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The Effect of the Missouri Safe School Act of 1997 on Alternative Education Students: A Qualitative Analysis

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THE EFFECT OF THE MISSOURI SAFE SCHOOL ACT OF 1997
ON ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Doctor of Philosophy Degree

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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Randall G. Rhodes, for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Education Administration and Higher Education, presented on October 25, 2013, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: THE EFFECT OF THE MISSOURI SAFE SCHOOL ACT OF 1997 ON ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Kathy Hytten

Because of a perceived increase in school related violence, a political reaction occurred in Missouri that led in 1997 to the Missouri Safe Schools Act. This new law significantly changed school disciplinary policy and allowed administrators to move large groups of students to alternative education programs, or expel them to the streets. The purpose of this qualitative study was to learn from students who attended at least one year in an alternative education program about their experiences. I interviewed 26 former students and another 14 former students entered into the conversation by posting their thoughts on a Facebook site for alumni of a specific alternative program. The 40 former students shared common stories that indicated their confusion, a misuse of power by the school district, and a lack of due process surrounding the events that led to their suspensions. At the same time, they shared many stories of relationships, kindnesses, and empathy that they experienced from the alternative school teachers and administrators. Results point to the need for families to educate themselves (and sometimes resist) arbitrary decisions made by school personnel, and the importance of teacher and administrator selection for alternative school programs.

Keywords: alternative education, at-risk, zero tolerance, dropout, safe schools, school-to-prison-pipeline

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
ABSTRACT.....	i
LIST OF TABLES.....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	iv
CHAPTERS	
CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER II – REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	16
CHAPTER III– RESEARCH METHOD.....	62
CHAPTER IV– DATA ANALYSIS FROM FIRST RESEARCH QUESTION.....	86
CHAPTER V – DATA ANALYSIS FROM SECOND RESEARCH QUESTION.....	135
CHAPTER VI– CONCLUSIONS.....	154
REFERENCES.....	172
APPENDICES	
APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW SCHEDULE.....	196
VITA.....	199

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Messages from Individuals on Social Media Site.....	73
Table 2: Individuals Personally Interviewed	74

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Outline of Emergent Categories from Research Question Number One	80
Figure 2: Outline of Emergent Categories from Research Question Number Two.....	81

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Various ideas and reforms have influenced the policies and practices that have created American education. Alternative education or what educators called freedom schools represents one of these ideas. With their origins in Civil Rights Movement (Young, 1990), these schools operated separately from the local public schools, used basic education curriculums, and featured a “democratic” administration rather than control by government or board oversight (Graubard, 1972). Within the last several decades, many alternative schools have changed from innovative curriculums and collective decision making (Raywid, 1981, 1994) to a basic curriculum and an ever-increasing population of students with discipline problems from within the traditional public schools (Aron & Zweig, 2003; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Kupchik, 2010). In support of this transition, both federal and state legislators created laws that have significantly changed the definition and operation of alternative education programs and the educational climate in the United States (Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009).

Educational administrators, legislators, and politically influential organizations supported the passing of the Federal Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 (20 U.S.C. Chapter 70, Sec. 8921) that mandated a year’s suspension for certain weapons and drug crimes. Most state legislatures passed their own comparable legislative initiatives that increased the use of disciplinary policies across the country that resulted in increased suspensions and expulsions of a large group of students. Within the past two decades, the phrases “safe schools” and “zero tolerance” have represented the rationalization and push to tighten and codify school disciplinary policies. The term safe schools refers to a series of state-wide grants created in response to legislative action in many states that provide funds for alternative education programs for students who are

suspended, expelled, or otherwise unserved by the traditional school (Lehr et al., 2009). Various authors define Zero tolerance as “policies that punish all offences severely, no matter how minor” (Skiba & Peterson, 1999, p. 1).

Some researchers and policy advocates viewed these changes as the beginning of a safer and more productive environment for the American education system (Knight & Kneese, 1999; Lambert & McCombs, 1998). Other researchers found that the strict, incarcerel type of changes have had a significant downside (Black, 1999; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985; Kozol, 1991, 1997; Taras et al., 2003). Despite implementation of these federal statutes, the number of students identified as at risk, by either their behavior or by other struggles that effect their ability to be successful in the traditional schools, has remained the same or actually increased in many urban and economically deprived communities (Hughes & Adera, 2006; Knitzer, Steinberg, & Fleisch, 1990; Lehr et al., 2009; North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1997; Skiba, 2000; Skiba, Raush, & Ritter, 2004). No matter which school of thought regarding these changes one supports, the fact remains that there has been an exponential growth of alternative school programs to serve the excluded at-risk student (McKean, 2000).

The word risk originated in the mid-1600s, and defined as exposure to danger, hazard, or peril or relating to someone that “creates or suggests a hazard or adverse chance” (Merriam-Webster, 2013, para. 2). Centuries later, our culture applies the concept of risk in multiple ways, for example, in the constructs of medical risk, environmental risk, and financial risk. In the 1980s, the concept of educational risk evolved to describe students who were in danger, hazard, or peril of academic failure (Johnson, 1994). The educational term “at risk” was first used in 1983 in *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), a report that describes students in danger of leaving school

without the skills needed to help the United States compete in a world market (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2000). Although the population within the modern disciplinary alternative schools is diverse (e.g., by gender, race, and socioeconomic status) by many standards, yet the umbrella definition of the alternative school student body by school administrators is that they are at-risk students (Hughes & Adera, 2006). Another use of the term “risk” by school officials refers to students who are a risk to others in the educational environment and, due to their various behaviors, should be educated in a separate school (Christle et al., 2007).

While popular, some scholars view suspension, expulsion, and alternative school programs critically, suggesting that they are just another stopgap measure in a long line of faulty theories and reforms that continue the long decline of American education from the turn of the century to the present (Dohrn, 1997; Ravitch, 2010; Woods, 1995). According to Dohrn (1997), two major ideas or events have contributed to stranding millions of students in an underclass position and have created an unchanging level of illiteracy in the youth population. The first idea is the establishment of an efficiency or business model for schooling (Callahan, 1962; Jorgenson, 1964; Provenzo, 1990), which the education community accepted beginning in 1930. The second idea is the more recent growth of school crime policy and legislative initiatives, which swept the nation between the years of 1990 and 1996, when the number of juvenile crime reports in the United States tripled (Dohrn, 1997). The sweeping changes in school law and policies made during and following those dates have increased the student dropout rate (Stanard, 2003) and furthered the plight of functionally illiterate and underemployed student dropouts who often turn to criminal activity for sustenance (Christle et al., 2007). Unfortunately, a major difference in the illiterate population 100 years ago and today is the lack of availability of unskilled manual labor and factory work to embrace those without an education. Today, the

criminal justice system is the service delivery system for the stranded or dropout student (Farrington, Gallagher, Morley, Ledger, & West, 1986; Sprott, Jenkins, & Doob, 2005; Thornberry, Moore, & Christenson, 1985).

As part of the broader policy climate to address at-risk students, the Federal Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 provided formula grants to states to support local educational agencies and community-based organizations in developing and implementing programs to prevent drug use and violence among children and youth. To receive funds, states were required to ensure that local districts updated their written disciplinary policies to include strict consequences for behavioral events deemed a danger to the overall student body and to create alternative school programs.

In this dissertation, I examine Missouri's legislative efforts to apply federal guidelines and the effects on students placed in disciplinary alternative schools. Few studies currently exist that describe the effects that school safety initiatives, zero tolerance policies, and contemporary legislation have on students and educational programs (Richart, Brooks, & Soler, 2003; Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riestenberg, 2006; Tebo, 2000). Specifically, we know very little about students who school districts and courts place in alternative educational settings have fared, and the ways in which the alternative educational programs they attended have influenced their lives.

I will be examining safe school and zero tolerance policies and procedures in this study to determine the legislative impact on various segments of the student population, especially those sent to alternative schools in the past ten years. Districts have most often used their safe school funds to tighten security and create separate programs, under the broad heading of alternative schools, for at-risk students with disciplinary problems (Hughes & Adera, 2006). In this study, I

interview students who attended at least one year in an alternative education program in an effort to gather rich, personal descriptions of how the students found themselves in the program, the challenges they confronted prior to graduation, and their current situation seven or more years later. I believe the students' perspectives and insights a number of years outside of their alternative school experience will be valuable to researchers and practitioners largely because there is little longitudinal data on the impact and outcomes of these programs. In addition, from a critical perspective, the voice of students is not present in the literature. This is necessary to understand the full impact of alternative placement, especially to create programs that both meet students' needs and endure future career and life options.

My interest in this study stems from my experiences as a juvenile officer, a position I held when the Missouri Safe School Act became law. At the beginning of the school year, in 1998, a female student who I had supervised while employed as a juvenile court probation officer contacted me. She was very upset, crying, and pleading for my help, which surprised me because I recalled she did not particularly care for me or take my advice while on probation. She stated that while trying to enter school that day, the school principal informed her that she could no longer attend school due to her past status as a juvenile court probationer.

I quickly read a summary of the new law and found that her closed case file showed she had a record of minor misdemeanors and truancy that had brought her under our supervision. The court record indicated none of the major felonies or circumstances that would have brought this student under the exclusionary parameters of the Missouri Safe School Act. In the end, after a short conversation with the school district's attorney, requesting that he educate the principal on the particulars of this new law, the student gained admission back in school. This situation remains vivid in my recollections of the early days of application and misapplications of this law,

and is one of the reasons that I continued to watch for similar misinterpretations, and found many that have influenced the experiences of students with a perceived at-risk label.

Michael Foucault's writings have informed my thinking about the "mechanisms of power" that implicitly undergird the exclusion of at-risk youth from schools (Foucault, 1980, p. 39). The Missouri Safe School Act of 1997 joined (with grant funds) the power of the school authorities, the juvenile court, and school resource officers (law enforcement). I am interested in understanding how this amalgamated power structure, or apparatus, that created the system of disciplinary alternative schools affected and changed the lives of the students who enrolled there. What do their lives look like five to fifteen years later and how do they reflect on how their alternative school experiences shaped their present lives?

Statement of the Problem

The Missouri Safe Schools Act of 1997 echoed an increased national attention on issues of juvenile crime (Bernard, 1992) and documented public concerns about the seeming increase of illegal drug use and violence in schools (Lawrence & Mueller, 2003). High profile school crimes across the United States (including Missouri) added impetus to policy makers, legislators, and school advocacy leaders who played a role in passing this Act. Because of media-covered school shootings across the United States and a perceived increase in school related violence, a political reaction occurred in Missouri that led in 1997 to the Missouri Safe Schools Act, which significantly changed school disciplinary policy.

The Act itself precipitated school policy changes across Missouri that have influenced many interest groups, school administrators, teachers, court officials, and students (Anderson, 1999). Under the new legal and policy umbrella of "safe schools" and "zero tolerance," suspensions and expulsions increased (Christle et al., 2007). New alternative schools and

classrooms became the preferred placement for students deemed a danger to the regular school setting. School administrators also enrolled former school dropouts, pregnant students, and students with Individualized Education Plans (IEP) in the newly funded alternative school programs (Knitzer et al., 1990; Lehr, Lanners, & Lange, 2003).

Although there have been both qualitative and quantitative studies evaluating alternative school programs, an area that requires fuller assessment is the impact of the Federal Gun Free Schools Act. The Missouri Safe Schools Act of 1997 is a law prepared by legislators to be a direct response to this blended crime and educational federal legislation. How students relate and reflect on their alternative school experience is not present in the existing literature and their voice is necessary to examine the full force of the legislation, and the resulting alternative school programs, from a critical perspective.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gather information about the impact of crime and education legislation on students who attended alternative schools in Missouri and to add the voices and perspectives of those students to the literature on alternative education. Based on my own experiences, I know that placement in disciplinary alternative schools has influenced the academic future and livelihoods of at-risk students; it has not simply created safer schools for other students. Since alternative schools have become something other than a pedagogical alternative to the traditional school environment (Lehr et al., 2009), researchers and practitioners must seek to understand their impact on students who attended the modern, disciplinary alternative schools and on those affected in the future.

Research Questions

I used the following research questions to guide this study:

1. How (following the Missouri Safe Schools Act of 1997) do students who attended a Missouri disciplinary alternative education school for at least one year describe the experience of attending these schools?
2. How (following the Missouri Safe Schools Act of 1997) do students who attended a Missouri disciplinary alternative education school for at least one year perceive the impact of their experience on their present life circumstances?

Significance of the Study

The demand for alternative school programs increased in the last twenty years, following the Missouri Safe Schools Act of 1997 and the federal, Gun Free Schools Act of 1994. As Missouri legislators and educators seek to implement, support, and expand successful alternative education, the data and analysis from this study will provide valuable information about the perceptions and experiences of students who have attended alternative schools. This information will also be valuable to educational leaders in other states who face similar challenges identifying and implementing the best educational options for at-risk students.

Gilderhus (2003), supported by other historians (Collingwood, 1946), argues that “to examine the past, remote or recent, is to shed light on our present circumstances” (p. 13). Information on how students make sense of their secondary education after finding themselves displaced from the normal path of traditional school should be of assistance to educational administrators who should be concerned about the far-reaching impact of their policy decisions. For example, this research could help them to develop best practice guidelines for model alternative schools or develop other disciplinary options than those currently in use. It may also be of use to educational administrators and researchers in their efforts to understand the impact of legislation and policy initiatives on select populations.

Although tempted to hear the voices of those who dropped out from the “dropout” school, I think we can draw less ambiguous conclusions from those who have successfully attended for one year, or two consecutive semesters. While the nature of qualitative research is that it is not easily generalizable, the experiences of the students in Missouri likely parallel those students in other states, placed in alternative, disciplinary schools. Moreover, rich data from interviews of those who have successfully attended one of the Missouri disciplinary alternative schools provides information as to where these students are now and how drastic educational policies and procedures affected their lives.

To further support the value of this study, I look to Scott (1998), who speaks of the classical Greek term “*métis*,” that describes, “the knowledge that can only come from practical experience” (p. 6). The practical knowledge that the students acquired while at an alternative school extends further than the subjects and classes they attended. Somehow, these students enrolled for at least a full year in school, and many went on to graduate high school. Yet, the question remains whether they have surpassed the at-risk label and achieved some semblance of a normal life.

Theoretical Assumptions and Positionality

Several years ago, I was program director for four alternative schools in Southeast Missouri. In that role, I wrote the supportive grants, influenced policies and procedures, and maintained statistics on each program’s effectiveness as measured by attendance and disciplinary reports. The record from these alternative schools was that after more than 10 years in business, thousands had attended but only a few hundred graduated. Researchers do not agree on whether any of the modern, disciplinary “alternative” schools are a true alternative, a way around desegregation, or a true choice for those students that school administrators have expelled, or

students who have dropped out (Christle et al., 2007; Lehr et al., 2009; McKean, 2000; Raywid, 1981, 1994; Stanard, 2003; Young-Bruehl, 2012).

After my role as administrator of these schools ended, I read critical theory literature and became aware that students already marginalized by their race, sex, and socio-economic circumstances can experience further marginalization as a result of common banking practices in the classroom. Reproduction theory also resonated with my observances of students both during their education and after they moved out into the world. Through the framework of critical theory, I became interested in knowing how students spent their time in the alternative school, and if they had achieved any of their goals and dreams. This real world look at how these former students have survived (or not), constructed families, employment, and possibly pursued further education could inform and assist other researchers in understanding the outcomes and consequences, both intended and unintended, of alternative schooling. As discussed in LeCompte and Preissle (1993), the social values and controversies that intrigue us are important to what and how we examine and frame our studies. I frame this study with a critical lens because I am interested in how we can best help those students labeled at-risk, and in understanding the kinds of educational systems and structures that best meet their needs.

Diane Ravitch (2010) argued that critically examining educational trends and reforms has purpose in the larger body of educational research and stated that, “the schools cannot solve all our social problems, nor are they perfect. But in a democratic society, they are necessary and valuable for individuals and for the common weal” (p. 6). In her latest work, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*, Ravitch (2010) acknowledges that complaints about school reform have occurred for many decades and gives as an example, William Chandler Bagley’s 1907 work on classroom

management that was critical of “feds and reforms” (Bagley, 1907, p. 243). Inspired by Ravitch (2010), I am interested in how we may create schools that are more democratic and serve all children well.

My research on alternative school students contains influences from my read of Paulo Freire. In “*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*”, Freire (1970) explored the historically Marxist thought that the oppressors use traditional education as a tool, but added that reformed education has the potential to be transformative for both students and teachers. I recall, alternative school students I worked with challenged the administrators for their right to attend graduation ceremonies, sporting events, and the prom with the regular public school students.

Attendees, and occasionally graduates, of the alternative school are a unique population of those who succeed. By this, I mean school administrators blocked many of the attendees of alternative school, historically, from free access to public education. Many alternative schools house youth barred by regular school policy to attend the public school, thereby reproducing what many predict will be a social class of inmates, dropouts, and the unemployed.

An early concern that many school and court administrators had during the formation of these alternative school programs was a reliance on computerized educational programming and a strictly worksheet completion strategy for classroom management (Raywid, 1999). These methods are consistent with the banking concept of education where students merely store deposits made to them by those who Freire (1970) would call the oppressors. In this way, teachers manage the students who learn passivity and conformity. Freire (1970) believed that reform starts by liberating the educators. In the earlier versions of the alternative school model, the student teacher ratio was low and a significant percentage of teachers self selected to teach in that environment; this would have increased the teacher-student dialogue rather than controlling

and creating imperialistic styled classrooms. In the interview component of my study, I collected data on this topic from the students themselves. Here is a sample question from my interview guide: Did they feel they assisted in developing their curriculum and were the conversations, dialogue, and relationships they had with the classroom teachers similar to what they had experienced in the regular school? In the literature review chapter, I will point out that the modern disciplinary alternative schools are far from the idealistic, decentralized alternative programs of the 1960's. Further, the students described banking concepts and lack of meaningful curriculum frequently during the interview process.

Consistent with Freire and other critical theorists of education, Ira Shor (1992) advocated for an investigation into the sociopolitical environment surrounding the student's lives followed by extended dialogue with students before a curriculum can develop. The challenge is to break through the mindset of student's passive behavior, acquired as a reaction to previous classroom experiences. As part of my interviews, I explored the educational experiences of students in alternative schools to see how much their own experiences informed the curriculum they received.

Analyzing the status quo of schooling, Shor (1992) said, "Existing canons cannot be delivered to students as universal standards of excellence because they are the products of undemocratic knowledge making in an unequal academy and society" (p. 256). Our principles and passions are important in making sense out of this critical approach. We should engage in dialogic education out of principle, not because it leads to particular results. In this study, I am examining one clear fact that should carry weight with both the former student and those powers within the academy; some of the students remanded to these programs managed to continue their

education and some even graduated from alternative schools or traditional high schools; something that many in their cohort did not do. How do they now make sense of their world?

For the past seventeen years, I have worked in Missouri Juvenile Courts that house, judicially process, and educate an overrepresentation of the lower socio-economic class and minority populations. The vagaries of the status quo and the fact that the government appears to value prisons over prevention and education have been increasingly disturbing to me. The ways in which schools contribute to reproducing class status were made clearer to me through MacLeod's (1995) work in, "*Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood.*" In the preface of the book, MacLeod (1995) reflects on the basic question, "What happened to these young men?" (p. xi). Echoing Freire's (1970) sense that social conditions significantly influence educational outcomes, MacLeod (1995) writes "To paraphrase Marx, we must understand that teenage peer groups make their own history, but not under circumstances of their own choosing" (p. 150). The paradoxical issue of free will and how much of the students current situation is due to their own choices interests me, especially as I argue in my literature review about the far reaching consequences of the Missouri Safe School Act in invading the lives of students into areas well past the safety issue, effectively blocking many from achievement.

In addition to critical theory, my analysis of disciplinary alternative schools includes the theoretical thought of Michel Foucault, particularly his later work around the concepts of governmentality and the dispositive (Foucault, 1980). Foucault placed the body of the student, criminal, or mental patient, within the dispositive, or apparatus of power created by, "a host of historically contingent rules, statutes, and norms, defined by the customs, practices, and institutions every human being must grow up within" (Miller, 1993, p. 69). The crisis event

created by numerous school shootings in the United States resulted in a virtually unchallenged response by the federal and state governments. Their response was to create the means, through grants, to increase discipline and the resulting punishments within schools. Foucault would see, and I would agree, that the disciplinary alternative schools act as a lower level of confinement, but with increased surveillance, that unfortunately result in more secure environments (jail and prison).

Foucault's later works, and how they were conceptualized by others (Bussolini, 2010; Foucault, 1980, 1998; Miller, 1993; Peters, 2004; Veyne, 1993), inform my theoretical map, as he emphasizes how vague and ambiguous actual lines of power are, particularly after the first bold stroke of law places an individual within an institution, or in this case the alternative school, as a subject. In my experience, many of the students did not know how long they could remain in the alternative schools setting and did not have a good understanding of the choices available to them. The principals from the student's original schools, maintained control over when and if the student was to ever return. The students themselves maintained power in the situation only through the action of dropping out of school completely, which many did.

Each individual holds a certain amount of power in Foucault's (1980) schema to manipulate his or her environment, negotiate, and maneuver within the "apparatus" or institutional power grid (1980). Peters (2004) calls this Foucault's shift from "regimes of truth to games of truth...the emphasis falls on how the human subject constitutes itself by strategically entering into such games and playing them to best advantage" (p. 56). Foucault felt that the apparatus of domination was far more complex than relations between social classes and production. Foucault (1980) encouraged researchers to explore domination and power historically, and genealogically, which in turn, "makes room for human agency in the process of

subject constitution, attending to the local and ‘subjugated knowledges’ marginalized by positivistic sciences and Marxism” (Peters, 2004, p. 84).

This lens of Foucauldian organization and strategies to survive within the institution is one of the things I explored in my analysis of my interviews with the former students. Did they establish congenial relationships with the teachers, administrators, and other students that diminished the risk of further suspension and expulsion? Schooling does mold and shape bodies in a certain way and we as educators and administrators have an ethical responsibility for the resulting conditions in which students find themselves.

