

# Exploring Student Experiences within the Alternative High School Context

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## Author's Note

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## Abstract

This paper describes a phenomenological study that explored the experiences of off-campus high school graduates. Twenty students participated in individual, tape-recorded interviews, during which they described their experiences, yielding written protocols that were thematically analyzed. Results from this study revealed five predominant themes that included the following: (a) ambiance (b) sense of belonging, (c) pedagogical skill, (d) program flexibility, (e) self-awareness. Findings and implications for educators, administrators, and future research are included.

Keywords: alternative, education, qualitative, research

## Résumé

Cet article décrit une étude phénoménologique qui a exploré les expériences hors-campus d'élèves diplômés de l'école secondaire. Vingt étudiants ont participé, individuellement, à des entretiens enregistrés au cours desquels ils ont décrit leurs expériences, ce qui a donné des protocoles écrits qui ont été analysés thématiquement. Les résultats de cette étude ont révélé cinq thèmes prédominants : (a) ambiance (b) sentiment d'appartenance, (c) compétence pédagogique, (d) flexibilité du programme, et (e) conscience de soi. Les conclusions et les implications pour les éducateurs, les administrateurs, et les recherches à venir sont incluses.

Mots-clés : alternatif, éducation, qualitatif, recherche

### **Exploring Student Experiences within the Alternative High School Context**

As Canadian society changes, so follows the educational landscape. D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) remark on this transformation in relation to contemporary adolescent learners and contend that adolescent learners are more diverse in terms of their backgrounds, interests, learning styles, and motivations. Consequently, these authors conclude, "school officials must address these differences by thinking outside the box and creating alternative education settings that acknowledge the fact that not everyone can learn in the traditional classroom setting" (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009, p. 211).

Despite the rich history of alternative education (Mintz, Solomon, & Solomon, 1995), this form of education remains virtually unknown and somewhat enigmatic within Canada. In fact, a literature search revealed only one peripheral Canadian-based source produced by Vadeboncoeur (2009). In an attempt to begin filling this void, this paper discusses a phenomenological study that explored the experiences of learners who had graduated from a Canadian off-campus high school (hereinafter referred to as alternative). The purpose of this study was threefold: (1) To afford learners with an opportunity to share their academic experiences; (2) To provide preliminary information regarding this unique brand of high school education; and (3) To prompt interest and future research in the area of alternative education.

#### **Alternative Education: A Historical Review**

Contemporary alternative education boasts a long and colorful history (Mintz, 1995). According to Miller (1995) alternative education can be traced back to three European philosopher/educators: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, and Friedrich Froebel. Rousseau's 1762 influential book on alternative education and Pestalozzi's work in the early 1800s is cited by Miller who also acknowledges the early work of Maria Montessori in the early 1900s. Kim and Taylor (2008) speak to the gradual shifting interest in alternative education. Notwithstanding its impressive history, Miller notes that, "It was during the 1960s that alternative education grew into a widespread social movement" (p. 40). This unique brand of education was essentially developed to resist the impulse to standardize and mechanize learning (Miller, 2005) and to provide an educational setting conducive to non-traditional education and learning. In comparison to a regular or *normal* education that teaches to the mass, alternative education primarily offers students the opportunity to learn within their own style and at their own pace.

Although various forms of alternative education have emerged over the years, two enduring characteristics have remained consistent. First, alternative schools have been designed to meet the needs of individuals who have not been optimally served by traditional education and, second, alternative education has represented varying degrees of departure from standard school organization (Raywid, 1994). Despite its growth, value, and popularity throughout the world, a negative connotation continues to loom over alternative education. Kim and Taylor (2008) elaborate,

Public alternative schools presently run by school districts struggle with negative stigmas as dumping grounds or warehouses for at-risk students who are falling

behind, have behavioral problems, or are juvenile delinquents. These stigmas are some of the biggest obstacles barring the success of alternative education (p. 207).

As with most non-traditional or innovative endeavors, a lack of knowledge and a misunderstanding regarding alternative education can perpetuate a misperception. As described below, there several types of alternative education.

### **Types of Alternative Education**

Although variations of alternative education reside within the public system (Miller, 1995), three primary models exist (Raywid, 1994). Type I, otherwise known as Popular Innovations, reflects organizational and administrative departures from traditional educational models. Type II, otherwise known as Last-Chance Programs, are programs to which students are sent prior to expulsion. These programs include in-school suspension programs, time-out rooms, and long-term placements. Raywid (1994) notes that these programs have been likened to soft jails and focus on behavior modification principles. Finally, Type III, otherwise known as Remedial Focus Programs, are designed for students who require remediation or rehabilitation. These programs are based on the assumption that students will eventually return to a mainstream program. Raywid (1994) acknowledges that particular programming can be a mix of the aforementioned models. In essence, Types II and III rest on the assumption that the problem lies within the student whereas Type I assumes that difficulties may be a result of a poor student-school match and thus, a change in program and environment may alter a student's performance and achievement. It is worth noting that despite the archaic nature of types II and III, these models are still utilized.

