions
State Department of Education	Develop a process to allow alternative programs to apply for a Regents exam waiver, to allow teachers more flexibility in the curriculum
Board of Education	Provide financial resources for staffing, to allow for an intensive ratio of students to teachers in an alternative setting
District	Allow for cross-contracting of students from other districts, to financially support the program
Building/Program	<p>Schedule courses offered at the alternative program early on in the master scheduling process, in order to prioritize singleton classes at the alternative program and allow for the appointment of teachers who will voluntarily participate in the alternative setting</p> <p>Solicit feedback from participants in order to evaluate current practices</p> <p>Provide for common planning time and collaboration between staff members, possibly including substitute coverage during the day or compensation for additional meetings after school hours in the form of professional development hours or additional pay</p> <p>Utilize a comprehensive selection process for students that includes the parent(s) and requires agreement from the program, parent and student to attend the program</p>
Teacher	<p>Promote flexibility in the classroom setting, including relaxation of classroom rules in favor of more general expectations (e.g. attend class, demonstrate respect for others)</p> <p>Model desired behavior for students through such practices as respectful conflict resolution and acceptance of change</p> <p>Seek input from students on their interests and needs, to be incorporated into lesson planning.</p> <p>Receive professional development in order to be able to support diverse socio-emotional needs of students</p>

The findings of this study exposed the first major theme of collective commitment. In effective alternative programs, there is an understanding that all members of the community want to be there and are working towards common goals. In order to establish this practice of collective commitment, it is important to have a process in place to ensure that all members of the alternative education setting are there on a voluntary basis. The appointment of teachers to the program must not be based solely on

seniority or teacher availability; it is critical to have teachers who have been selected to work in that setting because they want to be there and possess the skill set to work with a high-needs student population. Teachers must be aligned with the mission/vision of the alternative program, and they must be willing to embrace community norms. It is important that teachers demonstrate flexibility and a willingness to endure frequent changes, which are made in response to student needs. Administrators can support teachers with a collaborative approach, allowing them to feel invested and take ownership of the setting, and by valuing their expertise. A screening process for students needs to be comprehensive, and there needs to be agreement between the staff, the student and their parents prior to the formal acceptance of the student into the alternative program.

The findings of this study exposed a second theme of embracing evolution, meaning that the participants understand and embrace the process of change, seeing it as necessary for growth and development. Participants discussed the need for flexibility, demonstrated an understanding that regressions/setback will occur as part of the growth process and acknowledged that change is a constant state. Given the student-first planning and unique needs of the students in the alternative setting, there will be frequent changes in the program. Different courses will need to be offered every year based upon the outstanding graduation requirements that need to be fulfilled, and supports will vary based upon the presenting needs of the students.

The findings of this study exposed a third theme has been defined as advancing advocacy, meaning that there is a commitment to prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable or disenfranchised members of the community. Participants discussed the

need to overcome stigma associated with an alternative setting, advocating for vulnerable populations, encouraging personal growth and responsibility and providing autonomy to teachers in decision-making. Participants acknowledged that there had been a stigma associated with alternative education, particularly in the early years of establishing their respective programs.

The above-mentioned implications for future practice do present challenges for school leaders including (a) budgetary concerns regarding the provision of intensive teacher-to-student ratio programs, (b) cooperation at the district level among administrators in order to assign teachers to the alternative setting, (c) the need for cooperation from members of collective bargaining units regarding contractual obligations (e.g. length of lunch period, prep time), and (d) reducing the emphasis on high-stakes standardized assessments at the state level.

### **Conclusion**

The findings in this study reveal effective practices in alternative education settings and outline obstacles/barriers that are yet to be overcome regarding alternative education. As the recommendations for future practice suggest, these findings highlight the importance of voluntary participation in the alternative setting, provide autonomy for teachers in order for them to have the flexibility to prioritize relationships over content delivery, advocacy for students, providing relevant and real-world learning experiences and overcoming the stigma associated with alternative education. It is important that participants in an alternative setting have a collective commitment towards shared goals, demonstrate buy-in regarding the mission/vision of the program and embrace community norms. There is an understanding of the mental health needs of students and a desire to

re-engage disenfranchised students in a school community. The teachers, administrators and other staff members in the program must also have a comfort with the process of change. They are willing to evaluate procedures, make changes when necessary, and understand that growth is not a linear process. Due to a lingering stigma and lack of understanding of alternative education, participants in an alternative setting also must engage in advocacy to support the needs of alternative education students and work towards erasing stigma. There is a limited body of research on alternative programs in general, and a particular lack of research on programs in New York State, where there are fewer alternative education options than in many other states. The examination of effective practices in alternative education in New York State addresses a gap in the existing research literature.

## APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVALS

[REDACTED]

### PUBLIC SCHOOLS

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
*Superintendent of Schools*

[REDACTED]  
*Assistant Superintendent for  
Secondary Education*

December 16, 2019

Attn: St. Johns Institutional Review Board

I have reviewed Elizabeth Dragone's research protocol, including any letters of consent or assent, titled "Making a Difference by Being Different: An Examination of Factors that Contribute to Student Success in Alternative Education Programs". I understand what she is asking of the individuals and grant her permission to conduct her study at [REDACTED] I have the authority to do so.