Overview of the Study

This study contains six chapters. In this chapter, I offered an introduction, statement of the problem, described the purpose and significance of this dissertation, identified research questions, and discussed how I came to this study and the theories that influenced me. In chapter two, I review the literature concerning the perceptions of juvenile crime in the United States, the interdependent relationship between education and delinquency, pertinent legislation regarding “safe schools,” and provide an overview of the disciplinary alternative school. In chapter three, I describe the study design and methodology. In describing qualitative design, I discuss data collection strategies, interview questions, and coding methods. In chapters four and five, I report on the data I collected, analyze my findings, and make implications within the data. In the final chapter, I offer conclusions, answer my research questions, and make recommendations for future research and practice.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

On January 24, 1995, 15 year old Christine Smetzer was murdered in the restroom of a St. Louis, Missouri high school. Her attacker, who was also a student, had transferred in that week from another Missouri school. In numerous editorials following this case, *The St. Louis Post Dispatch* (Associated Press, 1995, Burgess, 1998) questioned the current state laws, which, as they reported it, protected confidentiality of juveniles to the point that school districts within 25 miles of each other even in the same state could not share disciplinary reports or other information on students. In actuality, the laws did not prevent the sharing of information in 1995, as long as, “the information was passed to individuals with a need to know the students history, background, and educational needs” (Section 167.115, RSMo Supp. 1998). Yet, this was a watershed event that helped to shape the disciplinary alternative school movement.

In a direct response to this tragic event and due to a similar push from federal legislation, the Missouri legislature approved and passed the Missouri Safe Schools Act that went into effect in August 1996. Along with the law that included changes made with the intention of providing a safer school environment for students and teachers, the Act provided \$10 million for competitive formula grants to schools in that first year. Two million dollars of these available funds went to 156 districts to purchase equipment; collaborate with law enforcement agencies for school safety programs, apparatus and security officials (school resource officers); or make minor structural modifications to make buildings safer. Eight million dollars was available to districts to develop, staff, and fund “educational programs to serve violent, disruptive, or abusive students” (Mo. DESE, 2009). Another \$3 million was available for local government and school

partnerships to reduce crime and violence, and another \$7 million was available to divert adjudicated youth from commitments to the Missouri Division of Youth Services (Missouri Department of Social Services, 2010).

All of these funding initiatives created the right conditions for the largest development of alternative education schools and disciplinary programs in the history of Missouri public education. Over 250 alternative schools operated by individual districts, juvenile courts, and various not-for-profit ventures developed (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2009). Many researchers have questioned, what on the surface appeared to be a promising solution to a criminal student population and school violence (Hughes & Adera, 2006; Knitzer et al., 1990; Lehr et al., 2009).

Skiba (2000) searched the Lexis Nexus database for the terms zero tolerance under the category major newspapers (May 1, 1998 to December 31, 1999), and found that instead of reducing violence in schools, criminalizing relatively minor student disruptions escalated problems. This was an update of his review where he looked at suspensions and expulsions that received media attention from the date of passing of the Gun Free Schools Act in 1994 until May 1998. One of the examples he recorded states:

February 1999, Glendale, Arizona: Seventh grade David Silverstein, inspired by the movie *October Sky*, brought a homemade rocket made from a potato chip canister to school. School officials, classifying the rocket as a weapon, suspended him for the remainder of the term (Skiba, 2000, p. 7).

In further research, Skiba, Raush, and Ritter (2004) found that defining school misbehaviors as criminal was associated with increased dropout rates, higher levels of incarcerations, and the overrepresentation of minority youth in juvenile detentions across the country.

Also during the late 1990s, the United States media combined the issues of juvenile crime and problems in the nation's schools. Highly publicized school shootings were a driving force that increased the attention of the public, legislators and policy makers to school violence. In an attempt to lower levels of a perceived epidemic of school violence, the Federal Title IV Gun-Free Schools Act (20 U.S.C. Chapter 70, Sec. 8921) passed in 1994. In the 10 years prior to the passing of the Gun-Free Schools Act, school murders and shootings captured the nation's attention; in spite of the fact that the actual numbers of assaults, injuries, and even deaths at public schools had not significantly increased and in some areas had in fact decreased (Lawrence, 2007). This federal law required states that received federal education funds to expel from school for at least a year any student who brought a weapon and made available federal funds for "innovative research based delinquency and violence prevention programs" (20 U.S.C. Chapter 70, Sec. 8921, p. 7111).

In 1995, the federal government amended the Act to require a district to continue the disciplinary action when a suspended or expelled student changed schools. By 1997, the nation's school systems were suspending 3.1 million students, with only 10 percent suspended, or expelled, for violent and criminal acts, compared to 1.7 million total suspensions in 1974 (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003). Data from the Civil Rights Project at UCLA indicate that during the 2009-2010 school year, over three million students were suspended by school districts, with a disproportionate number being African American male students (Losen & Gillespie, 2012).

These are the events that led to the passing of the Missouri Safe Schools Act of 1997 that expanded the use of expulsion and suspension for numerous nonviolent offences that previously had been handled by individual schools. The Act also changed how juvenile courts and schools

shared information. Under the guidance of the Act, many disruptive behaviors such as truancy, incorrigibility, fighting, and drug and weapon offenses were deemed suspension or expulsion level offenses no matter the age of the student or the facts surrounding the situation. Van Acker (2007) estimated the number of students identified as displaying antisocial behavior and experiencing academic failure to be between four and six million in any given year.

As I describe the perceptions and experiences of students from the alternative school environment, it is important to understand the context and the course of events that placed so many of them in such an environment. I have structured this literature review to explore the ways researchers have measured juvenile crime in school, to present what researchers have found to be the factors that contribute to school disruption (truancy and dropout), to review the details of the Missouri Safe School Act, and to provide a description and evaluation of the alternative school environment. This background information provides an important backdrop to understanding student experiences within the alternative school environment.

Measuring Juvenile Crime in Schools

Most of the rationale for changing juvenile and school law in Missouri was based on the belief that there was an increase in juvenile crime and a failure on the part of courts and school administrators to respond to school safety concerns (Missouri Center for Safe Schools, 2005). In general, government statistics challenged the widespread belief that school crime was increasing (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2008; U.S. Department of Justice, 2007). Researchers have found that media coverage inflates the actual risk of violent assaults occurring in schools (Lawrence & Mueller, 2003). Nonetheless, one positive side effect of increased media attention during the 1990's was an acute awareness of bullying, threats, and the ways that an overcrowded and disorderly environment can result in violence in schools.

Bernard (1992) found that several perceptions of crime in society, and schools in particular, have stayed the same for the past 200 years. These beliefs include the ideas that young males commit more crime than any other group, and that the current group of juveniles in any time period are more violent and criminal than juveniles in the past. In general, the public tends to believe in the existence of a “juvenile crime wave” (Bernard, 1992, p. 21). These beliefs have been disproved through actual crime statistics during most, if not all, decades of statistical crime record keeping (FBI, 2008). The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s crime data index shows arrested individuals are juveniles 15% of the time. In 2010, law enforcement agencies charged 392,652 juveniles with serious violent crimes and property crimes; yet the actual juvenile arrest rate has declined 20% in the last 10 years (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011).

Another condition of crime record keeping that skews the statistical evidence toward the perception of more current violence in the school setting is the fact that in society at large, victims report to police less than 50% of all violent crimes, and currently 35% of all police departments in the United States fail to report arrest data consistently to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Lynch, 2002). Lynch (2002) found that crimes are not reported for a variety of reasons. In many types of crime, no witnesses or victims are present, and historically individuals are reluctant to report crimes when they feel there is a small chance of apprehending the offender. Individuals do not report to the police “victimless crimes” (Lynch, 2002, p. 3) such as drug possession and distribution of illegal substances as often as they occur.

Public concern about the status, safety, and operations of public schools drives the fact that most, if not all, crimes that occur at schools are reported, investigated, and prosecuted (Lawrence, 1998). Prior to the mid-1990s, school administrators expended little effort in developing criteria for recording and identifying the kinds of incidents that occurred in and

around schools (DeVoe et al., 2003; Garrett, Casserty, & Bass, 1978). More recently, the U.S. Department of Justice and most state education and justice departments codified offenses, expulsions, suspensions, and other events, giving us a better picture of school crime and behavioral incidents. Variations between districts still exist. Lawrence (1998) identifies that some schools handled weapons found on students in house while others maintained a zero tolerance policy and reported the incident to police immediately. Flannery (1997) reports that school violence became a “catch-all” (p. 31) term used by school administrators, policy makers, and the media to describe any student actions threatening or aggressive. Flannery further contends that administrators should look at various behaviors through the lens of child development theory and by what students are capable of given their age and maturation:

We need to consider violence along a continuum of behavior beginning with the aggressive acts of kicking, hitting, spitting, or name-calling, events that occur more frequently among younger students. As children grow older, behavior becomes more serious characterized by bullying, extortion and physical fighting. (p. 31)

Many possible reasons exist for the variety of different reporting procedures among schools. Lawrence (2007) indicated that one explanation might be that state departments of education might have different policies, definitions, and criteria to determine what constitutes a crime and what is left as a disciplinary incident to be handled within the school. Also, in my experiences as a juvenile court administrator, I find that school officials feel public (and school board) pressure to maintain a safe and drug-free environment and compare themselves with other districts, thereby becoming reluctant to report incidents that would cause negative perceptions.

Self-reports of victimization are another well-known method of determining the levels of school crime that occur. The National Institute of Education completed the first safe school

study in 1978 (Bastian & Taylor, 1991), and repeated that study in 1995, and again in 1999 (Addington, Ruddy, Miller, DeVoe, & Chandler, 2002). The survey gathered data from the National Crime Victims survey, a nationally representative sample of 43,000 households including 10,000 students between the ages of 12 and 19 in the 1999 sample. Students responded to questions concerning drug availability, street gangs, fear of attack, and victimization while at school. In the survey, students stated that, “88 percent of the crimes in and around school go unreported” (Addington et al., 2002, p. 11). The reasons for not reporting include student perceptions that “the events were minor, or that the police would not, or could not, do anything about the activity” (Addington et al., 2002, p. 12).

In the more recent Indicators of School Crime Study (U.S. Department of Education, 2007), during the 2005-2006 school year, an estimated 54.8 million students enrolled in pre-Kindergarten through grade 12. Data show that among youth aged 5 to 18, there were 47 school-associated violent deaths from July 1, 2005 through June 30, 2006 (14 homicides and 33 suicides). In 2005, among students aged 12 to 18, there were about 1.5 million victims of nonfatal crimes (simple assaults and serious violent crimes). The victimization rate of students aged 12 to 18 at school declined between 1992 and 2005. This thirteen-year collection of data provides some evidence that school safety has improved.

DeVoe et al. (2003) looked at still another way of detailing student safety and crime at schools by measuring students’ observations of bullying, threats, and other forms of victimization directed at other students and whether they perceived their school as “disorderly, or safe” (p. 5). According to DeVoe et al. (2003), knowing about or having observed school victimization or disturbances against other students creates a perception of disorder and a feeling that school officials are not in control and schools are unsafe. Another researcher noted that the

measures of fear do not often differentiate between emotion, cognition, and perception (Welsh, 2001). An important result of a student's fear of crime can be the avoidance of places in school, because they fear assault, or avoidance of school altogether (DeVoe et al., 2003).

My research consists of interviews with former students who experienced severe punishment in schools, including long-term suspension, expulsion, and eventually exclusion from traditional public schools. Before these students committed their final straw violation, most of them had not performed well for some time. Suh, Suh, and Houston (2007) found that students struggling academically are often discipline problems in the classroom. Several data sources are available to help us understand how individual schools handle crime and disciplinary actions. Even though it is an inconsistent and often unreliable source, we should examine school disciplinary records to help us understand the extent of crime in schools and how school administrators assign, and guide, students to alternative settings (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985).

A more reliable source of information regarding school disciplinary actions is a joint effort by the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the National Center for Education Statistics that has published the report, *Indicators of School Crime and Safety* for the past thirteen years (Robers, Zhang, Truman, & Snyder, 2010). This annual report presents data on crime at American schools from the perspective of principals, teachers, and students from many sources, including the National Crime Victim's Survey, Youth Risk Behavior Survey, School Survey on Crime and Safety, and the School and Staffing Survey.

From the 2003, *Indicators of School Crime and Safety Study*, when reporting serious disciplinary actions, principals report that the most common type of intervention is suspension (82%), followed by expulsions (11%), and transfers to special schools (7%) (DeVoe et al.,

2003). By comparison, the 2010 data from the same study found 76% use of suspension as an intervention, only a 5 % expulsion rate, but most significantly, a 19 % transfer rate to special schools, or alternative school programs (Robers et al., 2010).

Considerable variety exists among schools, districts, and even administrators within the same school in terms of reporting this information and the number and degree of disciplinary issues. In one study, Lawrence (1998) described a district located in a low crime suburban area that reported more suspensions for law violations, including drug and weapon possession, than did a larger metropolitan area school that had reported more incidents of street crime and weapon violations around the neighborhood of the school.

Disciplinary reports represent more of a policy measure between schools and districts than a reliable measure of crime and delinquency within the educational environment. In combination with other sources, they add to the overall picture of the environment, perceptions of students and teachers, and methods that administrators use for disciplinary policy development regarding school safety. What does not vary is the fact that the end result of using suspension and expulsion frequently in disciplinary actions is a high percentage of student dropouts and increased reports of truancy (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Griffin, 2002).

Truancy Issues and Dropout Factors

Since the implementation of the Missouri Safe Schools Act of 1997, one of the main statewide disappointments has been the consistently high student dropout rate. The assumption of the legislators was that with a safer environment, more students would stay in school until graduation. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. From the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Mo. DESE, 2011), the 2010 statewide dropout rate was

4.2%, with the rate for minority students at 8.7%, up 2% from the previous year (Mo. DESE, 2011).

Dropout rates across the State of Missouri and the nation have not decreased in the last 25 years (Leckrone & Griffith, 2006; Rumberg, 1987), and the national graduation rate has only slightly declined since 1984 (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2010; Wheelock & Miao, 2005). A report entitled, *Cities in Crisis 2009: Closing the Graduation Gap* (America's Promise Alliance, 2009) describes some progress by several major cities from 1995-2005 but found that "the average graduation rate of the 50 largest cities, 53 percent, is well below the national average of 71 percent and there remains an 18 percent point urban suburban gap" (America's Promise Alliance, 2009, para. 1).

There are many factors which play a role in these adverse results. Educational experts have reported that the increase in students deciding to pursue a General Education Diploma (GED) is caused by school reforms such as exit exams, minimum course requirements, and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) laws, which reward administrators who encourage their lowest achieving students to withdraw from school (Lillard & DeCicca, 2001).

Wayman (2001) studied the factors that influence the attainment of the GED and high school diploma of previous school dropouts. He found, through multiple regression analysis, that such variables as the presence of children (their own), previous grades, socioeconomic status, and grade attainment at the point of dropping out were significant to educational degree attainment. Another factor that Waymon (2001) did not directly mentioned, but is an important first step to dropping out of school, is truancy (Garry, 1996).

Another area of concern for the community as a whole, is that students who are not committed to school and do not regularly attend classes tend to experience high levels of

substance abuse, gang involvement, and delinquency (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994; Dryfoos, 1990; Huizinga, Loeber, & Thornberry, 1995). Students who skip school have a higher risk of substance abuse and delinquency than those who attend regularly. They are also more likely to experience encouragement by school officials and peers to drop out of public education. While many researchers have observed the relationship between dropout and delinquency, which activity comes first is still unclear (Jarjoura, 1993; Thornberry et al., 1985).

Dropping out of school shares a connection with a number of negative personal outcomes. According to United States Department of Labor statistics, the median income of persons aged 18-65 who had not completed high school was approximately \$24,000 dollars in 2007 (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 2008; U.S. Dept. of Labor, 2010), while the median income of persons aged 18-65 who completed high school or a GED was approximately \$40,000 dollars. From the same source, among adults in the labor force generally, a higher percentage of dropouts are unemployed compared with adults who earned a high school credential (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 2010). As another consequence, dropouts aged 25 or older report to be in worse health than adults who finish high school, regardless of income (Pleis & Lethbridge, 2006). The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) (2003) also addressed potential physical health, mental health, and safety concerns that arise from suspension and expulsion from school.

The U.S. Department of Labor estimated in 2001 that “5.2 million young people, aged 16-24, had not completed high school, were unemployed, and were not serving in the military” (RMC Research Corporation, 2008, p.1). The RMC Research Corporation (2008) estimated that disconnected youth represented 15 % of their age category and agree that this population faces a bleak future, particularly during economic downturns in which they are the most likely to be laid off. This report (RMC Research Corporation, 2008) further states that dropouts are likely to

experience mental health disorders and display antisocial behaviors that raise their likelihood of involvement with the adult and juvenile criminal justice systems (Martin, Tobin, & Sugai, 2002; Stanard, 2003).

Alternative schools are an example of a delivery system that sometimes uses more engaging methods than are commonly available in traditional school programs (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998). In an interview and focus group based study of school dropouts from twenty five different locations throughout the United States, Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morrison (2006) concluded that if exposed to certain interventions (e.g., such as improved school climate, more connections between school and work, improved curriculum to make school more engaging), most of the dropout students they interviewed reported that they would have worked harder to stay in school.

Race, ethnicity, and gender also factor into the equation of dropout characteristics (Garcia & Walker de Felix, 1992). Students of racial and ethnic minority groups are more likely to dropout than white students, and females are slightly less likely to dropout than males (Shambaugh, 2000). Research by America's Promise Alliance (2009) found that nearly 50% of African-American and Hispanic students do not complete high schools with their peers. Many researchers agree (Drennon-Gala, 1995; Dunham & Alpert, 1987; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Rumberger, 1987) that race and class issues share commonalities when it comes to problems in schools. At the same time, Dryfoos (1990) found that socioeconomic status is the best predictor of graduation from high school. Students living at or below the poverty line dropout at four times the rate of students of a higher socioeconomic setting (Alexander et al., 2001) regardless of their racial or ethnic background.

Most research in the area of student retention focuses on individual behavior, personal characteristics, and social factors even though school quality can also be an important factor in dropout rates. Dryfoos (1990) found that dropout numbers tended to be higher in those schools with high student-teacher ratios, in large schools with large class sizes, in schools that emphasize on tracking and testing, and in segregated schools. Individual school and teacher policy decisions regarding school safety and school discipline are also worth further investigation. Through the interviews and analysis in my study, I focus on one school and provide detail on how a set of students who completed at least a year at a disciplinary alternative school, were impacted by their teachers' and administrators' choices related to school safety and school discipline as influenced by the Missouri Safe Schools Act of 1997.

The consequences of delinquency and dropping out are clear, and involve an eventual cost to all of us with loss of revenue to schools (daily attendance formulas), society (crime rates), and local communities (less skilled workers). In the next section, I provide details about the Missouri Safe Schools Act and discuss why the law changes in 1997 helped to create a situation that increased the chances that a minority student or a student of low socioeconomic background would find himself or herself removed from the public school setting. This information sets the context for the school disciplinary policy changes, the organization of the modern alternative school, and the lives of the former students in my study.

The Missouri Safe Schools Act

According to the report, *Public Alternative Schools and Programs for Students At Risk of Education Failure: 2000 – 2001* (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002):

Concern among the public, educators, and policymakers about violence, weapons, and drugs on elementary and secondary school campuses, balanced with concern about

sending disruptive and potentially dangerous students out on the streets, has spawned an increased interest in alternative schools and programs. (p. 2)

Most states fell in line with this intent and desired to provide “safe and drug-free schools” (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1996, 1997). Missouri was no exception to the rule, and the Missouri Safe Schools Act passed in 1996 and went into effect the following year.

Following the Missouri Safe School Act of 1997, alternative schools became the programmatic reaction across the State of Missouri (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2009). According to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, school districts currently operate more than 250 alternative school programs (2009). In this section I will examine the Missouri Safe Schools Act of 1997 and its impact on students, school districts, courts, and communities.

Most of this Act remains in effect and by its enforcement, transformed the educational operations and policies of Missouri schools. The basic areas of change were reporting and record keeping, residency requirements, student admission and enrollment, and policy development (Anderson, 1999). The changes, particularly in disciplinary policy, have resulted in a removal of many students from the typical public school environment to either the streets or to alternative education sites.

Regarding policy development (Section 160.261 RSMo., 1999; Section 167.161 RSMo., 1999), the Act required that each district write, and make available to anyone who requested it, a written discipline policy that defined acts of school violence or violent behavior and addressed the administration of corporal punishment (spanking). The Act also required that the school district’s written policy specify that administrators report the above-defined acts to the district on a need-to-know basis, with need-to-know being defined as employees who are “directly

responsible for the students' education or who otherwise interact with the student on a professional basis while acting within the scope of their assigned duties" (Section 160.261 (3) RSMo., 1999).

The specifics of the written disciplinary policy are worth exploring further because it is a document used by the districts to define and justify their decisions regarding specific case dispositions. The written discipline policy must develop terms for a suspension of not less than a year or an expulsion if a student brings a weapon on school grounds. School must also be defined in the policy to include buses, parking lots around the school, and in some instances, designated bus pick-up areas. The definition of a weapon is quite broad and follows the federal weapons code definition (18 U.S.C. 921) for a firearm, and the policy must specifically include black-jacks, knives, explosive weapons, gas guns, knuckles, machine guns, projectile weapons, spring guns, switchblade knives, shotguns, and rifles. The Act specifies that a superintendent can modify a weapons suspension and that a district can provide for an alternative education setting in case of any violations under this section (Section 160.261(5) RSMo., 1999).

The written policy of each district in Missouri must also specify that school administrators shall report to the local law enforcement agency crimes that happen on school property, during school activity, or on a school bus. By this Act, the Individualized Educational Program (IEP), which has always been a confidential document, can now be released in total or part to any school personnel with a "need to know" (Section 167.161 RSMo., 1999).

This Act also addressed the issue of residency. Under Section 167.020 RSMo., 1999, a student must prove residency to register in a school district. A school district can grant a waiver for good cause, which does not include athletics. Various forms of guardianships apply toward

establishing the domicile of the student. An exception to this ruling is that homeless children and orphans are exempt from establishing residency with a guardian prior to enrollment.

The above section of the Missouri Safe School Act of 1997 is important due to the number of students whose parents, in an attempt to continue their children's education, transfer them to other districts when they are suspended or expelled. When school administrators discover this situation, they remove the student from the school or offer placement in an alternative school program, if it exist. The 8th Circuit of Missouri, heard a test case regarding residency (*Horton v. Marshall*, 769 F2d 1323) with the finding made that a school district must admit any child who is living in the district for reasons other than obtaining educational services. If a guardian or parent supplies false residency information, the school may file a civil court case to collect unpaid, out-of-district tuition fees.