To build on existing information and to advance knowledge regarding alternative education a phenomenological research orientation was selected for this study. This qualitative orientation was chosen in order to provide co-researchers an opportunity to share and expound on their experience. It was assumed that a conversation-based method of inquiry would encourage dialogue, invite a deeper description of experiences, and elicit valuable information. The benefits (e.g., self-acknowledgment, sense of purpose, self-awareness) associated with providing co-researchers the opportunity to articulate their experience was also recognized (Hutchinson, Wilson, & Wilson, 1994). What follows is a brief overview of phenomenology and the interpretive process inherent in this research orientation.

### **Phenomenology: An Overview**

Phenomenology is primarily associated with the foundational writings of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1970, 1973) who believed that science needed to restore its contact with deeper human issues, and his ultimate interest was exploring the roots of all knowledge. Consequently, phenomenological research searches for a deeper understanding and insightful descriptions of experiences that can be shared by co-researchers. Phenomenologists do not seek universal laws that propel behavior but rather, work toward describing subjective experiences that mediate behavior. Thus, by gaining

insight into individual experiences, they can begin to appreciate both the commonality and the uniqueness of human behavior.

Although a phenomenological orientation does not offer a theory with which to explain the experiences of co-researchers, it provides a way of arriving at insights into their world. Osborne (1990) contends that the intention of phenomenological research is not to test a hypothesis but rather to ask a question, allowing the data to speak for itself. A phenomenological orientation affords researchers the latitude to uncover the interactional experiences of co-researchers. Phenomenological research involves a respiration process thus, producing a recursive pattern of data gathering, interpretation, dependability, modification, and further data gathering as co-researchers and researcher interact. During phenomenological research, the descriptions of experiences are analyzed in order to uncover the structures of experience constituted in consciousness. Since the structure and order of meaning are difficult to describe, the purpose of phenomenological research is to generate clear, systematic, and precise descriptions of the meaning of the experience (Polkinghorne, 1983).

### **Interpretation of Stories**

The interpretive process cannot be denied within phenomenology and is central to the data analysis process. As noted by van Manen (1990), "Actually, it has been argued that all description is ultimately interpretation" (p. 25). As meaningful stories are shared, there is an ongoing process involving language and the interpretation of language. As such, the phenomenological text is interpretative in that it mediates (van Manen, 1990). Consequently, researchers are not outside the research dialogue but rather integrally entwined. As noted by Varela (1984), there is no method which can extract us from the tangled loops of interaction. An interesting aspect of conversation is that one never knows where it will end and who is at the helm. Because conversation is a co-production, there is no set route or destination. Conducting a research interview is simply not a matter of chunks of information being transmitted between people. More accurately, the conversational process is participatory, collaborative, and aesthetically rich.

### **Co-Researchers**

Several authors have discussed the issue of a smaller sample size in qualitative research (Morse, 1994; Ray, 1994; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007; Sandelowski, 1995). According to Sandelowski (1995), "Adequacy of sample size in qualitative research is relative, a matter of judging a sample neither small nor large per se, but too small or too large for the intended purposes of sampling and for the intended qualitative product" (p. 179). The purpose of this present study was to embark on an intense analysis of the rich descriptions provided by the co-researchers.

Criteria for co-researcher selection included individuals who (a) had graduated from the alternative high school, (b) were willing to share their experiences, and (c) were willing to illuminate the phenomenon of interest.

The recruitment of co-researchers was random and originated with a telephone call from the program counsellor. During the telephone call, individuals were informed about the purpose of the study and were invited to participate in research interviews. It

was explained that the purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the experiences of students who had graduated from the alternative high school program. To accommodate their schedules, co-researchers were informed that the interviews would be conducted at their preferred time. Space was allocated for interviews at the alternative high school and permission was obtained from co-researchers to audio-tape the interviews. Twenty co-researchers participated in the study which consisted of 14 males and six females. Of the 20 co-researchers, four were of First Nations and Aboriginal decent. Narrative collection occurred over a 6-month period.

This study began with an indeterminate number of co-researchers and interviews continued until redundancy among the narratives was heard. It should be noted that although additional co-researchers could have been recruited, it appeared unlikely that new information would be revealed based on the striking commonalties among co-researcher narratives. When new descriptions regarding the phenomenon no longer emerged, it was determined that a saturation point had been reached and consequently, the collection phase of this study ended.