If I have any further questions about this research study I understand that Beth can be reached at [REDACTED] or via e-mail at [REDACTED]@stjohns.edu. I also understand that if I have any questions regarding this IRB approval or the rights of research participants I can contact Raymond DiGiuseppe, Ph.D., Chair, St. John's Institutional Review Board, at [REDACTED] or via email at [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
Assistant Superintendent for Secondary Education

Date: 9-24-2020

IRB #: IRB-FY2020-369

Title: Making a Difference by Being Different: An Examination of Factors that Contribute to Student Success in Alternative Education Programs

Creation Date: 12-17-2019

End Date: 2-17-2021

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Dragone

Review Board: St John's University Institutional Review Board

Sponsor:

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### Study History

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Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Expedited	Decision	<b>Approved</b>
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## APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORMS



**Title of Study:** Making a Difference by Being Different: An Examination of Factors that Contribute to Student Success in Alternative Education Settings

**Investigator:** Elizabeth Dragone

### **Introduction**

You are being asked to participate in a research study that examines the factors that contribute to the success of students in an alternative education setting. This study will be completed by Elizabeth Dragone, a doctoral student at St. John's University in the School of Education under the guidance of Dr. Catherine DiMartino, dissertation mentor. You were selected to participate in this study due to your association with an alternative education setting. Please read this entire form and ask any questions before agreeing to participate in this study.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to examine factors that contribute to student success in alternative education settings. Ultimately, this research will be included in a dissertation toward a Doctorate in Education.

### **Description of the Study Procedures**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked questions about your experience in alternative school setting. Interviews will be audio-taped. You will have the right to request review of audio recordings and the ability to redact any or all portions of your responses. It is expected that your participation will require approximately one hour of time in order to complete the interview.

### **Risks**

There are no known or foreseeable risks to participation in this study.

### **Benefits of Being in the Study**

While there are no expected direct benefits to participating, the findings of this study are intended to inform future mentoring practices in education and will assist the field.

### **Confidentiality**

Your responses will be kept confidential. Confidentiality will be maintained through the use of coded identifiers for all participants. No identifying details will be included in the final report. Audio recordings will be kept in a password protected file and any printed transcripts will be maintained in a locked cabinet by the researcher during and after the study period.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time without affecting your relationship with the investigator of this study or St. John’s University. Your decision will not result in any loss or benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely from the interview at any point during the process; additionally, you have the right to request that the interviewer not use any of your interview material.

**Right to Ask Questions**

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Elizabeth Dragone at [REDACTED]@stjohns.edu. If you like, a summary [SEP] of the results of the study will be sent to you. If you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you can report them to the IRB Chair, Raymond DiGiuseppe at [REDACTED] Alternatively, concerns can be reported by completing a Participant Complaint Form, which can found on the IRB webSummitt <https://www.stjohns.edu/academics/provost/grants-and-sponsored-research/human-participants-irb-animal-use-research>

**Consent**

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.

Subject's Name (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Subject's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator’s Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS



### Semi-Structured Interview Protocol Stakeholder Interview Administrator

#### **Demographics**

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. What is your current role?
3. How long have you been working at this school? Have you ever taught/worked at another type of school?

#### **School Organization**

4. Tell me about the application process. How are students selected/identified for this program?
5. How is the school schedule created? What do you think about the school schedule?
6. How are decisions made? Who has the power to make decisions? Veto decisions?
7. What are the rules in this setting? What happens if a student breaks the rules? What is your involvement with discipline?

#### **School Climate and Culture**

9. How do you think students perceive this setting?
10. Tell me about working with teachers. Describe the relationship you have with colleagues, teachers and/or other professionals in this setting.
11. What are the attitudes of your students regarding school?

**Academics**

12. How are grades determined? What do you think of grading procedures?

13. How do students demonstrate what they know?

16. Are students' interests considered in academic planning?

**Conclusion/Member Check:**

14. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

15. Do you feel the need to clarify any of your statements?



## Semi-Structured Interview Protocol Teacher Interview

### **Demographics**

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. What is your current teaching area?
3. How long have you been teaching at this school? Have you ever taught at another type of school?

### **School Organization**

4. How are students selected/identified for this program?
5. How is the school schedule created? What do you think about the school schedule?
6. How are decisions made? Who has the power to make decisions? Veto decisions?
7. What are the rules in this setting? What happens if a student breaks the rules? What is your involvement with discipline?
8. What types of professional development are offered?

### **School Climate and Culture**

9. How do you think students perceive this setting?
10. Tell me about working with your colleagues. Describe the relationship you have with colleagues.
11. What are the attitudes of your students regarding school?
12. What is your general attitude regarding work?

## **Academics**

13. How are grades determined? Does behavior have an impact on grades?
14. Describe the process of lesson planning? Do you work in collaboration with colleagues on academic planning?
15. How do students demonstrate what they know?
16. Are students' interests considered in academic planning?

## **Conclusion/Member Check:**

14. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?
15. Do you feel the need to clarify any of your statements?

**APPENDIX D: OBSERVATION PROTOCOL**



**Observation Protocol**

Observer: \_\_\_\_\_ Setting: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_ Time of Write-up: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Physical Description of Setting</b>	<b>Direct Observation of Events</b>	<b>Observer Comments/Reflections</b>

Adapted from Stake (1995)

**APPENDIX E: DOCUMENT REVIEW PROTOCOL**



**Document Review Protocol**

<b>Document Selected</b>	<b>Description of Data Analyzed</b>	<b>Key Words/Ideas/Themes</b>

Adapted from Bowen (2009)

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## Vita

Name	<i>Elizabeth A. Dragone</i>
Baccalaureate Degree	<i>Bachelor of Science, University of Scranton, Scranton Majors: Counseling &amp; Human Services and English</i>
Date Graduated	<i>May, 2003</i>
Other Degrees and Certificates	<i>Master of Science, Fordham University, New York City Major: Therapeutic Interventions</i>
	<i>Professional Diploma in School Psychology (2007)</i>
Date Graduated	<i>May, 2007</i>
	<i>Advanced Certificate in Educational Leadership, State University of New York at Stony Brook, Stony Brook</i>
Date Graduated	<i>May, 2014</i>