Juvenile court personnel and other legal authorities are also given guidance under this Act in Section 167.115 RSMo., (1999). The Act requires that juvenile officers must notify the school superintendent no later than five days after they file a petition in juvenile court, that alleges that a juvenile has committed certain acts that would be felony crimes if they were adults. The specific acts or charges are first degree arson, sexual assault, voluntary and involuntary manslaughter, felonious restraint, first degree property damage, possession of a weapon, child molestation in the first degree, deviant sexual assault, sexual misconduct involving a child, sexual abuse, first and second degree murder, kidnapping, forcible rape, first and second degree assault, forcible sodomy, first degree robbery, first degree burglary, distribution of drugs, and distribution of drugs to a minor.

Missouri juvenile court rules offer certain protections to victims and to minor offenders, but these protections are lifted by the courts, for the above-listed felony acts, though a victim's

name and vital information are still protected. The court must provide to the superintendent of schools or designee a complete description of the crime and the dates of the acts. The information can be shared only with the superintendent and be further released only for “limited purpose of assuring that a good order and discipline is maintained in the school” (Section 167.115 (5) RSMo., 1999).

The Act also mandates a reporting requirement for teachers (Section 167.117 RSMo., 1999). If a teacher observes or is made aware of the following acts, the teacher must report these acts to the building principal: first, second, or third degree assault; sexual assault; deviate sexual assault against a pupil or school employee; possession of a controlled substance; or possession of a weapon. If a teacher ignores or fails to report, they may be charged with a misdemeanor.

A student’s transfer history from other schools is also scrutinized under this Act (Section 160.261 RSMo., 1999; Section 167.020 RSMo., 1999; Section 167.026 RSMo., 1999). When a student requests enrollment in a district, the receiving school must request from the sending school the student’s records, including discipline referrals, from all schools attended during the previous 12 months. This section of the Act also requires Missouri districts to “keep and maintain” (Section 167.026 RSMo., 1999) within the student’s record, discipline policy violations. School districts may share student records with need-to-know personnel of the juvenile court and law enforcement officials. The Act also states that the State Board of Education shall, by policy, create a system to expunge disciplinary records of students who have turned 21 or graduated.

The Missouri Safe Schools Act of 1997 also created the new crime of “making a terroristic threat” (Section 574.115 RSMo., 2012). The crime is committed when a person communicates a threat to commit a felony, makes a knowingly false report concerning the

commission of a felony, and makes a false report regarding the occurrence of a catastrophe that frightens or disturbs 10 or more people, or causes the evacuation or closure of a school. This crime carries the weight of a Class D felony.

Regarding weapons and assault, the Act specifies a difference in the severity of the crime depending on geographical location. If a weapon is brought to school, or if an assault happens on school grounds, the crime moves from the classification of a Class A misdemeanor to a Class D felony. School property is broadly defined as the school itself, school district property, a vehicle that at the time of the act “was in the service of a school or school district” (565.075 RSMo., 2000), or an act that came about as a result of a school district or school activity, for example, a prom at a local hall.

Several modifications and amendments to the Act have been added since it was passed in 1996, but the basic impact, information sharing between courts and schools and the increased use of suspension and expulsion still remains. One commonality between districts attempting to continue the education of students who fall under the provisions of the Missouri Safe Schools Act has been the development of alternative classrooms and schools across the state. In these alternative locations, many students have made the necessary efforts to overcome the challenges of their past and have graduated from high school.

In the next section, I review the efforts made to provide alternative school classrooms for students who have found themselves under the specific guidelines, punishments, and directives of the Missouri Safe Schools Act. Forms of alternative schools have been present for many years. Alternative schools that act as a school district’s disciplinary classroom represent a new phenomenon and a response to school administrator’s suspending or expelling a greater number of students. Understanding the workings of alternative education and the particular activities that

placed students in that environment is important before we hear the voices of those students describing their experiences.

Alternative Education

Following the Missouri Safe Schools Act, school districts found themselves lacking program options for at-risk youth who were suspended or expelled from school for lengthier periods of time than ever before. School districts responded to this need by hiring at-risk coordinators, developing in-school suspension classrooms, and writing grant proposals for alternative education classrooms (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002). Defining alternative education in light of all the recent law changes and policies that supported the ideas of school safety and zero tolerance turned out to be problematic in many ways. Although, some students thrived and found the alternative school program and curriculum better suited to their needs than the traditional district school (Kovach & Evans, 2006)

In this section, I describe the historical development of alternative schools, specifically, the disciplinary alternative schools, and the process by which they became the common local district policy option following Missouri safe school legislation. I also examine the research on the effectiveness and theoretical underpinnings of the disciplinary alternative school movement, which for many alternative school children is their last chance to complete high school. For the data collection portion of this study, I interviewed students who have attended at least one year as well as some students who mustered enough personal resources to meet graduation requirements.

The term alternative schooling has always referred to nontraditional public and private educational approaches available by choice to parents and students. As stated by Kovach and Evans (2006), “Alternative education has been an active player in the public school system for

more than 50 years” (p. 2). These programs, ranging from actual schools to programs within schools to single classrooms, began to evolve during the late 1960s and grew from a few isolated innovations in local communities to an educational reform involving millions of students (Barr & Parrett, 1997). Barr and Parrett (2001) estimated that by the year 2000, more than 15% of the students enrolled in public education in the United States attended a public school of choice, which includes alternative classrooms and charter schools. No exact method exists to calculate the number of alternative schools that enroll specifically students at risk of school failure. Lehr et al., (2003) estimated that more than 20,000 alternative schools or programs in operation target the at-risk student population. In 2010, Almeida, Le, Steinberg, and Cervantes, surveyed administrators at 176 Missouri alternative education school sites. From the demographic information, they found that 33% of the programs had been in operation for more than 10 years, and 26%, for 6 to 10 years (Almeida, Le, Steinberg, & Cervantes, 2010).

The definition of alternative school depends on who you ask and their interest in the operation, methods, students, and program. Simply, alternative education is any alternative to traditional public school learning programs. Historically, the alternative school definition must be flexible because of the range of foci in schools, including sports, performance arts, math and science, vocational training, and/or disciplinary or mandated programs, which is the focus of this work. Morley (1991) characterizes the learning communities known as alternative schools without regard to the makeup of the student body or their future goals:

Alternative education is a perspective, not a procedure or program. It is based upon the belief that there are many ways to become educated, as well as many types of environments and structures within which this may occur. Further, it recognizes that all people can be educated and that it is in society’s interest to ensure that all are educated to

at least.... [a] general high school...level. To accomplish this requires that we provide a variety of structures and environments such that each person can find one that is sufficiently comfortable to facilitate progress. (p. 10)

Morley (1991) argued that good citizenship depends on education, which given the accepted statistic that 75% to 85% of adult incarcerates are school dropouts, appears to have validity (Stephens, 1992). A school linked to the community through its various support systems is also a trait of a successful alternative school. Given Cox's (1999) findings that additional factors that occur apart from the school environment can hinder the student's outcomes in the area of long-term personal success, a link between alternative schools and outside services is required. Parental involvement, participation, and caring about their child's educational planning and attendance have shown positive results in student achievement (Chaskin & Rauner, 1995; Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1993). Cox (1999) also found positive results when schools connect with a variety of job training programs, health and social services, mental health providers and the juvenile courts for information regarding delinquency activity patterns not only with the involved students but also within the community as a whole.

The tension between the goals of alternative education, the desire to assist students to succeed, and the equally motivating desire to separate and isolate those students deemed to be a bad influence on others, is worth exploring further. For some, the small caring environment that purportedly takes place in the alternative school environment increases the student's participation and cooperation more so than grade retention policies, punitive zero tolerance philosophies, and lengthy suspensions (Christenson & Havsy, 2001; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985; Gregg, 1998; Natale, 1991).

Alternative School History and Characteristics

Meers (2004) viewed the apprenticeship system as an early form of alternative education. Apprenticeships were, by nature, small in number, consisted of individualized instruction, and focused on tasks that supported a future vocation. In the 1950's and 1960's alternative schools became more of a global movement modeled after such programs as A.S. Neill's Summerhill School in Suffolk, England (Stronach, 2006; Stronach & Piper, 2008). In the 1970s, legislators began reducing federal and state educational budgets, and as evaluations were questioning the successes of these schools, many closed. Of those that remained open, alternative school educators refined their practices to justify continuation of the programs and as a result, created a more educational and supportive environment for at-risk youth (Meers, 2004).

Funding sources improved in the 1980s and 1990s, and alternative education began to expand. One particular area of expansion was due to funding and program support from the Federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). The mission of the OJJDP, which is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, United States Department of Justice, is to provide,

national leadership, coordination, and resources to prevent and respond to juvenile delinquency and victimization. OJJDP supports states and communities in their efforts to develop and implement effective and coordinated prevention and intervention programs and to improve the juvenile justice system so that it protects public safety, holds offenders accountable, and provides treatment and rehabilitative services tailored to the needs of juveniles and their families.

(OJJDP, 2011, p.1)

OJJDP created a federal grant program called, The Delinquency Prevention through Alternative Education Initiative, with the idea that schools play a major role in juvenile crime reduction (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985). Federal funding went to school districts to develop alternative school programs, curriculum and staff training for communities with high rates of crime, delinquency, school dropouts, and youth unemployment. During this time, many courts and school districts partnered to remove disruptive students from their regular classrooms and provided them with the option of attending an alternative school program.

Alternative schools are typically small and collaborative and extend the roles of teachers into student counseling and some administrative tasks. Another commonality is the absence or, or a minimum use of, tracking and other forms of labeling (Neuman, 1994). The first alternative schools appeared in the 1960s, yet the theories used within their structures predate their formation by decades (Cox, 1999). The early alternative schools appeared in urban and suburban areas more often than in rural ones (Druian & Butler, 1987). School administrators at urban schools targeted the needs of minorities and the poor, while the suburban schools focused on innovative and reform-oriented policy (Raywid, 1999).

Both correctional and education-reform-based alternative schools continue to exist but in a more diffused placement throughout the United States. This is due, for the most part, to the nation's concern with youth violence, particularly in the school setting. More examples of the basic disciplinary model that previously served the poor and minority students are located in suburban communities, and target students who have dropped out, have truancy problems, are pregnant, or are involved with the criminal justice system (Meers, 2004).

Raywid (1999) divided alternative schools into three types in line with their orientation toward measuring change: (1) Changing the student – both therapeutic and disciplinary model

schools fall under this category. Measurements are individual and typically result in a goal of returning students to the sending schools. As can be imagined, these environments are not attractive to outsiders and students attend as a last resort or by coercive means. (2) Changing the school – Central Park East Secondary School in East Harlem, New York, is an example of this type of school. It is purported to be highly innovative in curriculum with a school-based management approach that encourages administrative participation at all levels. Raywid (1999) reported the success ratio of graduation and eventual college enrollment to be higher in these types of schools than in category one. (3) Changing the educational system – introducing new ideas and innovative programming within the system through small experimental schools and “school-within-a-school” models.

Schools in the first category (changing the student) are the most common, are corrective in nature, and represent the majority of the 250 alternative schools currently in existence in Missouri (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2006). There are two types of schools designed as “last-chance” programs for students within the safe school guidelines (adjudicated delinquent or deemed a danger to the school environment). Researchers define the first type of program as punitive and highly structured, such as the many programs funded by the Texas 1995 Safe Schools Act (Bickerstaff, Leon, & Hudson, 1997). The second type is represented by those schools that are therapeutic and remedial (Koetke, 1999). For example, in Missouri, the St. Joseph School District used a safe school grant to develop an “alternative elementary management school” (Henley, Fuston, Peters, & Wall, 2000, p. 33) for students with aggressive behaviors that attempted to improve students’ social skills and then return them to the sending schools. Henley et al. (2000) reported that 50% of the students in that

school showed improvement in all measured areas of the Burkes Behavior Rating Scale and that returning students improved academically and had fewer disciplinary reports or suspensions.

Regarding what constitutes success in these correctional alternative programs, Raywid (1999) confirmed that the measuring stick differs within individual schools, thereby creating a challenge in determining the usefulness and efficiency of continuing or replicating these schools in the future. Within the correctional or disciplinary model, criminal recidivism rates might be more important than educational outcomes (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). If job placement and high school completion are the goals, then “seat time” and achievement-test scores may not be a factor in reporting success as they are in the traditional schools.

Meers (2004) reviewed the literature on alternative school evaluation and found the following factors contribute to success:

1. A low student-teacher ratio (preferably close to 1:10 teacher student)
2. A felt sense of community by students and teachers
3. A discipline code clearly understood and followed
4. Clear and understood mission statement to direct and focus the students
5. Student perception that the faculty cares about them
6. The faculty chooses to teach at the school and enjoys working in the environment of alternative education (pp. 31-43).

Existing literature suggests alternative education programs can enhance self-esteem, increase student achievement, and improve attendance (Cox, 1999; Kovach & Evans, 2006). Gottfredson and Gottfredson (1985) found that students who attend alternative school programs feel more comfortable in their environment and are more motivated to attend this type of school as compared to a more traditional school setting. “Students engaged in alternative education are believed to have higher self-esteem, more positive attitudes toward school, improved school

attendance, higher academic performance, and decreased delinquent behaviors than when they attended traditional schools” (Kovach & Evans, 2006, p. 2).

At the same time, some of the research on alternative schools has also shown many of the improvements as being short term and not impacting delinquent behavior (Cox, Davidson, & Bynum, 1995), particularly for those students who return to the traditional school. Cox et al. (1995) argued that even though the students appeared to have performed better while at the alternative school, other influences such as family and peers have a greater effect on criminal activity. Various researchers found that peer groups could be a major obstacle to student academic success (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Fredericks et al. (2004) found that peer groups can add to school disengagement particularly among minority high school students and suggest that students trying to obtain good grades and doing well in school are hampered by peer acceptance and rejection factors.

Delinquency, truancy, and other problem behaviors at school, in the community, and at home increase a student’s chance of finding themselves in this environment yet some stay enrolled for a full year and for some, graduate in the face of these obstacles. In the next section, I explore the connection between delinquent behaviors and school dysfunction due, in part because many alternative school students have been involved with delinquent activity.

Delinquent Behaviors and School Dysfunction

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) developed the Core Data System to prepare annual school accountability report cards as required under the Missouri Safe Schools Act. The Core Data System categorizes delinquency incidences by six types of offenses: weapons, alcohol, drugs, tobacco, violent acts, and “other.” A 2008 report from the Missouri State Auditor’s Office (Montee, 2008) indicates that most discipline incidents

reported as “other.” Of the approximately 350,000 incidents reported for the 2006-2007 school year, 330,000 (95%) of the incidents were reported as “other.” For the Missouri State Auditors report, officials from various schools who are designated core data coordinators indicated that the incidents reported as “other” included disruptive behavior, bullying, insubordination, tardiness, profanity, and fighting. Some of the preceding were serious acts and could have resulted in juvenile court action. However, most were not, but still were resolved with suspensions or expulsions for many of the students.

In 2008, the Missouri State Auditor cautioned that, “the failure to ensure the accuracy of the disciplinary incident data reported by the school districts prevents DESE, school districts, General Assembly, and other interested parties from conducting an accurate analysis of the data and making an informed decision regarding school safety” (Montee, 2008, p. 21). This failure to make informed decisions regarding school safety has created policies that have landed many students in discipline related alternative education programs. Many alternative school students have a history of delinquent acts (Cox et al., 1995), and the research I explore in this section shows that many students find themselves placed in these programs for minor infractions and due to circumstances beyond their control.

During the past 40 years, researchers who advance the literature of sociology, corrections, and education (Kallio & Sanders, 1999; McCarthy & Levin, 1992; Montgomery & Rossi, 1994; Rumberger & Larson, 1994; Slavin & Fashola, 1998) have discussed alternative education. The researchers listed above generally support the idea that the alternative classroom is an escape valve for the pressure that has been building in the nation’s classrooms. Missouri’s educational districts contend with the many issues of truancy; assaults; drug use and distribution; and in the rare occasion as described at the beginning of this study, murder (Evans et al., 2008).

Few refute the connection between delinquency and school achievement, yet many researchers doubt if the alternative classroom setting and programming have had any significant effects on achievement rates since the inception of the concept (Raywid, 1999). Part of the difficulty in evaluation of alternative programs is that many disciplinary alternative schools have unclear or widely varied program goals and, due to the pressure and fears of the school community, find themselves as “dumping grounds or warehouses for social misfits and academically incompetent students” (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999, p. 89).

It is difficult to find research specifically on disciplinary schools that are steadfast to their program goals and take only students who fall under the mandatory suspension and expulsion laws of that particular state. One such study (Doolittle, 1998) reported on a Travis County, Texas, alternative school that served expelled students aged 10 to 17. School administrators and courts had removed these students from the local school districts for the serious offenses of drug possession, assault, or weapons violations. Even though funding for this school was specifically set aside for the above given conditions, Doolittle (1998) found that 61.8 percent of the students enrolled were committed due to “discretionary offences, or persistent misconduct” (p. 1).

Although at-risk and delinquent populations are not the same, many schools combine programs due to the lack of funds to run programs that reach specific populations. Many of these schools are unsuccessful at achieving their goals (Swanson & Williams-Robertson, 1990). For example, an evaluation of the Austin Independent School District program known as “School Community Guidance Center” reported that the program was designed to “help at-risk students improve in the areas of school attendance, academic achievement, behavior and frequency of contacts with the court system” (p. 1). Even though the program design was extremely clear, the authors of this study relayed that a new policy resulted in 151 “over-age middle school students”

(Swanson & Williams-Robertson, 1990, p. 1) transferred into the program during the evaluation period, and they eventually comprised 22% of the student population.

Swanson and Williams-Robertson (1990) reported the following findings in the Austin Texas district, purportedly due to the additional enrollment:

1. Enrollment increased by 27% and the student-teacher ratio increased to 15:1, although the state-recommended ratio was 10:1;
2. Recidivism, or reentries into the program, had increased to 26% (over the previous year, only 18% returned);
3. Following release from the program, the twelve-week follow up data indicated that attending this particular alternative school had no effect on academic performance and may have had a negative effect on attendance (34% had improved attendance while 43% had worse attendance);
4. A survey of this school's employees showed that few (13%) had a positive view of the school and that more than half had no opinion (58%) and more than one quarter had a negative view (29%).

Alternatively, Munoz (2002) found positive results through an analysis of the “non-academic impact” of several alternative school programs in Jefferson County, Kentucky. Munoz (2002) collected data on 450 students' attendance, behavior reports, and suspension rates and found that the students within the program improved attendance, and reduced behavior problems.

Issues Related to Race Factors

The Department of Justice (OJJDP, 2004) found that minority students are more likely to find themselves in the student population of alternative schools, just as they are overrepresented in the general juvenile offending population. Some authors argue that low tolerance by teachers

for cultural differences and a higher percentage of suspension rates and expulsion rates for minority students are due to discriminatory practices by some school districts (Arnové & Stout, 1980; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). As reported in a publication by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Department of Justice (2004), minority students:

placed in a failing track, are not regularly promoted to the next grade, do not graduate from high school, and if deemed antisocial are further penalized by being excluded from their regular schools into alternative educational settings and the juvenile justice educational system. (p. 1)

As to permanently dropping out of school, 13% of black youth never return to any educational setting after attending alternative schools compared to 3.8% of white youth (Snyder & Sickmond, 2006).

Pane and Salmon (2009) explored black education through a heuristic study of transformative education in an alternative school setting. They maintained that students are “tracked” in the United States according to their social and academic achievement, with a strong emphasis on early reading skills. According to Fine (1991), students placed in high tracks make better grades, do not dropout of school, and ultimately find better employment than those in the lower track. Pane and Salmon (2009) described the silencing of black students in traditional schools and illustrated an alternative school program’s ability to be school based in its curriculum design. As an alternative to a racist environment, Pane and Salmon (2009) advocated innovative, arts-based, and culturally equitable educational practices that can bring the students’ experience and their race into a positive perspective in the classroom setting.

Along with race, Biddle (1997) correlated differences in eighth grade math achievement with levels of school funding and rates of child poverty (Biddle, 1997). Biddle (1997) expresses this “formula for failure” by stating that:

poor children are uniquely handicapped for education because of their poverty. The homes of poor children provide little access to the books, writing materials, computers, and other supports for education that are normally present in middle-class or affluent homes in America. Impoverished students are also distracted by chronic pain and disease; have poorer nourishment; tend to live in communities that are afflicted by physical decay, serious crime, gangs, and drugs; and must face problems in their personal lives because their parents or older siblings have left home, died, been incarcerated, or lead seriously disturbed lives. All of this means that poor children have a much harder time in school than their more affluent peers. (p. 11)

The preceding quote from Biddle (1997) helps to explain the struggles that some students have that increase their contact with the criminal justice system and disciplinary alternative schools (Hawkins & Lam, 1987; Potter & Krider, 2000). The United States Department of Health and Human Services “Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative” (U.S. Dept. of Health, 2011), encourages school districts by awarding \$145 million to approximately 77 school districts a year. The criteria for funding is to those schools that use best practices to approach school violence as a public health issue and offer “comprehensive, coordinated services along the path of childhood development” (U.S. Dept. of Health, 2010, para. 3).

Zero Tolerance

The perceptual increase in violent juvenile crime precipitated a response on the national level, calling upon state and federal legislative bodies to “get tough” on juvenile crime,

particularly in the school environment. As I described in my first chapter, in 1994 Congress passed the Federal Gun-Free School Act requiring states to pass legislation, “requiring a one year expulsion for students carrying firearms on school property” (20 U.S.C. Chapter 70, Section 8921). Failure to comply would result in a loss of federal funding. The states extended these laws to include other weapons and the use or possession of drugs. The disciplinary sanctions became part of what we now know as, “zero tolerance policies” defined as “a policy that mandates predetermined consequences or punishments for specific offences” (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999, p. 138).