## **Procedure**

### **Interview**

The interview format was based on a three-phase model proposed by Osborne (1990) and included (1) the establishment of rapport, (2) sharing of narratives, and (3) appropriate closure. During the engagement process with the co-researchers, roles were clarified and issues of confidentiality and anonymity were reviewed. To encourage co-researcher participation, the actual interviews were open-ended, minimally structured, and without time limitations.

Each individual interview was approximately one to one and one-half hours in duration, and each interview was conducted by the author in person. All interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed verbatim. The initial statement made to the co-researchers was as follows: "Please describe for me as completely as possible your experience as a student in the alternative high school program." Following this request, the co-researchers were invited to reflect and elaborate on their experiences for further articulation. To enhance research credibility, the co-researchers were asked to clarify and confirm experiences during the course of the interview. When the co-researchers appeared to become detached from the topic, they were gently re-directed with such comments as: "Can you share more about what that was like for you?" When the co-researchers' experiences had been fully articulated, the following question was asked: "Is there anything else that you would like to add that has not yet been addressed?"

### **Stages of Analysis**

To synthesize the co-researchers experiences into a logical and coherent whole, narrative analysis was based on guidelines set forth by Morrissette (1999) as described below (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Overview of the Data Analysis Process*

Step	Description
Step 1	The interview as a whole
Step 2	The interview as text
Step 3	First order thematic extraction
Step 4	Second order thematic cluster
Step 5	Individual co-researcher protocol synthesis
Step 6	Overall synthesis of co-researchers' protocols
Step 7	Between co-researchers analysis

First, immediately after each interview, the audiotape was carefully listened to and reviewed in an attempt to gain an awareness of the experiences described by the co-researchers.

Second, each interview was transcribed into a written protocol and was then read in its entirety several times. During final readings of the entire protocol, significant co-researcher statements were extracted, paraphrased, and assigned a meaning.

Third, the significant statements, paraphrased meanings, and thematic descriptors were placed in a tabular form and were referred to as the First Order Thematic Abstraction of each co-researcher experience (see Table 2). This step was essential in order to capture the unique experiences of the co-researchers and to compare experiential similarities and differences among the co-researchers.

Table 2  
*First Order Thematic Extraction of Amanda's Experience*

Excerpts from transcribed interview	Paraphrase	Themes
When I wanted to come back to school he (teacher) was the most supportive person I have ever had around me. It was a real personal thing for me. He	Teachers demonstrate a genuine concern/commitment	Meaningful relationships

wanted me to come there personally. He wanted me to get my high school diploma. If it wasn't for () I would not have done it, I would have never made it.

We talked about life there. They don't act so much as a traditional teacher, you know. They are more of a mentor. They don't look at you as just a student. They try to be your friend as best as they can without compromising anything and you could really share things with them. They want to help you but you really have to want to do it yourself.

You are not worried about what other people are doing or what other people are thinking. It is very casual you can literally shut down and be yourself

You learn from experience that that's just not who you want to be. You want to make a better life

The ability of teachers to function in different roles **in** order to meet different student needs. Teacher skill and competency

A relaxing environment helped learners relax and be themselves Ambiance of acceptance

Increased introspection occurs with time and experience Self awareness

Fourth, a Second Order Thematic Cluster was developed that involved clustering identified co-researcher themes (as found in the First Order Thematic Abstractions). Once established, this information was placed in tabular form and a general description for each cluster was provided (see Table 3). These descriptions reflect the essence of the experience within the prepared themes of each co-researcher. These thematic clusters formed the basis for synthesizing the co-researchers' experiences.

Table 3

*Second Order Thematic Clusters of Tyler's Experience*

First order clusters	Cluster Description
1. A second chance	The alternative school program provided Tyler with an opportunity to eventually achieve his goal of obtaining a high school diploma.
2. Forming relationships	Tyler was influenced by the level of respect, encouragement, and support he received while completing his academic program.
3. Introspection	While completing his studies, Tyler took the opportunity to reflect on his past experiences, present circumstances, and future prospects.

Fifth, a within-person's analysis was developed. This analysis involved summarizing each co-researcher's overall experience. While completing this process, various themes surfaced and brought the researcher back to the original text and to the overall story that was described.

Sixth, the various themes that emerged from each interview were reflected upon. This process provided another way of understanding the essential structure of each co-researcher's experience while discerning the uniqueness of his or her experience. The resulting overview provided an opportunity to compare experiences in a descriptive format and to relate these descriptions to existing research.

Seventh, the clustered themes for all co-researchers were presented in a grid format. The purpose of this format was to provide a quick visual reference regarding specific themes within each co-researcher's experience. This process was helpful when comparing experiences among co-researchers and in formulating a global picture of their experience.

### **Trustworthiness of the Study**

The fact that researchers frequently select topics that are personally meaningful is well documented in the qualitative research literature (Berg, 1995). Consequently, working toward achieving trustworthiness is essential to qualitative research. Nutt and Morrow (2009) underscore the importance of trustworthiness and contend,

You may have just completed the most clearly articulated, reasoned, and balanced qualitative study in the history of psychotherapy research; however, if you cannot clearly communicate what you have found and why it matters, we suggest that your study is not considered trustworthy. (p. 580)

Presuppositions and biases toward the phenomenon had to be identified and bracketed prior to the commencement of the research. Fischer (2009) elaborates on the concept of bracketing and writes,

Bracketing typically refers to an investigator's identification of vested interests, personal experience, cultural factors, assumptions, and hunches that could influence how he or she views the study's data. For the sake of viewing data freshly, these involvements are placed in "brackets" and "shelved" for the time being as much as possible. (p. 583)

The purpose of bracketing was not to achieve a state of absolute disinterest or objectivity, but rather to realize how personal interests in the topic could influence the research activity (Colaizzi, 1978). In short, beliefs about the phenomenon under study were stated and temporarily set aside so as not to obstruct a view of the narratives (Kvale, 1996).

The dependability/audibility of this study was based on a decision trail (Koch, 1994) that involved coherent presentation, including (a) described interest in the study, (b) purpose of the study, (c) co-researcher selection, (d) narrative collection and its time line, (e) the context of the interviews, and (f) narrative analysis. To enhance credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), co-researchers consulted during the collection phase of the study. This process enhanced accuracy by providing co-researchers with opportunities to add or clarify information.



### Research Question

The research question that was asked in this study was: What was your experience within the alternative high school program?

### Results

When analyzing the research findings five predominant themes emerged. Each theme is discussed below and includes (a) ambiance (b) sense of belonging, (c) pedagogical expertise, (d) program flexibility, (e) self-awareness. The way in which the themes recurred was striking thus, suggesting similar experiences. Fictitious names have been used to protect co-researcher identity.

#### Theme I: Ambiance

The program's non-intimidating, and supportive atmosphere was instrumental in alleviating co-researchers' trepidation regarding their return to school. The physical arrangement and mood of the learning environment provided an inviting and safe atmosphere. Various elements and gestures, that were both subtle and obvious, contributed to an inviting atmosphere. Regarding the former, Jim remarked on the polite manner of the teachers and staff. Debbie described the program as peaceful and noted,

*If you explained why it took you longer to finish your work they never criticized you and they thanked you for letting them know that you need help. They were very comforting. If I wasn't there for a while, they would say "Hey there stranger, OK, let's get you started on your work."*

It became evident that the co-researchers valued the disposition and outgoing attitude of teachers and staff. As a result, they eventually became comfortable disclosing and sharing personal issues that impacted their learning. Hansen (1998) speaks to the notion of classroom harmony and being together in a substantive moral way. He goes on to say, "to work together means developing dispositions of patience of listening, of attentiveness to contrasting views, of sensitivity to human detail and nuance, and a great deal more that fuels the growth of a person who can dwell in harmony with other people" (p. 392).

In essence, there were opportunities during one-on-one conversations and group discussions to refine interpersonal communication/social skills while sharing career and educational aspirations. It appeared that this experience was influential in helping these young people challenge their previous view of self and their ability to integrate and establish meaningful relationships. Sam noted that, *Everyone was interested in what I was going to do after graduating and they were interested in helping me get to that goal...* Jim added, *I could be myself and didn't have to be cool. In all my years of high school I don't think I have had a better experience.*

What could be described as *emotional safety* frequently surfaced as the co-researchers recounted their experiences. The notion of a secure base has been addressed by van Dijken (1998) in her exposé regarding the early life of John Bowlby and progressive education. Co-researchers described how they were able to relax and how

they actually began to enjoy learning within an environment wherein they felt respected and supported. Bill reflected on his experience and stated,

*They treat you as they would want to be treated. It's a huge respect level that they give you. And that's a big deal. Adam spoke to the caring attitude of teachers and remarked, The teachers were always there for you. They would always stick with you. The teachers treat everyone the same, there are no favorites here.*

Lydia described the program as *chilled* and appreciated the impartiality of the program,

*I didn't feel like the lower person on the chain like I usually did in classes where I was like the slower student and everyone else was ahead... I felt like I was just another person here and I could blend in more easily.*

Trevor liked the respectful way in which staff and teachers spoke to him. He reported *feeling like someone*.

Interestingly, the co-researchers mentioned the absence of distractions within the open learning environment. When queried, they revealed an unwritten code of respect among learners, teachers, and staff. Learners understood that their peers voluntarily chose to return to school for a variety of personal reasons. Moreover, they realized that their peers were focused on obtaining their high school diploma while working and/or fulfilling familial/parental responsibilities.