School districts continue to expand zero tolerance policies to include infractions that pose little or no safety concerns. As William Modzeleski, director of the Safe and Drug Free Schools Program, U.S. Department of Education, Feb. 18, 2000, expressed, “An overwhelming majority of schools (90%) do not experience any serious violent crime, and nearly half of all our schools (43%) experience no crime at all” (Harvard Advancement Project, 2002, p. 54). The Harvard report gives an example of a zero tolerance disciplinary action by describing a situation in Mississippi where students on a school bus were playfully throwing peanuts at one another. A peanut supposedly hit the bus driver who immediately pulled over and called the police. Law enforcement subsequently charged five African-American students, aged 17 to 18, with felony assault, which carries the maximum penalty in Mississippi of five years in prison. The sheriff stated to the newspaper, “This time it was peanuts, but if we don’t get a handle on it, the next time it could be bodies” (Clarion Ledger, 1999, p. 2).

In response to the increasingly outrageous reports of zero tolerance policies, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) issued a policy statement in 2003 that highlighted aspects of suspension and expulsion that jeopardized children’s health and safety. It stated that

between 79% and 94% of schools have policies known as zero tolerance, “the term given to a school or district policy that mandates predetermined consequences for various student offences” (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003, p. 1206) and almost 90% of Americans support these policies (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003, Rose & Gallup, 1998).

The pattern of inadequate public schooling, to suspension or expulsion, to street life, to prison, has become so common that it has acquired the name, “the school-to-prison pipeline” (American Civil Liberties Union, 2008). School zero tolerance policies fuel the school-to-prison pipeline at least in part, by removing students from the classroom and into the juvenile and criminal courts. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is concerned that, “this pipeline reflects the prioritization of incarceration over education” (ACLU, 2008, p. 1).

Suspensions or expulsions from schools stem from possession of a weapon or violent activity only 10% of the time (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003; American Civil Liberties Union, 2008; Legislative Analyst Office, 1995). Weapons crimes were the heart of the Federal Gun-Free School’s Act intent (U.S. Public Law 103-882; American Federation of Teachers, 1995) and the Act also specified that the school districts should provide alternative education services for the suspended student. Even though urban schools experience more violent crime than rural schools, Brooks, Schiraldi, and Ziedenberg (2000) found that small towns in Oregon and South Carolina suspended and expelled students at 5 to 6 times the rate of students in such large metropolitan areas as Chicago, illustrating that discipline practices are at best, arbitrary.

School districts do not expel many students for major, violent incidents or weapons offences. Yet, when an administrator suspends or expels students for what the American Academy of Pediatrics report called a “cooling- off period for the offending student as well as for frustrated educators and administrators” (AAP, 2003, p. 1207), this can have serious

consequences. Kupchik (2010) takes up this topic of impact and reliance on a pseudo-forensic approach to school discipline and states, “By relying on police officers, ramping up punishments for misbehavior, and subjecting students to invasive surveillance (such as hall, bus, and classroom cameras, metal detectors, and searches by drug-sniffing dogs), schools have created what some call a school-to-prison pipeline” (p. 19). The police and the juvenile justice system now likely handle behavior once handled by teachers, counselors, and administrators. Indeed, some researchers believe that the motivation of certain administrators is to eliminate troublesome students from the educational system altogether (Bowditch, 1993; Fine, 1986).

Research Studies and Evaluations of Alternative Schools

Various evaluations of alternative schools have typically failed to find positive evidence of effectiveness in reducing delinquent behavior (Cobb et al., 1997; Cox, 1999; Dodge, Dision, & Langford, 2006; Duke & Grieson, 1999; Lehr et al., 2009). For example, Cobb et al., (1997) specifically evaluated North Carolina alternative schools and found that students rarely completed or returned to the sending schools, and, when questioned, the students considered the alternative schools “dumping grounds” or “junior jails” (p. 7). The students in the Cobb, et al., study reported that the staff members were generally caring, but the teachers did not have adequate training to deal with at-risk students. The schools further lacked adequate budgets and facilities when compared to the traditional programs.

Dodge et al. (2006) discussed another issue that can affect the effectiveness and safety of these alternative programs. Alternative schools designed to be the last opportunity for public education might also put victims of crime in close proximity to a population of offenders. These researchers point out that when both offender and victim are in this situation, they are more likely to carry weapons of protection (knives and guns) to school.

While much of the data about the effectiveness and unintended consequences of alternative schools is troubling, some have also reported promising outcomes. Cox, Davidson, and Bynum (1995) examined evaluations of 57 alternative education programs and found that these programs can have positive effects on school performance, attitude, and self-esteem. Despite the positive results, they did not find any significant changes in the student's delinquent activity. According to Cox et al. (1995), "even though the students liked going to alternative school and appear to have performed well, these gains did not overcome other influences that may have had a greater effect on subsequent delinquency (e.g., family and peers)" (p. 229).

Two findings from the Cox et al., study in 1995 are important in regard to alternative school effectiveness: (1) alternative schools for low academic achievers or delinquent students showed reduced delinquency and growth in educational achievement compared to schools that could not identify a target population; and (2) the more observational or qualitative research projects that Cox et al., examined described greater effects (lowered incidences of law violations and graduations) than did the relatively few experimental designed studies. My search that encompasses the past three decades of literature on this topic shows more examples of naturalistic studies than studies that attempted a quantitative design.

Overall, there is not much empirical research on what happens to students after attendance at alternative schools. In addition, criminal justice researchers rarely undertake an empirically designed template by establishing a control group or by random sampling members of a population to treatment programs (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002; Sherman, 1997). From their meta-analytical study, Cox et al., (1995) found that the modern alternative school, populated with a district's designated at-risk students, functioned best when it included "small

classrooms, low student teacher ratios, individualized and self-paced instruction, non-competitive performance assessments and less structured, classrooms” (p. 219).

In a subsequent work, Cox (1999) used an empirically designed study to assess alternative school effectiveness that included a control group of students who met the entry criteria but did not attend an alternative program. Cox (1999) used grades, delinquent behavior, and self-esteem as markers to analyze alternative school effectiveness. His findings concerning the treatment group included no positive change in delinquency behavior but did produce positive short-term effects in grade point average, a drop in truancy incidents, and an increase in self-esteem. When the treatment group, consisting of those students who were at the alternative school, returned to their conventional school, most of the positive changes they experienced in the prior setting disappeared (Cox, 1999).

These findings are typical of delinquency program studies that show little or no treatment effects from programming over time. Greenwood (2008), in his meta-analysis evaluation of delinquency intervention and prevention programs states that “for more than a century, efforts to prevent delinquency have been guided more by prevailing theories about the causes of delinquent behavior than by whether the efforts achieved the desired effects” (p. 187).

Greenwood (2008) pointed out something that the legislatures should have taken into consideration when they created the safe schools legislation both at the federal and the state level: that true outcome-based violence prevention programs “are those that prevent youth from engaging in delinquent behaviors in the first place” (p. 185). He describes these programs specifically as home-visiting programs by registered nurses that target pregnant teens and their at-risk infants and preschool education for at-risk children that includes home visits or work with parents. Greenwood (2008) states, “Measuring the effects of delinquency-prevention programs

is challenging because the behavior the programs attempt to change is often covert and the full benefits extend over long periods of time” (p. 187).

It is clear from Cox (1999), Greenwood (2008), and others, that at least some future research should involve long-term studies to locate key curricula, influences, or programs that result in long-term change for at-risk youth. Of course, this is just one of many potential yardsticks of achievement from this environment. One question that researchers might ask is whether evidence exists that shows that public school attendance reduces delinquent events or the career of budding criminals.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention first promoted and underwrote grants for alternative education in the 1980s. The reason that juvenile corrections began to fund alternative school programs was the widely held belief that education could play a role in the reduction of crime. The push was on nationally to remove disruptive students and to promote the more controversial approach of removing students showing high-risk factors of committing crimes in the future. I discuss some practices and research that examined the effectiveness of these programs in the next section.

Effective Alternative School Practices and Challenges

In this section, I review the literature on effective alternative school programs and their characteristics. Proponents state that alternative education has a significant effect on academic achievement and the behavior of dropouts and potential dropouts (Grannis, 1992; Smith, Gregory, & Pugh, 1981). As I mentioned in the previous section, overall effectiveness is debatable. I also examine the research on the basic tenets that describe the criteria for success in alternative school programs.

Some of the most important factors that impact alternative schools of any design are discussed by Smith et al., (1981) and include attachment, innovation, choice, policy, community, and size. Dworkin (1987) defines attachment as a type of relationship between a student and his or her school environment that enhances the learning environment. School attachment has a major effect on self-esteem, motivation, effort, behavior, and academic achievement. A lack of attachment can lead to students to dropout or otherwise fail within the educational setting.

Valverde (1987) interviewed 104 Mexican-American high school dropouts and graduates to determine what had contributed to their success or failure in school. He noted similar family histories, but those who graduated from high school reported substantially more friends at school, better grades, and siblings who had graduated (Valverde, 1987). Other results indicated similar findings: at-risk students who had dropped out of school lacked a network of peer support while similar students who graduated reported extensive activities, many friends, and general acceptance in the school environment (Bitting, Cordeiro, & Baptiste, 1992; Williams, 1991).

Goodenow (1991) defined school attachment through the developmental/motivational perspective of Maslow (1943) and suggested that “until social needs for belonging were met, higher motives for learning would not be present” (Goodenow, 1991, p. 52). Maslow (1943) posited that if individuals could not meet certain basic needs, they could not reach his/her “ultimate potential” (Engler, 2009, p. 351). In this case, if the student cannot meet the social need for belonging to the school culture, higher goals, and motivation for learning cannot take place. A feeling of alienation may exist at any stage of an educational career, but its early occurrence results in negative effects on school success (Goodenow, 1991).

Innovation within alternative programs can come from teacher creativity and flexibility to develop educational tracks of curriculum to challenge the student. Different strategies include

individual learning, cooperative learning, competency-based learning, team teaching, peer tutoring, and other learning strategies and implementations to deal with multi-faceted learning disabilities (Legters & McDill, 1994). Use of multiple alternative strategies is a major theme in alternative education, with the goal being to identify the right instructors who will be flexible in development of programming and curriculum, and structured enough on the discipline side to operate an alternative classroom efficiently.

Requiring participation or “sentencing” students to attend alternative schools seems to restrict the programming identity of the schools severely. The reality described by Lehr et al., (2009) is that 34 states have legislation indicating enrollment in alternative schools could occur because of suspension or expulsion. Other states might not have such explicit legislation, but as Lehr et al., reported, most schools address the issue of placement following suspension or expulsion in some way that is inclusive of the at-risk student. Much of the legislatively driven, school funding hinges on school administrators identifying and placing at-risk youth in alternative school programs.

Lehr et al. (2009) collected information on alternative schools at the state level, showing that, “only 19 of 36 states indicated their department of education had a system in place documenting outcomes for students who attend alternative schools” (p. 29). Only seven of the reporting states collect data on post school outcomes. The connection between goals and implementation to measurable outcomes should present a clear concern to lawmakers for future policy and funding considerations of the mandated program concept. Lehr et al. (2009) further maintained that mandated programs appear to be more short term in nature as compared to most voluntary alternative education programs.

No single program seems to work for all students or districts. Lehr et al. (2009) recommend a flexible program design and contend that “collecting data on outcomes for students is critical...if we are to understand how students who are most at risk of school failure are faring” (p. 30). Academic success is not the only criteria that matters when assessing the alternative school student. Lehr et al. (2009) reported, “determining the impact of alternative schools on students who attend them is difficult, as the population is at risk and measuring academic progress alone may not capture the settings’ influence on youth who attend these schools and programs” (p. 21). Students have multiple needs and spend most of their 24-hour day, away from the school setting.

Quality of staffing is also a factor when evaluating program effectiveness or outcomes of participating students. As an example of alternative school teacher training, the 2004 Education Code of California requires that teachers in alternative instructional settings hold regular certification and “possess a special fitness to perform” (Ashcroft, 1999, p. 82) that seems to imply a special aptitude or training for instructing at risk students. I could not locate any evidence of courses or curriculum that relate to this “special fitness” in the literature. According to Ashcroft (1999), the number of school age children who receive instruction in alternative settings exceeds the total number of age-alike students served in special education in the state. Yet the fact is that special education has generated several graduate level teacher specialist credential programs within the state’s universities whereas few universities offer even one course directed at teachers of delinquent youth or at-risk students.

Ashcroft (1999) found that teachers who work in this specialized setting of alternative or institutional education receive little or no training to prepare them to deal with students. He cited a study from 1992 in which he surveyed 72 alternative setting teachers, and another study from

1993 in which he surveyed 274 correctional teachers from state-operated juvenile detention centers. Most teachers reported no pre-service training to deal with the student population. Almost all teachers surveyed reported their students having legal, social, and psychological problems that they lacked the training to address.

One aspect of Ashcroft's study involved questioning alternative school teachers about the way they identified themselves professionally. Do teachers trained in mathematics identify themselves as math teachers or alternative school teachers? Ashcroft (1999) stated that from his investigations, alternative school teachers are more apt to attend alternative and correctional conferences rather than subject matter conferences. Teachers seek professional growth in areas that emphasize the peculiarities of their student population rather than the subject matter.

Researchers perceive little movement toward a creation of a specialty in the alternative school niche (Lehr et al., 2009). Most teachers who find themselves in this setting are entry-level teachers with little seniority, tenure, or thought of a continuing in that environment (Ashcroft, 1999; Cobb et al., 1997; Lehr et al., 2009). The field finds itself characterized as much by high turnover as it is by the lack of training.

In a five-year evaluation study of alternative educational programs in North Carolina (Cobb et al., 1997), researchers reported that although staff members were "generally caring...they did not have adequate training and support to provide students with a quality education" (p. 7). Within the correctional field, a movement has been taking place for at least 20 years to have certification and standardized training for youth worker. It also has little chance of acceptance for most of the same reasons as previously stated for educators (Ashcroft, 1999).

A final factor in successful programming is a concept that appears to hold perhaps the most significance in programming results. Student-to-teacher ratio has a major effect on the

student outcomes from the reviewed literature (Lange & Sletten, 2002). A ratio of 15:1 is the maximum, with 10:1 being the optimum. Quick feedback and teacher response time to questions and behavioral issues seem to drive a successful alternative program (Hawkins & Lam, 1987). These pedagogical strategies link back to delinquency, attachment theories and apparent student need to develop positive relationships with peers and teachers for academics and a continuing desire to meet educational goals. Smaller classroom research supports the fact that in such setting, teacher and students collaborate on management and classroom decision making, which also enhances the attachment and investment that a student has in the operation and continuation of his or her educational experience (Franklin, 1992).

Summary

I began this review in memory of a murder victim: an account of a young life ending that will traumatize a family and a community for many generations. Hindsight tells us that school districts and possibly others, made mistakes in this situation, particularly allowing someone already suspended and deemed too dangerous for the school environment, to enroll in another district. Due to many similar violent events that were occurring in the early 1990s, the political climate, and the perceptions of a juvenile crime epidemic, a federal legislative reaction occurred that eventually affected all state laws regarding school crime.

In this chapter, I reviewed federal and specific Missouri legislation that had financial, political, and policy impact on many students deemed at-risk, or those who met some other diagnostic instrument that showed a propensity for violence or disruption (Hughes & Adera, 2006; Skiba, 2000; Van Acker, 2007). Clearly, the public remains concerned about crime and school safety, yet the actual crime statistics I reviewed in this chapter point to less severe and less frequent violent acts than those that actually occurred, uprooted, and displaced so many

students (Bernard, 1992; Lawrence & Mueller, 2003; U.S. Dept. of Justice, 2011). Due to the safe schools legislation that has resulted in students' coerced or directed to find alternative settings, even more responsibility lies with the school system to develop the goals necessary to meet students' educational needs.

I made a distinction during this review between actual violent behavior and the perception that such acts might occur by an ever-growing population of the public and school personnel. Because most students attending alternative schools during the past 20 years would have had an at-risk label by their sending school administrators, I also examined literature regarding truancy and dropout factors. I found literature viewing both truancy and dropout events by students as an implicit method in which the students metaphorically vote with their feet by refusing to attend a school in which they have no attachments (Kortering, 1999; Skiba, 2000; Skiba et al., 2004; Van Acker, 2007).

To summarize, the literature suggests a low school crime statistic overall and a constant overall national dropout rate that includes a disproportionately high number of students of lower socioeconomic classes, minority statuses, and from urban areas. In certain populations, the dropout rates are extremely high (America's Promise Alliance, 2009; Drennon-Gala, 1995; Dunham & Alpert, 1987; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Pane & Salmon, 2009; Rumberger & Larson, 1994; Valverde, 1987). Dropping out has a dramatic impact on a student's future wages and academic pursuits past high school. At the same time, several scholars (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006; Dryfoos, 1990) believe that school climate, teacher training, and school funding correlate with higher or lower levels of dropouts.

A section on the modern disciplinary alternative school was necessary because of its metamorphosis from the early reform, free-school movement. Alternative educational

classrooms were formerly student-centered educational experiments that in the course of 20 years changed into the more common disciplinary school that is isolated, and where students are segregated from the educational opportunities of their fellow students in the “regular” school (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Hughes & Adera, 2006; Lehr et al., 2003, Lehr et al., 2009). Knitzer et al. (1990) described school administrators that disliked or feared certain students, and then forced them to attend alternative school that they found to be a harsh setting and a bleak curriculum.

A body of research exists that finds alternative schools in general to be ineffective in curbing delinquent acts (Cobb et al., 1997; Cox et al., 1995; Dodge et al., 2006; Duke & Grieson, 1999; Lehr et al., 2009). An explanation of this effect, or lack of one, may lie in the misuse of alternative schools as a form of punishment with little or no specific programming tailored to meet the needs of those enrolled. Further, by the time school districts or the courts identify and place delinquent youth in alternative schools, the response is too late to affect delinquent behavior. Research in the field of criminal justice tends to support the alternative school model by finding causal relationships between delinquent behavior and such school-related variables as school performance, attendance, and attitudes toward school in general (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010; Christle et al., 2007; Cox et al., 1999; Stanard, 2003; Van Acker, 2007).

I also pointed out the disproportionate effects of the legislation on poor, non-white, and students with disabilities (Alexander et al., 2001; Bellis, 2003; Griffin, 2002; OJJDP, 2004; Pane & Salmon, 2009; Stanard, 2003; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2009). While scholars attempt to define and estimate the population of students impacted by these laws (Hughes & Adera, 2006; Lehr et al., 2009; and Van Acker, 2007), few qualitative studies of students who enroll in

alternative schools exist. Similarly, we have very little longitudinal research on students who are the products of alternative schools.

Most researchers mentioned in this chapter would agree to a statement that emphasizes the importance of succeeding in school. William Glasser (1969) wrote in *Schools Without Failure*:

I believe that if a child, no matter what his background, can succeed in school, he has an excellent chance for success in life. If he fails at any stage of his educational career – elementary school, junior high, high school, or college – his chances for success in life are greatly diminished. (p. 5)

The authors reviewed here found that alternative schools, as marginal as they might appear, are at best a successful alternative placement for students who find themselves defined by the Safe Schools Act, and at worst, a dumping ground for special education students, delinquents, and misfits.

Although not condoning behaviors that can run from aggravating to criminal, Dryfoos (1990) proposed that antisocial and at-risk behaviors could stem, at least in part, from ineffective schooling and include feelings by the students of failure and frustration. Van Acker (2007) admits that no single risk factor can predict who will reach dangerous levels of antisocial behavior. More importantly, empirical research does not support or deny the long-term effectiveness for students who volunteered, or the school districts forced, into alternative school programs. Many researchers can describe what is “best practices” within the environment (Gottfredson, 2001; Reimer & Cash, 2003; Van Acker, 2007; Young, 1990), yet few researchers include student voice in their analysis.

In sum, researchers report mixed results on whether the current, usually disciplinary, alternative schools have been effective (Cox et al., 1995; Dodge et al., 2006; Lehr et al, 2009) and very little qualitative research that has allowed former students to describe and reflect on their experiences in the alternative educational classroom. Alternative programs are worthy of research and study due to their importance to so many districts as they provide students deemed to be a danger to the public school population their only educational opportunity. In this project, I attempt to fill some of the gaps in the research by studying students who attended alternative schools in Missouri to find out about their experiences, recollections, and current life circumstances.

In the next chapter, I describe the methods I used to collect data from former students who described their experiences at an alternative education program, reflected on their current circumstances, and discussed how their secondary school experience informed their adult life. Most of these former students had little choice but to attend the local alternative school. The court system ordered a few students to attend and the others were surprisingly, volunteers. To inform future policy and practice within alternative education programming, it would be helpful to hear about the student's experiences and what kind of impact their alternative school placement has had on their lives.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHOD

Researchers use qualitative research methods to examine practices and perceptions, and to make sense of people's experiences. Merriam (1998) defined qualitative research as "an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible" (p. 5). Taylor and Bogdan (1998) further define qualitative research as "understanding people from their own frames of reference and experiencing reality as they experience it" (p. 7).

The first step of a qualitative analysis is to ask through a literature and document review, what actually happened in a situation or historical context? I have addressed this question through a review of the legislation and the disciplinary alternative school movement in the previous chapter. More specifically, I explored the nature of the school policy and program changes due directly to the Missouri Safe Schools Act of 1997, and discussed the broad research about alternative education programs and their effectiveness.

In the design of the study, I used a broad qualitative framework that I constructed drawing from the work of several qualitative methodologists (Holliday, 2001; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln, 1985; Patton, 1990; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Seidman, 1998). I began with purposive and snow ball sampling methods (Goodman, 2001) and generating data through semi-structured interviews of students (Berg, 1989). Blinde and McClung (1997) stated "qualitative methods allow respondents the opportunity to discuss what they deem to be the most relevant and meaningful aspects of their experiences" (p. 329). While interviewing, I maintained a semi-structured approach to help to ensure the trustworthiness of the data I collected, while also allowing "sufficient flexibility for exploring uncharted paths" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 145). I

also collected data via a private facebook set up for former alternative school students to share their experiences.

For the data collection itself, Mason's (2002) ideas of data "generating" as opposed to collection, influenced me because my role has been an active one in the phenomena of alternative education and at times, in the lives of the students involved in this study. I have conducted an inductive analysis of the data, evaluation, and auditing of the results throughout the study (Abrams, 2010; Holliday, 2001; Mason, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with the assumption, as is common in most qualitative studies, that the generating of data and the analysis process are interwoven. While interviewing, I attempted to use open-ended methods (Goodman, 2001; Patton, 1990) and even alert my interviewees to this approach in the interview schedule (Appendix A). In reference to qualitative preferences, and in particular in gathering stories and narratives from participants, a project's distinctiveness and experiential quality, "lies in its resistance to being pinned down" (Abrams, 2010, p. 24). In the next section, I explore why this study was best suited to a flexible qualitative methodology.