Co-researchers referred to an unspoken structure and a sense of purpose within a relaxed environment. This description is addressed by Raywid (1994) who states, "the school's social order becomes dependent on norms rather than on rules, and far more collaborative effort occurs among both students and staff than in other schools" (p.29).

In reference to the ambiance Trish commented, *it's welcoming and warm and makes you feel good that you are actually getting things done. It was very supportive*. As discussed later, the reality of life without a high school diploma was realized and there was a sense of maturity, personal agency, and urgency among learners.

## **Theme II: Sense of Belonging**

The initial greeting and warm welcome had a significant impact on the majority of co-researchers. Most co-researchers experienced trepidation and did not know what to expect when arriving for registration and orientation. They discussed arriving at the program with unfavorable memories of former educational experiences. Several described feeling marginalized and isolated while others discussed the dissonance they experienced when faced with remembering less-than-favorable experiences and a desire to obtain a high school diploma. Embedded in these narratives was an emotional struggle to move beyond their past experiences and embark on a new beginning.

Being immediately welcomed and embraced by the teachers and staff contributed to a sense of acceptance and belonging. The co-researchers underscored the importance of this first impression and how it contributed to their perception of their new learning environment as a *place of their own*. According to the co-researchers, the teachers set the stage for success through their tone, demeanor, and approachability. Norm recalled

arriving at the school and said, *The first day was kind of scary but the teachers were really approachable, talked to me, and let me in the school... I felt comfortable after I spoke to them.* Similarly, Carl remarked,

*I was kind of nervous because I didn't know what it would be like. But I arrived, Mr. \_\_\_\_ shook my hand and told me to sit wherever I wanted to. He said that there was coffee in the back, if I wanted to have a drink and to ask for help... I wasn't expecting him to shake my hand.*

Feeling accepted and embraced by the teachers, Larry discovered that he *didn't dread going there like my old schools.*

Along with feeling accepted by teachers and staff, the co-researchers also reported benefitting from a sense of community within the alternative program. The significance of community and trust in the classroom has been identified (Hansen, 1998; Swaminathan 2004). It became apparent that the teachers and staff devoted considerable time and energy into cultivating a strong sense of community among students and between students and themselves. Swaminathan (2004) speaks to the concept of place-identity and suggests that students' ownership or affinity to school spaces can contribute, "to a sense of identification, commitment, integration, and alliances among students and faculty" (p. 33). Raywid (1994) also emphasizes the importance of alternative schools membership and writes, "Membership is what makes students speak of alternative schools as caring places and liken their school to family" (p. 29). The bond that students experienced was exemplified by Bill who stated, *every time I get a chance I drop in to see the teachers.*

As they began to settle into the program, new relationships began to slowly take root. Barb commented, *I felt like there were other people in my situation and people that I didn't even realize would be going there.* As alluded to earlier, several co-researchers described how they felt like outcasts during their previous school experience and consequently, the sense of community within the alternative program was critical to their decision to stay; particularly, during difficult times.

### **Theme III: Pedagogical Expertise**

By far the most common theme discussed by co-researchers related to the teacher-student mentoring relationship. This finding supports Hansen's (1996) position that, "the most important factor in teaching is the individual human being who occupies the role of teacher" (p. 392) Brenda remarked on the warm personalities of the teachers and staff and remarked, *I don't know if I can put it down to one memorable moment, but just building relationships with the teachers.* She went on to say,

*They were nice through every situation. Everyone gave me the time to do my work. Sometimes it would be like I was working on something for two weeks and I hadn't been to school in awhile and they realized that I was working and they just kind of understood what I was going through.*

The aforementioned comment speaks to the intuition and sensitivity of the teachers. It also highlights the congruency of these professionals. Based on the co-researchers narratives, one appreciates the ability of teachers to quickly assess the emotional disposition of their young learners, attend to subtle details, and respond accordingly. As noted by Hansen (1996) the ability to accommodate students requires skill and a certain disposition. Throughout their narratives, the emphasis teachers placed on engagement and relationship building surfaced.

Co-researchers benefited from speaking with teachers and seeking their advice regarding life choices and future plans. They described an inherent ability of teachers to support and guide them without becoming judgmental or overbearing. Frank stated that the teachers helped him become an adult in an adult world because he didn't want to be a little kid anymore. Cindy recounted,

*The teachers were easy to approach and you talk to them one on one. And they could help you individually. Yea, I basically told the teachers... they knew my life situation and I don't know. I was relieved that I could talk to them about other things other than school.*

Although not mentioned directly the element of trust between teachers and learners was addressed by Bill who remarked,

*We talked about life there. They don't act so much as a traditional teacher, you know. They are more of a mentor. They don't look at you just as a student. They try to be your friend as best they can without compromising anything and you could really share things with them. They want to help you but you really have to want to do it yourself.*

It appeared that as the teachers and staff developed a trusting relationship with the co-researchers, these professionals also gained their confidence and thus, the ability to guide their learners in terms of life and career choices.

Some co-researchers alluded to being vulnerable and in transition. Trevor observed that the support he received was very personal. He went on to say that the teachers saw past his reputation, the problems he had encountered, and in short order knew that the teachers were invested in his goal of completing high school. The importance of person in the role of the teacher is apparent in the aforementioned narratives. Hansen (1998) contends, "In order to promote learning, teachers must develop certain kinds of relationships with students, and they must construct certain kinds of environments in the classroom (p. 392). Brenda noted that she initially expected much less but over time she learned how to remain on track and become self motivated. She described her learning process as a right of passage,

*The teachers tracked me and saw potential in me. They took an interest in my life, not just school. They got to know me. They provided direction regarding future opportunities and made me realize that I could do more. I am a reacher not a settler.*

Jim shared,

*I just didn't know about myself... if I would come to the challenge and get it done and everything like that because I wasn't sure if I would be pushed enough but they pushed me just enough that I would get things done... This way I was learning things I was actually slowing down enough that I could take the time to realize what the teachers were saying without just going through and saying, OK I got to figure out this answer or I'm not going to pass...*

#### **Theme IV: Program Flexibility**

The program was described as both structured and flexible. The inherent flexibility of the program emerged in two distinct ways. First, students remarked on the willingness of teachers to transition from formal instruction to conversation about personal issues or struggles. Bill noted,

*It's almost like they don't even have to think about it – it just automatically you know. They can go from helping you out with something and then without a blink they're into let's talk and see how you're doing.*

Students discussed the need to discuss an issue or problem in order to regain focus on the educational task at hand. Rather than ruminate, with the support of a teacher students were able to process their concerns. Barry revealed that, *some things just cloud my mind and I need to talk to someone and I just talk to them*. A consequence of this interaction was a stronger and more respectful relationship between student and teacher.

The willingness and ability of teachers to enter into this process speaks to their genuine interest in overall student development and ability to function effectively under uncertain conditions (Hansen, 1998). Since participation in the program was voluntary, their need to discuss personal issues with teachers was not a delay or distraction tactic. Rather, students were fully aware of their schedule, program expectations, and what they had to accomplish in order to graduate. In essence, the ability to proceed academically appeared to hinge on the need to first process life events and circumstances. This process seemed instrumental in helping co-researchers regain focus.

Second, students commented on the structure and expectation of the program. Despite being relaxed, students appreciated clear expectations of what they needed to do in order to meet their objectives and succeed. Several co-researchers pointed out that they had a better idea of what to do with clear expectations. Debbie explained,

*When I walked in I had no idea about where I stood with my schooling. They had it right there in front of me and told me what I had to finish. I found that I was closer than I thought... They were very prepared. They had the things that you needed right there.*

Frank stated,

*You're not second place to anything. If you need help with one specific thing they will do it and if they need help they will call in who they need to get that done.*

Realizing these expectations appeared to foster a greater sense of independence and self-motivation.

The different learning styles and a need for independence became evident through co-researcher discourse. For example, Stanley said, *If someone tells me what to do, I won't do it.* Adam disclosed, *"As long as you don't pressure me - I get the work done."* The programs' flexibility allowed students to learn at their own pace and fostered their unique learning styles. Hansen (1998) writes, "In order to promote learning, teachers must develop certain kinds of relationships with students, and they must construct certain kinds of environments in the classroom. Moreover, to perform such tasks is a matter of both skill and of disposition" (p. 392). This sentiment is shared by Jackson (2010) who suggests that teachers should start where their students are and posits, "you communicate to students that it's OK to be exactly who they are" (p. 10).

The co-researchers referred to the inherent variety within the alternative program. They appreciated the opportunity for self expression and being able to think outside the box. Jim summarized this sentiment,

*Everyone gave me the time to do my work...People didn't stand in my way... I mean things caught on more better, I don't know, most of the time I am slower to catch onto things so they kind of broke things down and showed me. I mean they don't pressure you to get things done on time, they let me do it on my own time even though it took longer than I expected. Without the pressure, I figured out the best method ... I found out that I work better in the classroom setting than on my own. It was the fact that if I needed help I did not have to go far.*

### **Theme V: Self Awareness**

There were several reasons why students returned to complete their high school education. For example, Jeremy summed it up by saying that, *it was the right thing to do at the right time.* Cam reported,