The Naturalistic Design

Karl Popper (1961) described a specific reason to use naturalistic methods as a tool of study by stating the importance of researchers considering "unintended consequences of deliberate human acts" (p. 45). These consequences are important considerations when studying educational legislation and policy. As an example, excluding so many students from schools was not the expressed intention of the Missouri Safe Schools Act of 1997, but it did give school administrators the authority to create alternative schools for those students labeled at-risk.

This study was exploratory in nature as I collected rich and detailed descriptions from former students regarding their secondary education experience in a disciplinary alternative

school. Since it was not my goal to do an analysis of the effectiveness of these programs, but rather to understand how students experienced alternative schools, my study was well suited to a qualitative design. In what follows, I provide a window into the lives of those who experienced alternative schooling to see what we can learn from them that numbers cannot tell us.

Mason (2002) wrote that one should select qualitative and/or historical methodologies if looking for opinions, analyses, values, ideals, and perceptions. Lazaraton (2003) suggested that qualitative inquiry is most suited to comment on sociopolitical issues. Further, naturalistic studies are useful tools of advocacy, according to Thompson (2000), for “groups marginalized or excluded from formal channels of power” (p. 154). Most alternative school students from the 1990s to the present have had very little choice in enrollment and there is little information regarding their potential continued levels of marginalization within their communities. Some studies exist regarding outcomes for students enrolled in alternative education programs, yet I found no studies that explored the world and experiences of alternative education students after graduation, or leaving, alternative schools.

Participant Selection

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) posited that “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 2). In the case of alternative education, the organization, mission, and scope can vary widely between districts and even within a certain school over time. In this section, I describe the rationale of my purposeful, or criterion based sampling procedure (Patton, 1990). Specifically, I limited my sample to students who attended a certain alternative school during a certain time. Purposeful sampling occurs when “the investigators use their judgement

and prior knowledge to choose people for the sample who would best serve the purposes of the study” (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 1998, p. 144).

In 1997, the State of Missouri fully funded the “safe schools” initiative and I became the program director of four alternative schools, serving four school districts in Southeast Missouri. I left the academic goals, student population, curriculum, and size, up to the individual school administrators. Two of the districts chose to operate as “a school within a school,” and students attended part time for one or two classes when they had trouble academically or socially in the traditional classroom.

One other program was in an extremely rural district. The director/teacher was a very experienced individual who chose to serve a very small population of primarily students with individual education plans and learning disabilities. This was a full time program with many of the students not returning to the sending district but eventually attempting to pass a general education test for a diploma. All of the aforementioned programs served students experiencing removal, suspension, or expulsion from their sending school for safe school violations or for extreme attendance problems.

The largest school district in my jurisdiction, Riverton (a pseudonym), decided to operate a full time program, serving expelled, suspended, or previously dropped students. As the largest district in a city with a population of approximately thirty five thousand, and with a minority population of eight percent, this alternative school proved to be the largest of the four that I directed, with the most staff, teachers, and a full time administrator. During the first year (1997), we enrolled only 20 students, but within three years, there were approximately 75 to 100 students per year attending. Many students did not complete one year of education before dropping out again or finding themselves back in court. Each year, approximately 20 to 25 students

graduated. Because of the size of this school, and the consistency of curriculum and staff over time, I chose Riverton Alternative School as the location for this study.

To create a purposeful sample of students, I drew from those students who completed at least two consecutive semesters (one year) at the Riverton alternative school. The students attended sometime between 1997 and 2007, which is when my particular involvement ended with these schools, due to the state moving budget allocations from the judicial circuit's juvenile divisions to the individual school districts. My working relationship with the Riverton Alternative school from 1997 to 2007 was useful in developing rapport with the interviewees. Sampling this particular school also allowed me to assess and describe the gathered data "experiences" in light of what the actual program goals were in that historical context.

The primary technique I used to collect data in this study was semi-structured interviewing. I also collected information via comments on a facebook page. Burgess (1984) referred to qualitative interviewing as "conversation with a purpose" (p. 102). In this study, I was specifically interested in student's interpretations and understandings of their experience in, and due to, their time in an alternative school. Listening to their accounts was the best way to achieve that end. I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with former students who attended Riverton Alternative School for at least a year between the years of 1997 and 2007.

I used a snowball sample technique (Goodman, 2001; Holliday, 2001; Shadish et al., 2002), beginning with students who I had contact with in my role as a juvenile officer and students who had maintained contact with several of the teachers from that time period. Qualitative researchers have used this technique of locating and sampling a population, "where existing study subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances" (Goodman, 2001, p.2). In selecting the former students, I looked for those with a range of experiences. I

interviewed some students who had previously dropped out of school, for various reasons, and found that returning to the alternative school program was a better fit than the traditional school environment. Suh, Suh, and Houston (2007) found that students struggling academically were often discipline problems in the classroom. I also interviewed students who were able to graduate from the alternative school and some who eventually graduated from their original sending schools.

Interview Pilot and Data Collection

As is standard practice for qualitatively designed studies, research methods, strategies, coding methodologies, and timelines are dependent on ongoing data collection and analysis (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). As part of designing this study, I pilot tested my preliminary interview questions by having several 30-minute conversations with a former student from the Riverton Alternative School who fit the profile of my participants of this study. I then simulated an actual interview with him by asking all of my prepared interview questions. Arvis (a pseudonym) is a community youth worker employed in Missouri.

While I have had brief conversations with former students in past years who attended Riverton Alternative school, I was not sure how much information they could provide for me about their experiences, especially the longer they were out of school. Every time I talked to a former student, I was amazed at the depth of their recollections. The pilot interview confirmed for me that this population of students could teach us much about what it is like to have attended a disciplinary alternative school and that memories and reflections on the experience are a rich source of information.

Arvis attended the Riverton Alternative School for two years. He was very comfortable speaking about his experiences while attending the school and we talked for approximately thirty

minutes regarding the interview schedule. He helped to confirm for me that the questions I asked would help to uncover significant experiences during attendance and the influence on the alternative school on former students' current lives.

From my pilot with Arvis, I determined three things:

- 1) Alternative school students, many years out of high school, can remember many details, stories, events, and have many opinions regarding the quality of their secondary school experience.
- 2) I need to use more direct questions and probes to generate data around the circumstances of the student's enrollment at the disciplinary alternative school.
- 3) In some cases, a follow up interview, or conversation would be necessary to allow us time to reflect on the previous conversation and understand experiences more deeply.

I have had two conversations following the pilot interview with Arvis, that he initiated, to further discuss events and experiences brought up in his interview. These conversations and the data gathered from the pilot interview resulted in slight changes in the interview schedule. I needed to be more specific regarding the circumstances that brought the students to the program. I also needed to ask for specific "stories" that distilled experiences representing the student's daily routine while involved in the program. I added several items to the final interview guide which I include as Appendix A.

Berg (1989) and others (Mason, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 1995) described the semi-structured interview as the researcher following several predetermined questions in a consistent order, but allowing the interviewee to freely tell their story and answer the questions in their own way. I suspected that because of their history, this population of students might want to share stories and experiences that veer from my tentative guide. I routinely asked "unscheduled

probes” (Berg, 1989, p. 17) as the interviews progressed, as my overall intent was to acknowledge that individuals approach and see the world in different ways and thus could need different prompts in discussing their experiences.

Interview Guide

I designed the interview guide (Appendix A) to explore the characteristics and backgrounds of the students to illustrate the complexities of what has so broadly and arbitrarily been defined as at-risk. I explored four broad areas in each interview:

1. General information and participation at the alternative school (During what years did you attend the alternative school? Can you describe the alternative school you attended?).
2. Impact and circumstances regarding enrollment at the alternative school (How did you happen to attend the alternative high school? What were some of the struggles you experienced?).
3. Transition from the alternative school experience to other educational and/or vocational endeavors (Did you graduate? What have you been doing since leaving school? What jobs have you held?).
4. The student’s status and the impact of the alternative school experience (What are your plans now? Do you think your time at the alternative school helped or hurt your chances in life?).

I continued to refine the interview guide with each interview. Here I followed Rubin and Rubin’s (1995) advice that “researchers set up an overall framework for the interview to keep the interview on course yet allow sufficient flexibility for exploring uncharted paths” (p. 145).

To increase the rigor of the study, I interviewed each person once and then followed up with a second contact to discuss any remaining questions, to share broad themes that were developing. Throughout the interviews, I asked questions to encourage depth of the interviewee's response (Goodman, 2001; Patton, 1990). For example, I would ask, "Was that the only time you experienced that particular situation while at school?" or "How did you feel about that situation?" From this line of questioning, I expected to get more in depth stories that would help explain the types of communications that occurred between students and between teachers and students at the alternative school. I also expected to hear and feel content that is more emotional and personal to the students while using these probing style questions (Berg, 1989).

Research Plan

I began this study by sending a message out to prospective interviewees. One of the Riverton Alternative School teachers who retired from that role approximately five years ago, kept an extensive contact list on facebook. With his help, I sent out an invitation to join a private facebook discussion group to maintain contact with former students and to assist me in gathering information for this study. The group was set up to be by invitation only, and further, I posted the SIUC's human subject's board approval on the site, noting that any posted information could end up in the final paper, but that all names, locations, and situations, would be, as much as possible, changed to protect the identity of the participants.

I posted the request on his "page" at about 10:00 AM, one week day in March, 2013, checked the website at about 1:30 PM, and there were already 69 members signed up for this new group. The students immediately began to post information about themselves and their families. They wrote about events that happened at the alternative school, and credited their

teachers and alternative school administrators for sticking with them during that time in their lives. Eventually, the site contained 79 members.

After about one week, I posted my contact phone numbers and an email address on the web site, along with information about the study and a request for interviewees, as well as an explanation of the time requirement for the interview. I also explained that the study was about recording their experiences and stories, and reporting on what they were currently doing in light of their alternative school experiences. On the first day, I received two contacts and started interviewing the following evening. In the end, I interviewed 26 former students.

I audio recorded each of the interviews, and as part of the interview data collection process, I made post interview comments after each interview describing nonverbal cues and any insights that would not have been picked up in the transcripts. I also kept a running commentary while personally transcribing all 26 of the interviews. The transcriptions totaled 66,148 words, or 149 single spaced pages of text. Following the transcriptions of the 26 interviews, I also copied and pasted content from the social media page into a text document, along with notes from my conversations with the former students, and saved them for later coding. The social media contacts added the voice of 14 more individuals to the total data set bringing it to 40.

Establishing Contact

I began interviewing during the first week of March 2013 and continued for approximately 30 days. I interviewed everyone who contacted me, and met the designated time span of attendance at the Riverton Alternative School. Three individuals set up appointments, but then did not show up. I was unsuccessful in rescheduling these appointments. I went to several homes to interview because the former students did not have transportation, or could not arrange babysitting for their children.

During the time I was actively interviewing, other former students who wanted to discuss their experiences contacted me. However, for reasons such as living out of state, and in one case, living in another country, I was unable to interview them face to face. These former students engaged in conversations and shared questions and comments back and forth on facebook, in some cases, we spoke on the phone, and I kept detailed notes from those conversations. The total number of individuals in this category numbered 14 (Table 1). In the end, I conducted 26 face-to-face interviews (Table 2), and interacted with 14 additional participants via facebook and phone conversations (40).

I conducted most of the interviews in a small conference room in a county government building. The interviews occurred after normal work hours and on weekends when the building was empty of employees. These times were the most convenient for the interviewees. The interview format consisted of personal introductions, an explanation of the study, signing of the consent to interview documents approved by the human subjects committee, and an explanation of the various precautions that would occur with the resulting taped interview and transcript. The tapes will remain locked in my safe for at least seven years. After the interview, I took time to reflect on the interview, and make notes regarding the process, preliminary analyses, and question for follow-up with other participants.

In-Depth Individual Interviews

My questions, comments, interjections, secondary prompt questions, influenced the course of the information provided by my participants. The interviews typically began with my participants identifying the years that they attended the alternatives schools. I found it easiest to focus on what building the students were in because there were frequent moves over the years as the program grew and finally, when the school district took over the administration and funding

Table 1

Messages from Individuals on Social Media Site

	<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Graduated</i>	<i>Court</i>	<i>Post-secondary Ed.</i>
1.	Lisa	Female	W	Diploma	No	No
2.	Nicole	Female	W	Diploma	No	No
3.	Paula	Female	W	Diploma	No	No
4.	Danielle	Female	W	Diploma	No	Yes: A.A.
5.	Colin	Male	W	Diploma	No	No
6.	Tammy	Female	W	Diploma	No	Yes: A.A., and Military
7.	Rena	Female	W	Diploma	No	Yes: toward a B.A.
8.	Virginia	Female	W	Diploma	No	Yes: toward a B.A.
9.	Shari	Female	W	Diploma	No	No
10.	Hanna	Female	W	Diploma	No	Yes: toward a B.A.
11.	Marco	Male	W	Diploma	No	No
12.	Sally	Female	W	Diploma	No	No
13.	Henri	Male	W	Diploma	No	No
14.	Sam	Male	W	Diploma	No	Yes: A.A. and Military

Table 2

Individuals Personally Interviewed

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Graduated</i>	<i>Court</i>	<i>Post-secondary Ed.</i>
1. Barry	Male	AA	GED	No	Yes: B.A., Criminal Justice
2. Dorian	Male	W	GED	No	No
3. Andrea	Female	W	Diploma	Yes	B.A., Nursing
4. Jerry	Male	W	Diploma	No	No
5. Erin	Female	W	Diploma	No	No
6. Chantal	Female	W	Diploma	No	Yes: A.A.
7. Karen	Female	W	GED	Yes	No
8. Melissa	Female	W	Diploma	No	No
9. Tanya	Female	W	Diploma	No	Yes, B.A., J.D.
10. Nestor	Male	AA	Diploma	No	No
11. Van	Male	W	GED	No	Yes: Tech. A.A.
12. Bret	Male	W	Diploma	No	No
13. Don	Male	W	Diploma	No	No
14. Lee	Male	AA	Diploma	No	No
15. Rebecca	Female	W	Diploma	No	Yes: A.A.
16. Franklin	Male	W	Diploma	No	Yes: A.A.
17. Emily	Female	W	GED	No	No
18. Nate	Male	W	No	No	No
19. Irene	Female	W	Diploma	Yes	Yes: A.A.
20. Maria	Female	W	Diploma	No	No
21. Bonnie	Female	AA	Diploma	Yes	No
22. Gabrielle	Female	AA	Diploma	No	Yes: B. A.
23. Ingrid	Female	W	Diploma	No	Yes: (toward a B.A.)
24. Fiona	Female	W	No	No	No
25. Tomas	Male	AA	Diploma	No	No
26. Vince	Male	AA	Diploma	No	Yes: B.A.

of the program in 2007. Each building seemed to have its own educational atmosphere and quirks, both good and bad, as described by the former students.

The earlier programs were characteristically, smaller, less organized, and enrolled more court ordered individuals. During the interviews, at least one former student from those early years spoke of smoking marijuana on the roof of the school building. Others spoke of physical assaults, having money stolen and agitated students overturning desks and storming out of the program and teachers following them down the sidewalk in attempts to deescalate situations. A later school site, on the other hand, featured a shared space with a church, a day care, and students taking frequent walks to the nearby park and feeling safe enough to bring their infant children to class when necessary.

Although many of the interviews were pleasant experiences, with students detailing their accomplishments and positive family scenarios, some of the situations and life histories the students relayed were grim. They detailed criminal activity, legal problems, child abuse and neglect situations from their past; police “swat teams” knocking down their doors; debilitating illnesses; and car accidents resulting in permanent disabilities. Some of the former students were raising children with varying degrees of disabilities and health issues that they voluntarily mentioned as an added concern.

Many students expressed embarrassment, and appeared ashamed by the situations that resulted in their alternative school placement. At some point in the interview, several students remarked that, “they were not the same person now.” I found myself in many of the interviews elaborating on the roles of the court, specifically, as to the funding source for the alternative school program. Looking back on the transcripts, at times, I appeared frustrated that the public school co-opted the intent of the program by placing students for minor events in an apparent

arbitrary manner. On the other hand, I had many opportunities to hear and participate in positive events these students shared about their personal lives and families.

Demographics

In approximately a 30 day period, I sat down with 26 individuals who had been students at Riverton Alternative School. In total, seven were white males, 12 were white females, five were African American males, and two were African American females. Another 14 former students chose to communicate with me on facebook only. In that group, 10 were white females and four were white males. In the two tables below, I provide brief information on my 40 participants.

As the interview process began, it became clear to me that African American alumni were not contacting me. As a strategy to reach as many different voices as possible, I enlisted the help of three Riverton School District employees, who were also African American, to reach out through phone calls, emails, and social media postings, in an attempt to increase those numbers.

I also searched through the yearbooks and attempted to locate others through local and internet phonebooks, web searches, and through Missouri Case.net, which is a website open to the public, that displays court records that includes contact information. This did result in a few more contacts, but even when former students were located in this manner, unfortunately, they were not willing, or did not choose to make themselves available for interviewing. The reality seemed to be that if the African American student was not successful in the alternative school program, or did not graduate, they would not be part of the group that “self selected” to tell me what were mostly positive stories about their attendance.

The American Promise Alliance (APA) found in 2009 that almost 50 percent of African American and Hispanic students, nationally, do not complete high school with their peers (APA, 2009). Similarly, anecdotal information from the Riverton alternative school suggests that African American students were less successful there than white students.

It was also common for me to have a second contact with many of the former students who I interviewed. For example, they would call me, or post a message on the social media page. One student wanted follow up information regarding web based GED classes, and another wanted information about a possible employment opportunity we had discussed. Most of these follow-up conversations simply confirmed information we discussed in the original interview and did not lead me to any new reflections.

Many of those former students who I interviewed continued to reside within 150 miles of their childhood home region. Some had moved out of state and even out of the United States for brief periods, but most were residing in their moderate sized, Missouri County of approximately 65,000 individuals.

As a group, I would suggest that these former students had found acceptance in the local community with jobs, families, and children. Even though it was not a question on the interview schedule, I kept track of the number of children the former students mentioned from these interviews. Just the children mentioned by the 26 interviewed students tallied 54. My sense was that all of the students I interviewed had their children's best interest in mind, and as evidence, made various comments that would indicate their interest in their children's future educational and vocational success.

Interpreting Data

As mentioned before, the bulk of the data came from my transcriptions of the 26 interviews. Once I transcribed all of the interviews, which I did as I was gathering them, I read over the resulting data and began the coding process, first by indentifying recurrent words, phrases, and topics. I also coded and analyzed the facebook comments similarly. Across the collected data, I looked for contrasts, paradoxes, and irregularities (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Malu, 2010; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). I also highlighted specific comments that students related and looked for similarities and differences in their experiences across the transcripts of the interviews that applied to the research questions (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984).

I then read the transcriptions over again to identify broad topics related to my research questions. I identified seven distinct topics after multiple reads of the transcriptions and notes from facebook, as well as key quotes that seemed to point to themes within these topics. I then read all the material at least two more times to explore the theoretical assumptions that I began this study with and that would influence my discussion and conclusions.

For purposes of identifying individual students, I use pseudonyms. In Table 2, I summarize by interview order, other identifiers (race, sex, and educational achievement), and whether or not the student was court ordered to attend the alternative school. I do not want to imply that this break down was the only pertinent categorical divisions between the students. Other identifiers such as length of time in the alternative school program, the year, and size of the student population, and the student's family involvement and acceptance of the alternative school, also carried significance in the analysis of the data.

Analysis of Data

I organized my analysis of the data in relation to the two research questions in my study:

1. How (following the Missouri Safe School Act of 1997) do students who attended a Missouri disciplinary alternative education school for at least one year, describe the experience of attending these schools?
2. How (following the Missouri Safe Schools Act of 1997) do students who attended a Missouri disciplinary alternative education school for at least one year, perceive the impact of their experience on their present life circumstances?

For the first research question, I asked my participants about “the circumstances and experience of attending” the alternative school. I describe the information the former students provided in the following four categories (see Figure 1):

1. Circumstances/events that lead to enrollment in Riverton;
2. How the former students identify themselves, and their family, during their time of attendance at Riverton;
3. Riverton Alternative School, as described by the former students;
4. The public school, as described by the former students;

The second phase of the interviews was focused on the here and now, or the impact of the alternative school experience on the former student’s present life. The data yielded three categories of information (see Figure 2):

1. Meaning or interpretations, as the former student’s describe and make meaning of their lives;
2. Their current status (jobs, family, education);
3. Their goals, dreams, and motivations;

I divide my data analysis into two chapters. In Chapter Four, I discuss former students’ experiences in Riverton and their reflections on those experiences. In Chapter Five, I focus on

their current lives and the ways in which they think their experiences at Riverton influenced their present circumstances.

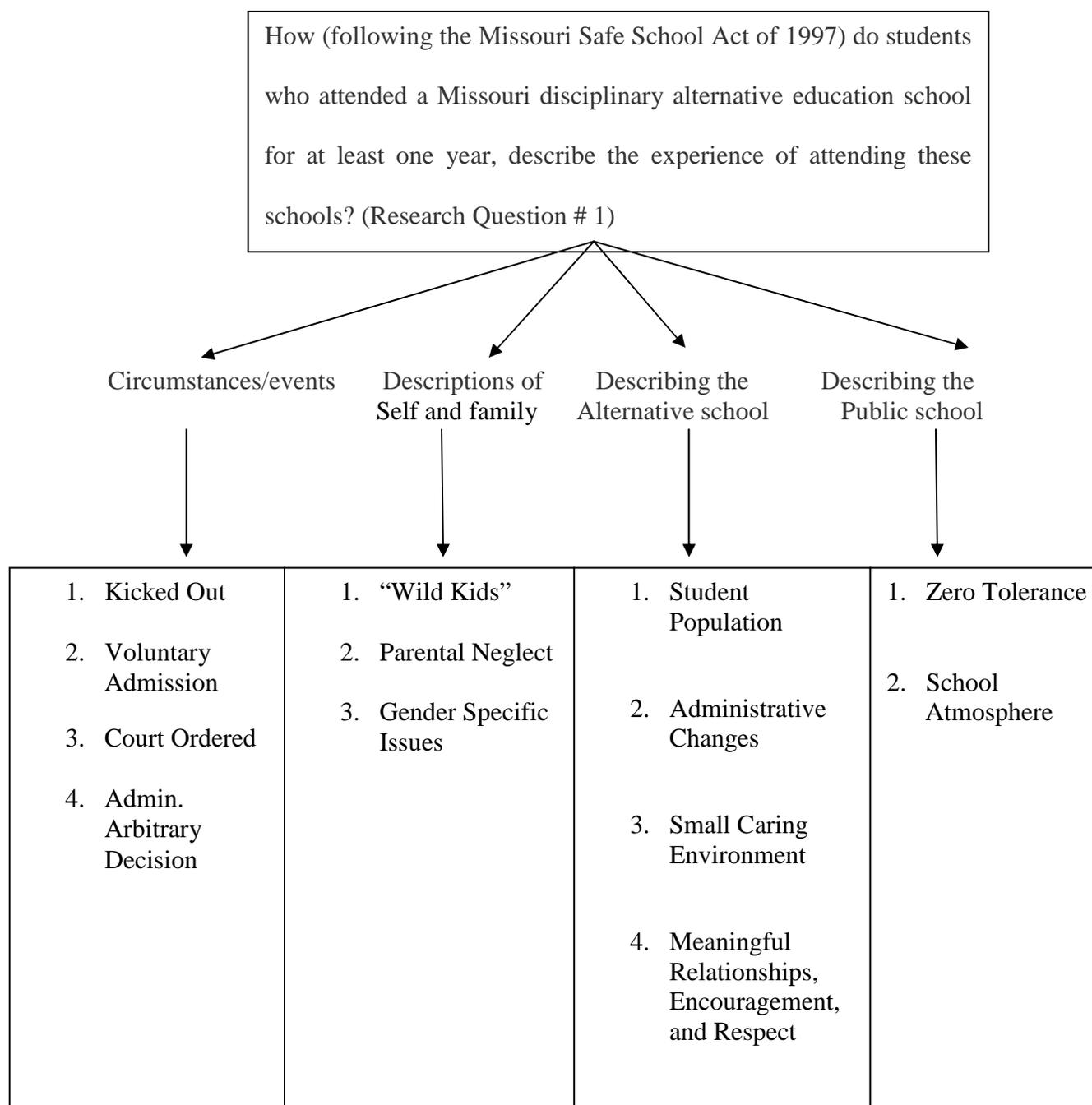


Figure 1

Outline of Emergent Categories from Research Question Number One

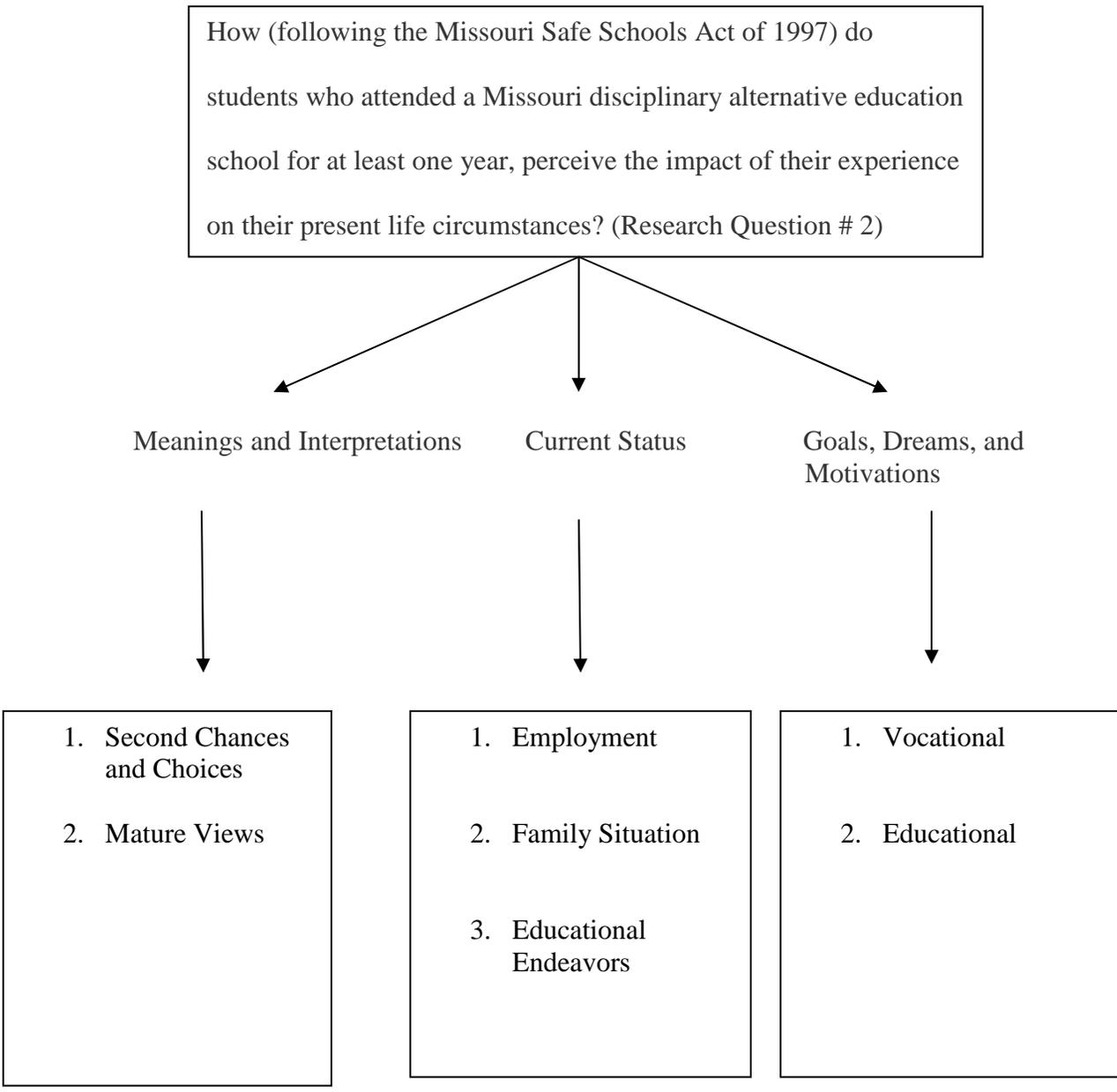


Figure 2

Outline of Emergent Categories from Research Question Number Two

Limitations

One of the major limitations to this study is that I did not have access to the official recorded reasons why the alternative school admitted individual interviewees. The student's memories and perspectives might contain personal bias in many cases, regarding their initial enrollment at the alternative school. The fact remains that they were there. They somehow managed to attend, and many graduated from high school (and for some of them, graduate from the disciplinary alternative school), and their perceptions, memories, and impressions could shed light on the phenomena of alternative education from a student's perspective.

Memories distorted by time and filtered through life experiences are how we “convert the fragmentary remains of experience into autobiographical narratives that endure over time and constitute the stories of our lives” (Schacter, 1996, p. 71). This perspective could be particularly valuable as we continue to reassess and reform our educational strategies for working with marginalized students.

Role of the Researcher

The ontological perspective of a researcher strongly influences the philosophical underpinnings of any research project. My particular orientation is constructivist. That is, I believe reality is dependent on who interprets it, and over time and with the addition of new circumstances, variables, and evidence, how we understand reality might change. Also important to my perspective and ontology are the belief, as expressed by Holliday (2001), that “qualitative research is a creative exploration akin to the research we all do in every day life” (p. 10) and the belief that research is part of social action. Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, and Richardson (1992) expressed this idea by stating, “researchers cannot help being socially located

persons” (p. 5). A written study of this type includes the researcher as the instrument to describe to the reader a rather complex human situation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

In regards to ontological positioning and preliminary questions to take into consideration prior to actual research, Mason (2002) stated, “What is the nature of the phenomena or entities, or social reality (situation) which I wish to investigate?” (p. 198). I maintain that the positioning of actual students, their thoughts, and perspectives, in the alternative school literature is significant. I argue that those in power, and the systems that maintain power, control how they place some students in alternative settings. Legislative and administrative groups created sometimes haphazard arrangements and social constructs to address complex problems culminating in alternative school students needing to negotiate their own survival and ultimate exit strategy which for some, was graduation.

The many years that I have worked in the educational and juvenile court setting, as well as my coursework in qualitative analysis, and previous qualitative research experiences, have invariably influenced my research. The data that I gathered comes from an alternative school program in the Midwest, for which I wrote the original funding proposal and acted as project administrator for an eight-year-period. Guba and Lincoln (1989) argue that self-awareness of the researcher is essential to the credibility of a study. I followed a well-documented and logical process in this study, so a reader can presumably transfer and apply the resulting conclusions to his or her own situation and experiences.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four constructs that best establish the trustworthiness of qualitative research design: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. An investigator achieves credibility when they thoroughly and accurately identify and describe the

research topic through use of multiple sources of evidence. I can determine the degree of credibility by the extent to which the descriptions of the study findings are plausible. I can identify plausible findings by:

1. Interviewing, using approved techniques to answer research questions and to gain information that is not available in written primary source material.
2. Being aware, and accounting for, personal biases that may influence data collection.
3. Reflecting on interpretations and perceptions of the findings (Franklin & Ballan, 2001).

I also asked several peers to examine the transcribed interviews, review my assumptions and to discuss the areas in which I have assumed meaning and content while coding. This approach is recommended as a technique to reduce, or at least bring to light, personal biases entering into the analysis as well as uncover themes that may have been missed (Creswell, 2007).

Because the researcher takes an active role in data generation in qualitative analysis, trustworthiness of the methodology and the sources of information must be critically examined at all stages of the study. Padgett (2004) elaborated on this issue with practical suggestions and strategies to achieve and enhance trustworthiness by prolonging engagement with interviewees and auditing data throughout the research event. I identified graduates from a particular alternative school for which I wrote the initial funding proposals, and I used the aforementioned techniques as the data emerged from the conducted interviews.

Summary

I interviewed former high school students who experienced the disciplinary alternative school program in a representative Missouri school district and heard them describe what they were doing now and how their time at the alternative school affected their life. I found there are

historical similarities between other times when the powerful made decisions for the good of the group or community that resulted in unexpected and at times horrendous consequences. As noted by Jane Addams (1912), founder of Hull House and a contemporary of John Dewey, “It is easy for the good and powerful to think that they can rise by following the dictates of conscience by pursuing their own ideals, leaving those ideals unconnected with the consent of their fellowmen” (p. 135). Admittedly, federal legislation and various states enacted “Safe School Acts” in an effort to reduce the risk of violent crime and make schools safer, but the impact has had far-reaching effects beyond school safety.

On a more micro level, in the following data analysis chapters I provide a descriptive account of a sample from the Riverton Alternative School students that includes demographics of the interviewees, narrative accounts and stories, with many former students starting with at least the gist of what my pilot interviewee stated; “Now that I am older, I see things differently.” Due to the depth and complexity of the data that I gathered, I chose to divide my data analysis into the following two chapters. In the final chapter, I offer interpretations through the lens of critical theory and reflect on the idea that certain events have a far-reaching impact on individual experience and the powerful bureaucracies that move us (Foucault, 1980).

CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSIS FROM FIRST RESEARCH QUESTION

In this chapter, I describe the information collected from the students who attended the Riverton Alternative School program between the years of 1997 and 2007. I organized the information in sections that help answer the research question, “How do the former students of Riverton Alternative School describe the experience of their attendance? The former students describe events that resulted in suspensions or expulsions, followed by enrollment at the available alternative school that was usually a voluntary action on their part. Some students sought out the alternative school with no exceptional delinquent or otherwise negative circumstances. Both of these forms of entry into the Riverton Alternative school are sections in this chapter.

Very few students were court ordered to attend. Many were encouraged to attend by public school administrators, friends, or family members. Many descriptions of family life occurred in the interviews that I will describe in this chapter, along with self-descriptions by the former students that give meaning to their experiences around the time of their attendance. Other areas that the students and I explored in the interviews were general descriptions and stories about what it was like attending the alternative school and their previous public school. Their descriptions contained many similar experiences that developed into the categories detailed below.

Circumstances and Events Leading to Enrollment

The first major category under the first research question, regarding the circumstances and experiences of attending the Riverton Alternative School, appeared very early in the interview of most former students. The question that usually urged the participants to describe

their story, or the event that lead them to the Riverton Alternative School program was, “Tell me the circumstances of how you started to attend the alternative school?” Barry indicated one of the most common reasons for enrolling in the alternative school, other than for court directed reasons. “I had a lapse of about four months where I wasn’t enrolled in school at all. And then I went down and spoke with R.D. (principal) and got enrolled in alternative school.”

In the early days of Riverton Alternative School, due to the size of the building, the program was able to maintain only 20 students. There were two teachers and one administrator on site. The program originated with the intent of educating youth referred and supervised by the court. I came to find out that many students did not come via court referral. During the interviews, I always followed the “how enrolled” question by identifying the years and the buildings in which the students attended. This assisted me in placing an approximate student body size, administrative configuration, and the facility impact, clearly in my mind during the interview.

During the early interviews, I was still under the assumption that many of the youth in the program were court-involved students. It became apparent early on, as similarly reported by Lawrence (1998); a large number of situations fell short of a law violation and adjudication. In my fourth interview, Jerry provided one of the typical reasons:

Yeah, mine was, I never got kicked out of school. I accumulated a lot of referrals, I was suspended all of the time, but, the next semester was coming on and my mom somehow or another they got me enrolled at the alternative school because I just couldn’t succeed at Riverton Junior High School.

Jerry provided much information about the alternative school, in part because he was the student who stayed in the program the longest. He attended from seventh grade through high

school graduation. This interview helped me to see the broad reach the program had over those who exhibited no criminal behavior, but instead had a deep history of attendance troubles, feeling unattached from their previous school district, or simply found they could function better in a smaller setting.

Another student who relayed the same innocuous beginnings with her placement at the Riverton Alternative School was Maria. She had attended the program at the end of the court's administrative involvement. She remembered a reason for attending that had to do in part with the size of the public school and the corresponding smallness of the Riverton Alternative School:

Well, I chose to go there, I didn't get sent there. First off Riverton High is a really, really big school and I didn't get along with a lot of people there. I didn't have the one on one that I really needed with teachers because there were so many students there ... and it was a smaller school, so less people that I had to deal with.

Gabrielle also reported having distraction and concentration issues while at the public school that could have indicated a need for specific attention, or assistance, from a special services provider from within the school district. It is not atypical for alternative schools to ask teachers and administrators to assume multiple roles including counselors and special education providers (Neuman, 1994). When asked about her circumstances:

Um, I need a smaller setting; it was hard for me to concentrate on my studies at the regular high school. The principal at Riverton High recommended that I go talk to the principal (at the alternative school). I think the principal's name at the time was Mr. D.? So, we had an interview with Mr. D. and he thought it was best for me and my sister to attend.

It was still difficult for me to believe that the district was not making more efforts to retain these students in the regular public school, for example, by teaching appropriate study habits, or evaluating for some type of accommodation rather than placing them at the alternative school. In the interviews, I regularly asked questions like those below:

There wasn't anything about the court involved, or anything like that it was an agreement with the school system? What kind of changes in friends, family, living arrangements, whatever, occurred when you changed over?

In Gabrielle's case, like many others, the answer was that she came to the program with no law violations or court involvement. When I asked about changes, she was clear that the alternative school was a better fit:

No, nothing changed; it was just easier for me to concentrate on my studies, and to graduate from high school. Most of my friends were already attending; I had about five or six friends who were attending there already so it wasn't like a big change for friends.

It is important to note that of the students interviewed, only four were there by an adjudication (found guilty and ordered by a court). The other 22 students were either enrolled by their (and their families') choice, or due to an event that could have been illegal, but was usually considered more of a disruption to the educational environment than a criminal offense. There was little or no evidence, or details described by the former students, that the described events ended in arrest or adjudication prior to their move to Riverton Alternative School.

“Kicked out”

Former students would indicate in their interviews that they were “kicked out” of their old school, but when pressed, they would tell me a tale of an event, or events, followed by a

discussion, then an agreement between the student, their parents, and a school administrator. The agreement in these cases usually culminated in a suspension followed by an enrollment at the court operated alternative school. Van, a married, community college student with two daughters, who related to me a desire to become a psychological counselor in a church setting, provided a good example of this phenomenon:

Well, I had ongoing issues with speaking out and talking in class and a bunch of referrals and I got sent to one of their In School Suspension (ISS) classrooms at Riverton High School. They said we can't deal with ya, so I had to find somebody that could and it was Riverton Alternative School that said that they would give me a shot.

As I remember, there was always a waiting list to attend the Riverton Alternative School, therefore, it is likely that there were many students in the same situation as Van, who were suspended and disappeared from Riverton's public school population, yet who were not offered the alternative school option.

During my fifth interview, I learned from Erin that zero tolerance policies could carry into the realm of absurdity by a public school being intolerant of those suffering from depression. Erin's initial "event" placed her in that enrolled student population at alternative schools across the country that faced issues of medical and psychological problems, handicaps, and self-harming tendencies (Knitzer et al., 1990; Lehr et al., 2003). She started at Riverton Alternative School during her ninth grade school year, continued through half of the tenth grade, then transferred to another district's public school for half a year, and then back to Riverton Alternative School in the eleventh grade through to her graduation. Her own words described a convoluted path to graduation:

Let's start off. My dad was in and out of prison. He got out when I was twelve and then he went back my ninth grade year and I was just devastated, depressed, um, one of my friends brought a handful of pills to school and I'd never taken pills never knew they could mess you up or anything and I was like, 'are these going to make me happier?' so I took all of them and overdosed in school. Got kicked out for being a threat to myself and others for 30 days, then I had ISS for 30 days and by the time that was over I had failed nearly all my classes except for an art class so in order to catch up on credits and everything and just embarrassment in general, I went to alt school.

In the above situation, I wondered, since she indicated that there were no efforts to place her in counseling or drug treatment, how did the move to the alternative school take place? Her response was:

Um, I'm not real sure how we heard about the alt school. Oh, F. L.! She was one of my best friends, and was actually going there before me because we actually overdosed together. She was the friend that gave me the pills. She got enrolled there before I did and she brought me an application. I remember now.

Through the course of the interviews, I heard many stories of an abrupt exit from public school and an entry into alternative school with no court process. A few former students indicated some type of due process, or an administrative hearing, conducted by school officials. For example, Tanya mentioned:

Tanya: I got kicked out of Riverton High for bringing alcohol to class. I had brought it in my water bottle... it was just handled by the school with Dr. N. (principal); it was his decision to suspend me for the 180 days. There was an appeal process but the school

board supported the decision. So we definitely tried to fight it because I mean I was the typical [kid], I took all of the higher classes, so we would fight that at any means.

Randall: So when the school board followed that decision, what did your parents think about you attending at the alternative school?

Tanya: They weren't thrilled about it, any more than I was.

I believe Tanya's report of an administrative hearing being held, yet with very little due process, and without her or her parents being aware that there were more steps they could have used through the local courts to get a more favorable ruling, illustrates the use of the power "apparatus," or as Foucault said, "the mechanisms of power" (Foucault, 1980, p. 39). The public school administrators knew quite well how to operate and leverage the policies to their advantage and to place students where it was most convenient.

After learning about the circumstances of their alternative school enrollment, we generally then discussed any stress or changes good or bad, the students encountered at the new school. I found out that if the goal was punishment for these students, it was short lived as evidenced by the frequently positive comments I received from the students. For example, Tanya said, "It was kind of like walking into Riverton High. I still had my old friends from high school. If anything it made me more popular." Despite my initial assumption that the experience at Riverton was punitive, Tanya provided a different picture:

It was a lot more accepting environment and the teachers actually paid attention to everyone and kind of let us choose how we wanted to learn. Before then I would follow the crowd. If they shopped for Hollister, I wanted to shop for Hollister. The school is where, it shaped you, and at least it set the grounds to follow anyway.

Her recounting of the struggles, acceptances, and negotiations with the alternative school staff describe the give and take of power components that play out in the school environment. How well a student enters into this “game” (Foucault, 1980; Peters, 2004) depends on many factors, both individual and relating to the make-up of the classroom and school. The congenial relationship that many of the former students reflected on, related to some degree of power they had to manipulate and negotiate in that environment.

In direct opposition to Tanya’s smooth transition to the alternative school student population and general curriculum, some former students reported some degree of trepidation prior to attending Riverton Alternative School, unless they had friends already in attendance:

Randall: There were some rowdy characters there?

Bonnie: Yes there was! I was like, this is me? I’m not, are they sure they got me in the right spot? I be looking at other people and say this is not for me. They said you’ll do fine, just don’t worry about them, we’ll keep them in line.

Voluntary Placement

Another female student, Irene, also expressed concern followed by surprise as to the make-up of the alternative school population. By this point in the interview process, I had become accepting of the fact that most of these students were voluntary placements and if the public school and the courts perceived the school as a disciplinary, boot camp style environment, they were mistaken. Describing her experience, Irene remarked:

I was scared at first, but it was not ... I liked it better than going to Riverton High, because everybody that was there was there because they wanted to be there. They weren’t there because their mom and dad were making them go to school. They were

there because they wanted to be there ... I pictured the worst. I pictured fights everywhere and I don't think I saw a single fight the whole time I was there and everybody got along, and I actually saw a bunch of kids that I gone to school with that I wondered what happened to them. There were people there for all sorts of different reasons. One of my friends was there just cause she was pregnant and had missed too much of class at Riverton High School for doctor's appointments.

Of the 26 students, I interviewed only two students were suspended, or expelled, for fighting; events that subsequently related to their alternative school placement. My review of literature on this topic showed that suspensions from school occur because of fighting only 10 percent of the time (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003; American Civil Liberties Union, 2008; Legislative Analyst Office, 1995). Both of these students were African American, one male and one female. The male student, Nestor, now a construction worker in a southern gulf state, related not exactly a fight, as I would typically define a fight as a court officer. Just like the previous student, Nestor found not punishment, but a pleasant learning environment upon enrolling at the Riverton Alternative School:

Nestor: I got into a fight and I was out the rest of the year. They just said I was too dangerous to be at the regular school.

Randall: Too dangerous for one fight?

Nestor: Yeah, I threw a stapler at a guy.