*This place gave me a chance to focus and get things done and it also gave me a chance to reflect on myself. As I was starting to study a little bit more and getting my work done, I was thinking that maybe I could actually go to college and try and go for a career.*

Trish saw it as, *Second chance in life and a chance to help yourself.* A common factor pertained to personal pride and the opportunity to prove to others (particularly family) that they could persist and succeed. Some co-researchers shared that they were burdened by feelings of guilt about disappointing their parents and significant others when they dropped out of school. Others struggled with the thought of being looked down on by society. Consequently, returning to school helped students redeem themselves and experience a sense of empowerment and psychological freedom. Trish recalled,

*I didn't want to look like a failure to my family so I came back here to get my diploma. I don't want my children to get the mixed message that they won't have to care for school or try. I didn't try very hard in high school and I screwed myself because of it.*

Similarly Trevor shared,

*I quit school two years ago and I wanted to make a difference. I just decided that I had enough of people looking down on me and I decide to go and get my grade 12. They kind of looked at me like a failure, I don't know, I just feel proud to tell people that I graduated from this program.*

The decision to return to school also provided students with a sense of accomplishment and perhaps more importantly, empowerment. Lydia described benefiting from the encouragement of others,

*Everyone felt that I could do it... like everyone in my family and stuff thinks that I'm smart but I had dropped out of school so many times... my life was kind of screwed up at the time. I just wanted to prove everyone wrong and impress myself and other people.*

*It was a good time to do it, I don't know when I turned eighteen I just went crazy for about a year just like partying and stuff like that and then a couple of my friends moved away and I just kind of felt like I had to do something and move forward. Actually I just called a teacher last week about university because I don't know how to get started but I really want to go back to school and get a career*

Having been away from school and experiencing life had a definite influence on students and shaped the way in which they approached the academic responsibility. There was a sense of urgency, determination, and maturity. Jim explained,

*High school was a learning experience for me...by the time I got here I was ready to sit back and do my work. Just coming here and working seemed to make a lot of other things much better ... I could forgot about things going on the outside and I would come here and work and feel good and actually getting things done.*

Bill summarized his participation in the program by remarking, *it was a stepping stone that I needed to get anywhere.*

As mentioned earlier, participation in the alternative program afforded students the opportunity to reflect on previous choices, their current circumstances, and future aspirations. The timing factor was important for students. Belinda described the program as a beacon of light and pivotal in her life. Larry reported,

*I was pissed off for awhile and then I realized that I should just start focusing on the future instead of self-destructing and just getting pissed off and finding*

*temporary solutions and I should find a permanent solution and that would be to get high school done and move on to something else. When I came here it helped me a lot because it made it a lot easier to get it done.*

A wall that displayed the names of program graduates served as a motivating factor for co-researchers. The co-researchers commented that the display reminded them of their ultimate goal and provided initiative to graduate. As Trevor mentioned, “seeing others graduate and succeed - I wanted that.

### Discussion

A discussion of this study’s findings should first address its perceived significance. It can be argued that the study was important on two levels. First, it appeared that the co-researchers profited in different ways from sharing their experiences. Hutchinson, Wilson, and Wilson (1994) outline various ways in which co-researchers can potentially benefit from participating in research interviews (e.g., self-acknowledgement, sense of purpose, self-awareness, empowerment) and suggest that such interviews can provide a voice for the disenfranchised and thereby, “give a voice to the voiceless” (p. 164). While sharing their experiences, several co-researchers described feeling good about providing information that could benefit learners and future program development. In essence the process provided them with a sense of purpose.

This reaction also relates to the aforementioned theme pertaining to a sense of community. Clearly these young people profited from their determination and commitment and in the end, received their high school diploma. What stands out, however, was their eagerness to reciprocate and give back to people who helped them move closer to their personal aspirations. Moreover, these young people were willing to become vulnerable while sharing a sensitive aspect of their life journey with an outsider in order to support and promote the alternative school program. The latter observation speaks to the issue of maturation and the possible affect this variable plays in learner focus and success. As alluded to by some co-researchers, their eventual return to school was influenced by their life and work experiences without a high school diploma. For these learners, the career opportunities were bleak and the realities of life were sobering. The decision to work toward their high school diploma was a serious matter which these individuals fully embraced.

Co-researchers also were fascinated with hearing themselves speak and describe their experiences—particularly during the auditing process when a portion of the audiotape was replayed for clarification. Some co-researchers commented that preparing for the interview prompted them to think about their accomplishments and an elevated position of being able to share information as a graduate. In essence, the process of being interviewed provided a sense of empowerment. This particular reaction echoes a sentiment expressed by Hutchinson, Wilson, and Wilson (1994) who observe, “Telling one’s story and really feeling heard can be empowering for participants. Empowering involves movement and change” (p. 163).

The second important aspect of this research relates to benefits gained by administrators, educators, and society in general. As noted earlier, fueled by a lack of knowledge and understanding a negative connotation continues to loom over alternative



education. There may be a myriad of reasons why people react in an arcane fashion to alternative education. Miller (2005) reminds us that, "First, why do we call various types of innovative or progressive schools *alternative*? The word *alternative* means a choice, an option, that is substantially different from the common or prevailing practice." Due to misconceptions, this brand of education may be marginalized and receive minimal attention. As demonstrated in the results of this study, the latter is very unfortunate since young people can be academically re-engaged via alternative education.

The information provided through this study may be useful in uncovering the advantages of alternative high school education and thus, alter the way in which education is perceived and delivered. For example, this brand of education provides individuals with an opportunity to achieve their high school diploma which in turn, can enhance their employment marketability and educational and apprenticeship options. Said differently, aside from learners' personal development and improved self esteem, alternative education bolsters a young person's ability to contribute to society through gainful employment and advanced education and training.

Notwithstanding the determination of learners to return to school and complete their academic requirements, the role and expertise of teachers and staff cannot be overestimated. According to the results of this study, these professionals were instrumental in co-creating a nurturing environment that maintained academic integrity while re-engaging young people in academics. The ability to accomplish these two critical goals speaks to professional skill, commitment, and vision. While addressing alternative high school education, Recio and Diaz (2010) write,

Although vocational and academic training is important in these programmes, no less important is the personal development of the students, and this is what really impregnates all of the actions undertaken in the programmes. Curricular structures which are inflexible, which are not differentiated and which cannot be adapted do not, therefore, appear to be effective.

It is noteworthy that the co-researchers did not speak directly to the content of what they learned per se (e.g., mathematical skills, writing skills). Rather, the focus of their stories pertained to their learning environment, relationships, and personal growth. Valid arguments can be made from both sides. For example, it can be argued that the results of this study simply reflect the research question. In other words, perhaps the co-researchers would have elaborated on content opposed to process if a different question was asked. Conversely, perhaps the results suggest that the ability to absorb and understand course content is secondary to learners and that learning hinges on the learning environment and interpersonal relationships.

A review of the findings highlights the importance of engaging learners at the point of initial contact and throughout their academic program. As intimated by the co-researchers, relationship needs vary among learners and as a result, the ways in which learners can be engaged is currently being explored. For example, some learners may invite and benefit from a close relationship with teachers whereas other learners do not demonstrate this need. In fact, some learners may function best working independently with minimal teacher support or contact. Assuming that all learners require and benefit from a close relationship with teachers and or staff can create unintentional friction and

result in learner attrition. In short, gaining a better understanding of learner needs and interpersonal preferences at the point of initial contact may provide important clues in how to best engage and respect learner needs and learning styles.

### **Suggestions for Future Investigation**

There is a need for ongoing investigation to better understand alternative high school education. Ideally, this study will prompt future research. For example, differences in gender, culture, and age may be explored. Ultimately, information gathered from such studies can be helpful to administrators, teachers, students and other stakeholders who are invested or curious about this form of education.

### **Limitations of This Study**

In becoming deeply engaged in the phenomenon and experiences of the co-researchers, researchers can be inadvertently influenced by personal subjectivity. Despite the steps which were taken to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study, the subjective nature of this research needs to be acknowledged.

Factors influencing the provision of co-researcher names by the school counsellor were unknown. Although the selection process was efficacious, alternative selection procedures could have been employed. Additionally, criticism could be directed toward the sample size of co-researchers. It should be reiterated, however, that the sample size was not predetermined but rather rested on the recurrence of themes. In fact, smaller sample sizes may afford researchers the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of co-researcher experiences (Sandelowski, 1995). Concern may also be expressed about basing the research findings on a single interview format. An alternative approach could have included multiple interviews to ensure that co-researchers had ample opportunity to further articulate or expand descriptions of their experiences. However, consulting co-researchers during the interview provided them with opportunities to clarify or modify their narratives.

Although common themes that emerged among the co-researchers, no claim to universal generalizability can be made. Conducting similar studies in different locations might provide additional information about the experiences of these learners. The limitations of the present study do not lessen the importance of the findings.

### **Conclusion**

As discovered through this preliminary study, there are several advantages associated with alternative education. While conversing with these young people, it became very obvious that much more was gained than simply obtaining a high school diploma. Perhaps most importantly, the alternative program engaged learners and provided them with opportunities to become introspective while feeling accepted and valued. For some this experience was in sharp contrast with their previous educational experience. Finally, the degree to which the co-researchers described program teachers and staff, speaks volumes about the expertise and commitment of these gifted professionals.

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