Lee was not court ordered to attend, but the "kicked out" theme continued in his story. Lee, another African American male, whose story, which I offer below, is reminiscent of others I heard that on the surface appeared to be criminal in nature. It is necessary to keep in mind that

prosecutors need a certain level of evidentiary requirements to prosecute a criminal case. As I listened to these stories through the lens and experiences of a court officer, it was clear that these situations usually did not meet the elements of a crime that a court would likely hear. In Lee's situation, I am sure his uncle had his day in adult court, but this young man's situation was "tried" by school administrators and not by court professionals. Describing his experience, Lee said:

Being dismissed from the incident that happened with my uncle, we were coming on the highway, and we had drugs in the car. It was such a large amount of drugs that they kicked me out. They ended up suspending me ... because I was in the car. I wasn't even involved in the drug process.

Lee reported the usual situation that seemed to have occurred with public school administrators at that time, which was letting students and their parents know that the school had already made their decision in the matter. Some researchers have indicated that arbitrary practices of suspension could be as much as five or six times higher in small towns when compared to large urban areas (Brooks et al., 2000; Cobb et al., 1997). This seems consistent with Lee's experience:

I was at school maybe one day, two days, the principal came and took me to the office and told me, ask me about the situation. I told him about the situation, he said due to new safe schools act and all that uh, the amount of drugs you been caught with, it's excessive, you know what I'm saying it's too much, excessive, so I'm going to have to let you go. They told me to go to alternative school and stay there a little minute, and come back, but, I went there and I just said, forget it. I just stayed there and went on and graduated from there. I got used to the teachers; we got real good relationships and all the teachers

liked me, they all respected me and I respected them, you know, and I just said forget it, I'll just go on and finish here.

This was not the last time that I heard a student make a choice to stay in the alternative school environment after they could have transferred back to public school. It seemed that they no longer “bought into” what Shor would have called the “existing canons ... as universal standards of excellence” (Shor, 1992, p. 256), and that a conscious choice was made to favor the trust and relationships with teachers over the seemingly less stigmatized choice offered by the public school.

Ingrid described yet another story, short of a crime, but with circumstances that resulted in a long suspension. Another former student said, “By the time the school district backed off their original 180 day suspension, the damage was done.” Ingrid was one of the former students who described embarrassment at returning to the public school even though she was not charged and the prosecutor’s office dismissed the charges on the adult driver. She described the events that led to her placement in detail:

[An older, male friend] picked us up to take us to lunch. We get down the street and he got pulled over, and they searched his car and found what they thought were drugs in the car. So therefore, by association, we were close to school property, and we got kicked out. I hadn’t been in any trouble before so this was kind of a big deal for me ... but because of the fact that once I got into the alternative school and I realized I was going to graduate early and I didn’t want to be embarrassed and go back to Riverton High, and be in front of my peers and be embarrassed and they would have known I’d got in trouble, I just went ahead and decided to finish out my school at the alternative school.

In exploring how the former students wound up at the alternative school, approximately half of the students detailed specific singular events. The other half described a pattern of behaviors and conduct, commonly known to the juvenile court system as status offences, or those things that minors do, that if they were adults would not be a crime, i.e., curfew, run away, not following parental directives, and school problems. By federal law (The Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974), juvenile courts cannot detain children for these status offences. Given the experiences of the participants in my study, school districts can remove children from school for up to a year, without any due process of any particular substance.

Court Ordered

Bonnie came to her interview after work dressed in her nursing scrubs. She received her certified nurse's aide license in the twelfth grade and said she has been working in local nursing homes for the past twelve years. Bonnie was one of the four (out of 26) individuals who was court ordered to attend Riverton Alternative School. Her enrollment event was a fight on a school bus and as Bonnie described it, "Me and one of the police officer's tussled a little bit."

It is important to note that Missouri Safe School Act violations could include behaviors that took place off school grounds but occurred while doing school related activities. For example, the court would receive safe school violation reports regarding school bus incidents, bus stop issues, and even arrests that the school would take action on while children were walking to and from school.

The school districts seem to throw the net wider over children in lower socio-economic areas and within the African American community. It was difficult to picture Bonnie, a soft-spoken woman, as an adolescent who committed the acts she described. From various comments in her interview, I surmised family members or friends pushed her into this role, or she felt

obligated to defend family members, which is a common reason for physical assaults in my world of juvenile court.

Administrative Arbitrary Decisions

Another category of students enrolled in the alternative school that I surprisingly uncovered while interviewing, I labeled as administrative arbitrary decisions. I would describe it as someone in the school district telling the students, “You must leave here (public school) to graduate on time and attend the alternative school, where you can achieve more credits in a shorter amount of time.” For example, from Bret’s own words, the school district clearly used the alternative school as a “credit recovery” program rather than for its main purpose:

I kinda didn’t get the best of grades and the last day of my junior year I was called down to my counselors office and she told me even if I came to Riverton High my senior year, made straight A’s all year, I still wouldn’t graduate on time. So, I called the alternative school and asked if he had a spot and explained my situation to them and he told me if I came there and made good grades and kept a job all year, because they let you earn a quarter credit if you had a job, if you worked through the semester and ended up doing that and graduated on time and everything so that is what had me go to the alternative school so I could graduate on time.

In another situation that also did not involve violence or a discipline problem, Nate reported:

Riverton High School wanted to hold me back due to my attendance. I missed the first week of school because I broke my jaw. I then missed another week of school because

my mom had passed away and [my previous high school] said the absences were inexcusable.

As evidenced above, students without “Safe School” violations, or behavior problems, just school credit problems, would sometimes find themselves placed with students who had a full range of conduct problems.

My last interviewee was a bit of an outlier and he presented his story of entry in a rather humorous way. After numerous conversations with this young man, I realized that time had reduced his anger at the school district, initially brought on by an obviously prejudicial action taken by a school administrator. This principal used his position of authority to make a judgment call based on race and prior residence, not on pertinent facts concerning the safety of the school or students. Vince, one of the few African American male I interviewed, described the power and control this school district could exert. He illustrated what Hughes and Adera (2006) described as the tightened security and separate programs created following the passing of the safe schools laws for at-risk students that disproportionately affected minorities and the poor: Vince described his situation thoughtfully:

They (school officials) were trying to say that I got kicked out of my old school in Chicago for being bad. Which I hadn't got kicked out of school, I hadn't been held back or anything like that, I simply moved down there because of a home issue between me and my mother. Yeah, I went up there, suit, leather coat looking good and everything trying to impress this guy (principal) and I, he wasn't in there five minutes before he was telling me I had to go to the alternative school. No choice no nothing. It was basically like the recycle bin for Riverton High, they were like, “we don't like you so you are going to the alternative school.”

Vince's story contained elements that made me reflect on Foucault's discussion of "regimes of power" and how institutions could and did, control the body of the subject whether it was in a mental institution, prison, or school (Foucault, 1980). Vince was reluctant to attend alternative school, yet related a tale of finding an environment that included caring teachers and a "structured" school that allowed dialogue, negotiation of curriculum, and what Foucault in later years of his writings and lectures called, vague ambiguous lines of power (Bussolini, 2010; Foucault, 1998; Peters, 2004). Vince described an alternative school that was less about domination and control and more about preparing students to control their future:

They (public school administrators) treated it like it was supposed to be a punishment that we were supposed to be upset about, but uh, everybody that came into there, it wasn't, ... it was probably more structured than Riverton High School, but it wasn't as strict and that in addition to the way that they cared, because the way that they cared, I think that tough love stuff really hit home with so many of the students that went there. What I got from them was that you didn't have to be a hard-core butt head all the time to get stuff done, to get stuff accomplished. Also, other ways to get someone to help you to get stuff done that you need to do. So basically, it helped me to learn how to figure out situations a lot better.

I offer more from Vince's descriptions of the alternative school later in this chapter. He was very articulate and passionate about his school experiences and let me know in one of his social media messages that the friendships he made while at the Riverton Alternative School were as meaningful and close as those relationships that he made in the course of his U.S. Army military deployments.

Descriptions of Self and Family

Throughout the interviews, the students attempted to describe themselves in relation to the world around them. Along with personal descriptions, their descriptions of home life and family members seemed to influence their school life. The former students described themselves as “wild,” with multiple family issues, including divorce, extreme poverty, incarcerated parents, addicted parents, or other types of challenging family histories.

The student’s family situation at the time of their secondary education was an inevitable topic of discussion during these interviews. Only 10 of the 26 students I interviewed described supportive families, yet somehow all except two of the 26 managed to graduate from high school, or pass a GED examination.

I did not ask outright for the former students to describe themselves or their families. For the most part, this was the first time we had met except for exchanging emails, social media messages, and phone calls to set up the interviews. My sense was I was already asking a lot when I wanted students to describe the story of their removal from their school and friends, which I assumed would evoke unpleasant memories. Yet, not surprisingly, their stories lead to discussions about their family lives, peer relationships and their own behaviors as young adults.

It was interesting to me that few students actively sought out enrollment and acceptance to the Riverton Alternative School. Many described a relatively passive role in the process of enrollment. Once enrolled, many described positive changes in their ability to learn and engage in healthy ways with student peers and the adults working at the school.

“Wild Kids”

Through an adult’s perspective, the former students described how they, and others, perceived their position within the educational environment. From the first interview with Barry,

it became a pattern that many students would place themselves, and their own attitudes and behaviors, at the crux of the reason for their move to Riverton Alternative School:

Um, well, I had an attitude; I guess I had a chip on my shoulder at a younger age and thought I was too cool for school and the attitude transpired over to my school work and the staff at Riverton High just couldn't handle me and they basically just, um, they didn't kick me out per say, but I didn't sense that they were interested in my education so I just decided to quit school.

Barry described himself as an active participant in his own educational "lapses." About others, particularly those who the school could not hold on to and eventually dropped out, he was more forgiving:

I think the school done as much as they could; I think what it really boils down to the home situation, a lot of the kids came from an unfortunate home situation. You can't give them new parents, if you could give them new parents it might be good, yeah.

Similarly, Maria placed all of the responsibility on herself while describing her past behavior. Taking responsibility for their actions was a common theme coming from the students throughout the interviews. For example, Maria discussed her own choices with a thoughtful maturity:

Yeah, I mean I did get into the bad crowd, but that is anywhere. It doesn't matter what school I go to it was up to me I was making the choices and I really, I started getting into trouble and all that good stuff but I think it was really my age rather than the school I was going to.

In a blend of both personal reflection on a delinquent past and a description of a neglectful parenting style from his mother, my second interview proved to be a very intense conversation on many levels with Dorian. This young father of two children had many personal stresses in his life at the time of the interview. Dorian bounced through many topics from marital problems, a failing small business, and a possible move to the west coast. He discussed many disappointments and regrets during our brief, yet candid, discussion:

I was everywhere, you could name it, drugs, thieving, the whole nine, doing exactly what you are not supposed to do, um, I think a lot of it came from parents splitting up at a young age. My mom just kind of let stuff go, I was just kind of make my own path, and it wasn't good and I got so finally I didn't show up for school and before you know it I got held back in ninth grade. I went through about two months of that and I said screw it, I'm out and then I went to the alternative school.

While Dorian discusses the impact of his family on his decision to stop going to school, Lee offers a parallel description of developing a streetwise toughness. His personal description of how he both lived on the streets and attended school is a testimony to youthful strength and the single-minded ability of some of these students to move through a secondary school education:

Yeah, all my family, they didn't even know I was going to school. Cause they seen me every day on the streets. They see me all night; I'm a youngster hangin out all night all day. I was out every night and run the streets, but I still, a lot of people didn't know that I still got up every day and went to school.

Parental Neglect

Early on in the interviews, I heard candid reports of parental neglect. Andrea was one of only four students (out of 26) who was court ordered to attend school. Her family situation was dire even before the felony charge that brought her to Riverton Alternative School. She talked about this during her interview:

My mother she basically just kind of left and was done being a parent when I was about 15. I was attending [public] school, but there was not a parent at home to make me go to school so there were plenty of times when I didn't go to school. Then I wound up getting into some trouble with the law and getting arrested and actually got charged with a felony.

The students from the first years of the Riverton Alternative School came of age during the peak years of juvenile gang activity and the crack cocaine epidemic (1984-1990). Adults were heavily involved with drugs and alcohol leaving their children on the periphery of society. Chantal described her father as someone school officials were afraid of and for the most part, avoided contact with during her childhood and adolescent years as a student:

My dad quit doing drugs, and meth, and everything because I graduated from high school. Back then, after doing 20, 30 years of hard-core drugs, he quit doing the hard stuff, no more meth, no dope, no coke, nothing.

Jerry, brother of Erin, who I already quoted describing the situation of their father being in prison numerous times during their childhood, related his situation and his virtually unnoticed existence in public school:

I wasn't doing good, my grades, I just was sleeping through class and being rude to the teachers. I didn't take it seriously, later on I found out I had bad eyes and I couldn't see

the board. I was suspended all the time, but, the next semester was coming on and my mom somehow or another they got me enrolled at the alternative school because I just couldn't succeed at Riverton High.

As did many of the other students, Jerry described to me the abrupt change from the public school environment to a perception of more attentive care from the staff at the alternative school. Jerry was one of the youngest to attend at that time, and seemed to have appreciated the increased dialogue with the staff at the alternative school:

Mr. D. (principal), I think he worried about me because back then I dressed in all black and chains and stuff, and he thought I was depressed and would pull me into his office and talk to me, he was, I don't know, just more one-on-one time and the teachers, ... it was great.

Jerry and his sister both developed felony court cases like their father before them, in spite of achieving a high school degree. This was unusual, as the total "data" group had a relatively low involvement with adult court proceedings. The literature on this topic indicated that the traditional schools were sending an increasingly delinquent group to alternative schools (Christle et al., 2007; Kupchik, 2010; Nelson, 2007). Of course, the low involvement in criminal behavior among the former students I interviewed could also be due to the voluntary nature of this study. That is, those students who came forth for me to interview may be the ones who were most successful at Riverton. Nonetheless, concerns about the impact of past criminal behavior were real for several of those I interviewed. Specifically, for those students who had "caught a felony case" right out of high school (usually a drug case) and were now in their mid-thirties, with a family, and constrained on job choices because of the kinds of background information that is available to employers on the internet. Erin's comments are illustrative:

Yeah, it was actually a class C felony for stealing. I went through drug court and they did a SIS [suspended imposition of sentence] on it, but I still can't get a job. A good job. I am not a convicted felon. It is just on, so anytime they see that they think I am a convicted felon.

More family dysfunction, friend issues, and significant changes in living arrangements, were also evident in my interview with Van, who developed a tough exterior over the years. Indeed, in many cases, there seemed to be a general sense of toughness that developed with alternative school admission and attendance. Researchers agree that students who are not committed to school, and who struggle academically, are more likely to experience high levels of delinquency, substance abuse, and gang involvement (Bell et al., 1994; Thornberry et al., 1985), all of which can contribute to a tough edge, as we see in Van's comments:

My living arrangements were the same. I was still living with my mom, I think, I might have went and lived with my dad for a little bit, cause my mom kind of got tired of me... I was kind of that gangster kid. There were a lot of people who tried to be tougher at the alternative school because they thought they were, I don't know, it was just the atmosphere probably.

The pattern of responses regarding the identity of these former students involved descriptions of adolescent years full of violence, parental neglect, and drug and alcohol use. For example, Van described a specific arrest and a sense of inevitably spiraling into criminality and imprisonment:

Um, handcuffed a few times, ... thought I was going to be going for fifteen years ... I've had a felony on my record. Two of them. One of them for theft, so my job, I couldn't find anything and I was having a hard time helping to support my family

Gender Specific Issues

Female students had their own brand of trouble within the school environment, often different from what I have been describing as isolated singular events of drug and alcohol possession, fighting and problems with focusing on schoolwork. Some of the women who came forward to be interviewed shared stories of rigid rules, both at home and at school, lack of access to mental health services, bullying, and the lack of flexibility in school policies to deal with such a normal human condition as a pregnancy. For example, when I asked about whether her parents objected to her attending Riverton Alternative School, Fiona said:

No, um, that was pretty much a good idea. I was getting bullied a lot at Riverton High, and I had tried to skip my classes because of all the kids bullying me, I got in trouble, and I had to do In School Suspension because I hid and I didn't want to go to school because I would be made fun of. I even told the principal I am getting made fun of, they just didn't seem to care and so it was a good idea, it was a big change. It was a good thing. It was an experience.

Fiona was a good example of a student that the school district placed in the mix of the alternative school population, as a victim rather than as an offender or discipline problem. Dodge et al. (2006), pointed out a challenge of the alternative school environment being the co populations of victims and offenders in the same classroom. Fiona discussed this during her interview:

I wish I hadn't dropped out though, that was my mistake. They tried to get me to come back. I couldn't take it anymore, it was overwhelming ... people were threatening me. It wasn't the teachers or the school, it was the kids. I couldn't do it.

How the former students described themselves in relation to others, both at that critical time of adolescence, and later as an adult, provides insight on how many barricades to learning, maturation, and development they faced as students identified as at-risk. Goodenow (1991) sums up the unique challenges of this population, suggesting that, “until social needs for belonging were met, higher motives for learning would not be present” (p. 52). The school district suspended Tanya for 180 days, on her first violation of the policy regarding alcohol on campus. She posted the following comment on the social media group site that shows the importance she placed on the learning environment she experienced at the alternative school and how it has influenced her life and general well-being:

I'll be the first to admit that I fought coming to the Riverton Alternative School tooth and nail; I was devastated to get kicked out of Riverton High School, and I couldn't believe my parents were too cheap to pay for (a private high school). As it turns out, though, it was the best thing to ever happen to me. My life had always been about trying to fit into other people's ideas of what I should be, but there I finally realized there was no one right way to be. For the first time in my life, instead of getting in trouble every time I wandered off task, teachers encouraged me to learn more about the things I was interested in. Instead of being made fun of for every little quirk, the other students embraced the things that made me different. Ultimately, I went back to Riverton for my last semester of high school, but I did so with a newfound acceptance of myself and others that has changed every interaction I've had since. I'm at peace with myself and the world around me in a way I never was before, and I owe everyone a pretty huge thanks for that!

Describing the Alternative School

The third major topic that came up in my interviews, and that helps provide the context for answering my first research questions, was that the former students reflected upon their descriptions of the alternative school program itself. How the students describe their experiences, relationships with peers and teachers, and satisfaction, or dissatisfactions, with the program seemed to be dependent upon the year, the actual school building, the size and student-to-teacher ratio, and the school's administration at that time. Their descriptions of the program, who they felt the other students were that attended, and how they related to others, are necessary to build a rich description of their attendance at the Riverton Alternative School and the meanings they make of that attendance.

Student Population

Many of the students had time off in between suspensions, expulsions, or dropping out periods before they enrolled at the alternative school. Students did not report these gaps as productive periods that increased the likelihood of not re-enrolling at all. Barry was in one of the first groups of students that started at Riverton Alternative School. He described the earliest group of students and the issues around being a student who dropped out and was not involved with the court process. I asked Barry at this point what it was like being out of school for several months and then coming back in:

Um, the social aspect of it was okay because I knew pretty much everyone there, I ran with them on the streets and stuff like that. Um, it took me a little while to catch up educationally, but I eventually did it. I found myself being intimidated at first because there were a lot of kids that were rougher than I was so I had to adapt to that and kind of adapt my personality to coincide with theirs. You had a mix of kids that were tough, kids

who wanted to be tough, and people in the middle also. I guess the behavior becomes, uh, I guess the word was gangster back then, become more like them, and so I would find myself saying and doing things that I wouldn't normally do if I was around other people.

Don was a student who was at the alternative school due to lack of credits to graduate and not a behavior, delinquent, or dropout issue. He described being surprised at the academic quality of his peers at school, despite their tough personas, and the depth of discussion and dialogue that took place at the alternative school:

I get to my senior year which was supposed to be the best yet and find out some of the credits I had just weren't there. No explanation, just 'you can try Alternative'... I did just that. Everybody there that I met at the alternative school should have been listened to. I mean, they were all very intelligent, articulate people. They didn't act that way because a lot of them put on a persona whether it was their violent home or where they came from ... it took a little prodding for some of them, but they were able to put on some valid points in a lot of the discussions.

Presuming that the educational quality was low, Lee's mother originally opposed his placement at the alternative school. Like many of the parents of the students I interviewed, she did not pursue the full extent of the due process available to her to challenge the school administration's decision. Lee was also one of the few students who mentioned the restricted curriculum offered at Riverton Alternative School, unlike the large scope of vocational and extracurricular programs available at Riverton High School:

My momma didn't like it at first, uh; she didn't like it because of me making good grades always growing up. She said, no, I want my son in regular school. She went up in there and talked to them, and tries to work things out to try and get me back in public school,

but they had these obstacles I had to face and all that. When I got down to the alternative school, I thought about doing what I needed to do to go back. I was like, I'll just stay here. I mean, I kind of wish I would have stayed in regular school though. It gives you more opportunities to join classes that the alternative school didn't have at the time. Like, I'm a certified welder now, at that time, if I wanted to take some kind of class like that at the alternative school they didn't have that for me and the regular school did.

Other students also commented on who the students were that attended with them during their year, or years, of involvement with the alternative school program. Dorian, a student from the earliest years (1997-98) seemed to agree that although he was not court ordered to be in Riverton Alternative School, he was exactly where he should have been:

So, it was, I mean everybody there ... everybody knows that you are there, when you walk in the door, you know you are there for a reason. Everybody screwed up ... they know. It's under the carpet and you move on, you know and you don't have a thousand students criticizing you or judging you.

Trying to determine the general nature and experiences of students at the Riverton Alternative School always provided a rich discussion area for the interviews. I felt that it was critical for the students to define who they were in relation to the total student population. Some of the former students would say, "I was in the right place, I belonged there." It seemed like a bad reputation preceded the school and its student population, and yet that was usually proven wrong once a new student was enrolled and attending. For example, Ingrid's experience is telling:

I enjoyed it. I made the best out of the situation, um, I enjoyed everybody there. It seemed like even the kids that were in there for really bad stuff, like I never had an issue

with anybody. I never saw any fights with people; we just had a good year, because I know that not all of the years were like that. Probably like the guy that I was dating, him like throwing a little fit and throwing a basketball was probably the worst thing that I saw.

Chantal was one of only three students that I interviewed who did not originate from the Riverton school district. Her “sending school” was a small rural school that by her report could not make accommodations regarding her pregnancy. She commented on being “bullied” when she first enrolled at the alternative school, yet she felt like it was handled, not by the administration, but by the other students sufficiently so she was able to continue:

The alternative school isn’t anything like a public school. The public school they kind of do the same general speech about how life is going to be when you leave ... I guess alternative school looked a lot more like the real world. People with addictions, people with problems. You weren’t there just because you had a bad attitude. There, most of the people, until you got to know them, did have a bad attitude, they didn’t want to be there, and there were very few with my situation that wanted to be there and a lot of them didn’t.

Administrative Changes

To understand the experiences of alternative school students, it is important to know something about the changes in the program over time. The local court operated the Riverton Alternative School for its first ten years of existence. The funding was specifically tied to a preference for court ordered students (being that it was Missouri Division of Youth Services funds), and following a goal of keeping a small student teacher ratio. In the later years of the program, after the school district took over the administration and the funding, the alternative

school student population expanded to include middle school (5th and 6th grade) students as well as junior high (7th and 8th grade) students. The school district removed the contracted psychological counseling services that had been available to all students on a voluntary, weekly basis, upon the funding and administrative changes that put Riverton school district in charge.

These policy changes following the change of administrative entities radically changed the Riverton Alternative School into more of an administrative “twin” of the public high school. The students during the years of 1997-2007 were involved in a unique classroom experience that did not continue after that certain time. Jerry and Fiona both expressed dissatisfaction with this policy switch, which they felt resulted in a loss of personal freedoms that they had previously received from the teachers and administrators, possible, in part, because the student population was older:

Fiona: I remember the first year I was there it was really laid back and cool and we had an hour lunch break, and then once the younger kids started coming in, they would abuse the privilege and we got our lunch taken away twenty minutes and we wouldn't be able to leave for lunch because they wouldn't come back and they would abuse what we were given so we would get things taken away from us and that kind of sucked.

Jerry: Alternative school changed throughout the years though, like I know the [downtown storefront] was cool, and no problem there, and M.G. [old elementary school leased by the court] was awesome, the whole M.G. experience, you would sit there and drink soda in class and listen to music while you were doing your work on the computer, in the background with your headphones on. Then, it changed. When Miss G. took over it just seemed like it was turning into Riverton High. It wasn't even an alt school anymore. That was rough on me too. I was really like the only one who knew how it

used to be and it was tough on me because that is how I was used to, and all of a sudden it was not what I was used to and it made it hard on me.

One of the women I interviewed also described dissatisfaction with the administrative changes at that time also. In my literature review, I described the different basic types of alternative schools (Raywid, 1999). Examples offered by my participants suggest that the former students perceived a fundamental shift from a program that was operated at the “change the school model” to a “change the student” model, which was more in line with how the public school operated. When I explained that the Riverton Alternative School, since 2007, had been under the management of the Riverton public school district, Chantal quickly responded:

I don't see that working out very well. The school district running it? If the school district runs it, it would not be very different from a regular school. It defeats the purpose. Why still separate them when you are still going to have the same problems there? It doesn't matter what buildings you are in if the school system runs it. It's still the same issues are at hand. Most of the teachers that done it for the alternative school, they knew why the students were there, they knew your issues at hand, they had to work with, what you could do and what you couldn't. [Long pause] They also had their own ... those teachers had their own issues, they could relate.

Small Caring Environment

One of the key characteristics, described by the former students, of the Riverton Alternative school was the small, and as they described, “caring” environment. This was due partly to a goal of the court's administration to keep the student-teacher ratio as low as possible. For many years, the court funded program maintained a less than 10 to one ratio of student to teacher. After the local school district took over the administration of this program in 2007, this

was no longer a priority, or feasible due to the large influx of students from all grade levels. In regards to student-teacher ratio, Bret defined its advantage as, the teacher's being "more on hand" than what he had experienced from his public school background:

It was just the smaller classrooms, instead of having 30, 35 kids crammed packed into a classroom with one teacher, I think the biggest class I had at the alternative school was maybe 20. Twenty kids in a classroom and the teacher had enough time to talk to everybody. The teachers seemed more on hand at the alternative school than at Riverton High. Like, they were more there to help.

Maria and Bonnie also agreed that the student teacher ratio of close to 10 to one had a profound effect on the learning experience:

Maria: I think they were smaller, I think that is why I started to make better grades because I got more attention from the teachers they didn't have 50 students to attend to.

Bonnie: For a little bit it was getting used to it. A smaller classroom, it was like, at first it took me a while to adapt to it I really didn't talk to anybody. I just talked to the teachers and stayed to myself. But once I got to know everybody I was fine.

Although not so much an issue for those enrolled, a possible downside for the administration of the low student teacher ratio was the need to prevent overcrowding by keeping a waiting list. The size of the rented facilities in the first few years influenced the necessity, but after moving into an old school building, the district assisted the courts in adding more teaching staff and therefore allowed more students into the program. At least for the years that the court operated the Riverton Alternative School program, the students seemed to appreciate the smaller classrooms and the caring environment developed by the classroom teachers. In the next section,

I will show through the student's words, the powerful relationships that this environment created.

Meaningful Relationships, Encouragement, and Respect

From the first day of receiving messages from the social media group regarding the "alumni" of the Riverton Alternative School, the overwhelming majority of the comments former students made were about meaningful relationships with teachers and administrators. They reported encouragement where the students had not previously received it, and respectful treatment, in spite of various challenges, handicaps, and social deficiencies that engendered past ill treatment from school officials and students.

In keeping statistics and demographic information for these alternative school programs for many years, I am aware that the typical student averaged six juvenile court referrals and/or arrests. They also have had more contacts with mental health providers, were more prone to risky behaviors that included high-risk pregnancies, tobacco use, chemical and alcohol dependencies. To hear from this relatively "hardened" group, frequent stories of caring adults outside of their biological families was quite surprising, recalling my previous reports of high levels of suspension rates in small towns across the United States for relatively minor infractions (Brooks et al., 2000).

Like other critical theorists, Shor (1992) maintains that extended dialogue between the student and teacher is necessary for a meaningful curriculum and learning experience. In general, the students at Riverton Alternative School had very little chance at "extended" anything. They could drop in mid quarter or have only one or two quarters to complete prior to graduation. Therefore, the time to build dialogue and relationship was very brief as reported by the students, yet it somehow managed to occur. We can see this, for example, in Barry's

comments when I asked him what some of his successes were while he was attending the alternative school:

I learned how to operate a computer because of alternative school, I learned about Windows programs, um, I guess I learned how to interact with adults, I always had the impression that all adults were bad, and stuff like that, but once I got to know some of the staff there I kind of developed a good meaningful relationship with them. There was a principal, R.D., I could just sense the compassion she had for her job she was just really generally concerned about every student she had, didn't matter what social class they came I could really sense she cared about them a lot and I will always remember that.

In my interviews, I heard descriptions of the early years where the courts rented an empty storefront style building and descriptions of one particular teacher's coping skills. During the first three years, there was an average of 20 students enrolled at a time, with at least one-half of the students being court ordered into the program. Dorian described his experience in this storefront school:

Once I got there, and I saw how laid back it was and how it wasn't push push push, this is what you have to do. B.R. (teacher), he would get on your level, you know, at least during school hours if there was a tough time he was quick to sit down with you and say what is going on and pull you aside as opposed to other places it was a little more one on one there other places were more, you're just a number in a way.

Dorian did not describe a time without conflict. His struggles with family obviously rolled over into the school environment and he eventually left the program, but throughout his interview he reflected on a level of caring he had not experienced elsewhere. For example, in

describing his experience, he said, “It was good, overall it was good, at the end of the day the people cared or they wouldn’t have been there.”

Andrea, who attended secondary school without parents, sometimes in the custody of the state, and sometimes a relative, described her relationships with various teachers:

They turned into parents for me, I mean they were always encouraging to me and so helpful and anytime I was struggling or down, anything they were like, let’s stop and take time out, they were different, it was really nice. I could go on and on about how great the teachers were there. I felt like they were my surrogate parents, in a way, guiding me and always challenging me to be and do my best. Ms. K. and Mr. R. truly cared about me.

Jerry, by his recollection, was at the school for approximately five years. His descriptions of the program contained a deeper understanding of the personalities and methods of the teachers and the needs of the students. These stories are testament to the small, caring environment that so many others also described:

I did go back to Riverton [public school] for a semester, but it just wasn’t for me. The individual teacher is what I needed. You know, not just being someone in a room. They would actually come around and help me and spend more time with me. That is what I needed, and the teachers seemed like they cared more. They knew my name, first and last name; they knew who I was; just more personal. I liked Mr. R. A lot of our music interest was the same; you know Pink Floyd and stuff. He would tell me about going to see them in concert and shared a bunch of that with us, and showed us videos of him scuba diving and treasure hunting and shared stories of that, he played music for us during class, it was nice and then Mr. F., he was a mean ass old man but he was cool! He didn’t act like a teacher he acted like your older grandpa or something, he’d give you shit,

he would give you a hard time but he wasn't doing it to, he was just doing it to, I don't know, just to play around with you. I always liked Mr. F.

Many of the former students that I interviewed echoed the same heightened level of communication and relationship that they had not experienced in the public school setting. It seemed for many, this was their first experience with "adult to adult" communication. For example, Erin described the respect she felt at the alternative school:

Yeah, they let you be an adult, like they treat you like an adult until you proved otherwise, and then at the other school they acted like they knew better than you and you had to raise your hand to go to the bathroom, like in kindergarten. I met the most wonderful teachers there. Teachers that would give anything for their students to feel accepted and part of the family. I definitely needed that coming from a home where one of my parents was incarcerated and the other was a workaholic. This place gave me the time of day, and a chance to succeed in life, whereas Riverton High didn't give a crap if you disappeared one day or not.

Similar to Andrea, Jerry, and Erin; Don was particularly impressed with the relationship he established with the teachers and other students while at Riverton Alternative School. Not having a behavior problem or a singular event of delinquency, his admission in the school was due to a lack of credits, preventing his graduation. He told a story that demonstrated the commitment to learning and the amount of personal investment the teachers at the Riverton Alternative School were willing to make:

But you know if B. R. [teacher] asked me to go retrieve a coin out of the bottom of Mt. St. Helen while it's erupting, I'm damn sure going to do it. He's that kind of guy, man. I still talk to him to this day, he stays up on me and my boys, how things are going. He

actually gave me my graduation gift, I have to this day, and I will never get rid of. With my love for history, his doing that off shore diving was always interesting to me. He gave me a coin that he found on a dive, and uh, he said your final grade is to figure out who is on it. Pass or fail. There you go, I said, “cool.” He said here is how you do it, what you use, etc. I respond very well on challenges and when things get hairy, I really thrive on chaos. So I said, okay, perfect. I came back it was Gaius Maximums Caesar. He was emperor from 238 to 235 BC, he was only emperor for three years, really unknown, nothing known about him, not a really big guy, didn’t do anything important. A Roman coin. A teacher gave me a Roman coin for my graduation. Not only was that my test, he said, “here you go it’s yours.” That’s a cool thing. It took me about a week and a half to figure out who it was, you know studying all the time, and I even took off work to find out.

From the male students I interviewed, I sometimes sensed a certain pride that they made their place within the environment of the “bad kids” or “tough school.” From some of the females, I sensed embarrassment, shame, and regret at times in the interviews. Many of the female students told me their memories were “cloudy” or “blacked out” about that time. They usually attributed their memory lapse to drug use, but no one admitted to any heavier usage than “a lot of pot.” For example, Rebecca reflected, “I hate to say this, but since I was ...and all of the drugs I’ve been, I do not remember actually. Isn’t that horrible?” and from Karen, “I just have a few stories, I smoked a lot of weed back then and I don’t remember a lot, that’s bad to say but I did.”

I think this memory lapse was a way to censor the material they were not willing to share. Even if they had been less reluctant, I would not have felt comfortable pushing into memories of

abuse and neglect situations that statistically, would have been a real possibility for many of these women. I tried to remain focused on their school experiences and their current situation.

Several students, early on in the interview process, had mentioned Lee, who was eventually my 14th interview. The common knowledge was that he had, “just got out” of a seven year prison sentence due to federal drug charges. I was finally able to arrange an interview with him through a message passed through another student. Earlier in this chapter, I detailed the circumstances surrounding Lee’s expulsion that was unsupported by juvenile court or criminal charges. We spent an hour together in a very enjoyable conversation where he supported the opinions of a positive experience at the Riverton Alternative School shared by many of the others:

Regular school is just real strict, no tolerance type of place, where at the alternative school they were more, I guess they say, more lenient they adjusted to you, they already know you had behavior problems, of some sort whether it is in school or out of school, whatever it is, they knew you had some sort of issues so they allow, they’ll work with you, they could have kicked me out of the school and been done with me, then I wouldn’t have had a high school diploma like I got now.

Lee admitted to attending school during the day and “living on the streets” at night. In other words, he sold illegal drugs among other illegal activities that eventually caught up to him after he became an adult, evidenced by his lengthy stays in prison. Regarding delinquency events, Lee’s activities supports Cox et al.’s, (1995) findings that alternative school placement does not necessarily influence delinquent behavior or tendencies. Lee clearly reported successes and a level of functioning while at the alternative school that showed a positive result, i.e., graduation. He also experienced support from his teachers, the kind that Carlson et al., (2009)

describe when they suggest that “effective teachers enact caring environments that show interest in the individual student, rather than whether or not the student has passed the test” (p. 34). In Lee’s case, I imagine punitive measures, standardized testing benchmarks would have meant very little. Teachers spurred him on by recognizing what motivated him and kept him engaged long enough to graduate from high school. He reflected on his experiences almost nostalgically:

They were teachers with real personalities. They joked when they played with the students, they interacted with the students on the level that it wasn’t always learn, learn, learn, it was how your life problems is, you could talk real like that, dealing with life’s problems. [Specific teacher] was a good guy. He looked out for me. He’d always tell me about my work. I would get a couple lessons behind, and he’d say, “You slackin” he’d call me a slacker, I need this, this, and this, and I would get it done for him though.

One of the two African American women I interviewed, Gabriella reported similar experiences with the teachers supporting her educational efforts and encouraging independent learning strategies while at the alternative school:

Everybody was so welcoming and made sure we stayed focused, I needed that extra push and they were really good at doing that. Most of the teachers allowed you to be more creative, they wanted you to express yourself through your writing and through class activities, so we all had a major say so in what we studied and what we did while we were on campus. That was a great thing.

By the time I completed my last interview, I had established a closer relationship with several of the former students than would be expected from the typical hour-long interview. For example, Vince and I wrote back and forth starting from the first day that the private group on the social media web site was set up. He had a lot to say about the teachers, the program, and

about how a school administrator immediately labeled him a “gangster,” and had no choice as to where he could attend school. Both his current employment and his military experiences were very interesting to hear about. In a conversation we had on the social media site instant messaging feature, he described the differences between teachers he experienced elsewhere, and those at Riverton Alternative School:

They did have that special something. I don't think it was patience or the fact of class size vs. students. They listened. They didn't judge. They allowed you to be yourself and encouraged an open mind. The only time I made friends like that was at war. I still talk to many of the people I went to the center with, and miss the ones who've passed on. Those that fizzled did so of their own volition. They would work with you, even come pick you up if you needed a ride to school. There were no excuses accepted, but instead they gave the window for us to learn and grow while knowing they actually cared.

I pursued his comments further when we finally had the opportunity for an extended interview. Vince was curious about my research process and my research questions. I freely discussed with him my data collection, ideas, and frustrations with my various findings:

Randall: As I look back at 26 interviews, it seems like that place (Riverton Alternative School) was more about socialization than it was about education.

Vince: Those teachers, the way they would treat those students, they treated those students like they were family. They'd yell at them if they were messing up, 'I know you are smarter than this!' and that was the kind of stuff that helped out a lot, cause some of the people weren't considered smart at Riverton High. They didn't get the praise that would help them realize, 'Hey being smart is okay.' I think that most of the students

once it was established were sent there like banishment! Most unfairly like me and once together we were all the "bad kids" who weren't really bad.

Andrea described another example of the ways teachers cared for, and connected to, the students, specifically discussing how the teachers at the alternative school encouraged assignments that were meaningful to the student's lives:

Miss J. would read stuff that I would write and encourage me to write more and write more, and I remember one time at the alternative school, one of the school shootings that happened, I think maybe Jonesboro, Arkansas had just happened and I wrote a letter to the editor of the newspaper just to kind of voice my opinion about it, and Miss J. [teacher] and Mr. T. [principal] said, this is great! This is great! They said make sure to put you are a student at the Riverton Alternative School because they wanted some positive, you know, views on the alternative center not just a bunch of delinquents going there... and they published the letter. It was kind of neat!

As I reflect on the comments and the experiences of the former students at Riverton Alternative School, it is obvious that among those who volunteered for an interview and wrote comments on the social media site, there was a general feeling that the public school district did not value the program, but the students felt a certain pride to be there and to still be connected with the school. Many of those I interviewed accepted the identity of "bad, wild, and delinquent," but most expressed appreciation of the personal attachment they experienced with caring and thoughtful adults, which given their reported family situations, was critical to their educational successes.

Describing the Public School

While I asked about their Riverton Alternative School experiences, most of the former students also wanted to discuss their experiences and association with the public school they attended prior to their placement at the alternative school. I did not ask any specific questions probing for this information. The former students typically offered their thoughts in comparison with Riverton Alternative School. The students felt the “distributed effects of public power” (Foucault, 1995, p.81) whether they were at the public school or the alternative school, although they described more abuses of power while they attended the public high school.

These descriptions are important to my study and to providing the rich, detailed context necessary to answering my research questions because the former students did not completely separate their experiences in the public school with those from the court-operated alternative school. In their descriptions, the two places were two sides of the same coin. Generally, the alternative school provided a more nurturing, supportive environment. Overall, the students disparaged the detached power and careless way the district proceeded with their situation. At the same time, the former students offered their own individual motivations and desire to finish their secondary education by the way they negotiated their attendance, credits, and potential graduation in light of their suspensions and expulsions.

The next section developed from the stories of the students as they discussed what they thought was the strategy and rationale used by the public school to remove many of them from the traditional educational path. For a term, or strategy, that was relatively unheard of prior to “safe school” legislation, almost all of the former students interviewed could accurately define the term and elaborate on the school administration’s use of the strategy.

Zero Tolerance

Just as second and third chances seem to have been the hallmark of Riverton Alternative school, zero tolerance and first offence expulsion (with no consideration of mitigating factors or significant due process) was an attribute of the Riverton public school. I expected serious, felonious events that resulted in student expulsion from public school, but this was not the case for the 26 former students who I interviewed. Rather, students experienced policies that resulted in the dismissal of any student who was at all difficult to manage.

The term zero tolerance was not specifically in the text of the Missouri Safe School Act of 1997, but the term became synonymous with its implementation. Particularly, in regards to suspension and expulsion, the students heard it as the prevailing explanation. Although the Missouri Safe School Act focused on potentially violent activity on campus, school districts tied alcohol and drug possession to zero tolerance terminology. During the interviews, I asked the former students several questions around zero tolerance: “Have you ever heard the term zero tolerance? What does it mean to you? Do you believe it is evenly applied? Can you remember any examples?”

Many of the students produced a straightforward definition of zero tolerance, focusing on drugs and alcohol possession, as the school district used it. Andrea described it as:

Well the zero tolerance part was just the no drugs ... and if you got caught with drugs you got a harsher sentence. [Regarding one of the students] Yes, M.G. That's the case that happened to him. He got caught with some weed in his locker and they booted him out.

Similarly, the school district suspended Tanya for 180 days for the single event of bringing alcohol to school in a water bottle. She described the Riverton school district's use of the zero tolerance policy that seemed to have skewed the population of alternative school students, at least from that district, to those without a pattern of offences but with singular events, or personal characteristics:

It was used to the hilt. They threw everyone in there together. I kinda knew that was what Riverton High was doing because kids from K. [another local school district] that went there had done quite a few things and this was definitely their last shot and then kids from Riverton High were there for like something small.

The former students were matter of fact in reciting the definition of zero tolerance when I asked them the meaning of the term in regards to their school experiences. For example, Don offered that "Zero tolerance was if you were to bring illegal substances on to Riverton public school grounds, there is no second chances, if you brought that stuff you were gone, don't come back."

During the interviews, all of the students talked about zero tolerance in relation to drug use and possession. Some former students questioned the term's application and its logic, where suspension and expulsion was concerned. Other students believed that alcohol and drug use should not be a part of the school environment and seemed not to question the long-term consequences of such rules applied by the public school district. For instance, Barry was adamant in his belief that "drugs have no place in school."

Nestor had one of the most logical arguments against the use of the zero tolerance argument in regards to alternative school placement, specifically its seeming arbitrary application to drug offences:

I mean when you look at my incidence, you know what I am saying, I did that and now you are saying that I am too dangerous to be around students but you are sending me to another school where there are students at? Me, myself, I don't think it was really worth it. No, it was not fairly done, because I had a student hit me and went to the principal and they didn't do anything about it.

Nestor did not want to provide any more discussion regarding the reality of suspension, and the number of other African American students influenced within that category. Many other former students were more than happy to elaborate on that connection. Barry recalled minority youth sanctioned for dressing "gangster." His recollection was, "I would say that minorities were targeted; I mean you had white kids dressing like that too."

I interviewed Ingrid on a rainy Sunday afternoon, prior to her weekly trip to the grocery store, while her husband watched their five children. Ingrid was quite thoughtful in her reflections, describing a sense of loss in not having a typical secondary educational experience, yet at the same time an acceptance of the past events. She was surprised that her one encounter with the police, in a car off campus, resulted in a lengthy school suspension. She had no prior delinquent or school related problems, and the local juvenile court did not file any charges. The adult court eventually dismissed the drug possession charge against the adult driver of the car. These circumstances made her recollection and understanding of the zero tolerance policy of Riverton School District even more poignant:

I had heard of zero tolerance, but for the fact that I hadn't been in any trouble before, I couldn't believe there wasn't like, "we are going to let you get off easy." This was no 10-day suspension; it was like that's it. Period. You gotta go. So I got a letter, saying if I wanted, now this was six month later, this was a long deal, I got a letter saying I could

go back to Riverton High. No, at that time, no, I wasn't going to do it. The damage had been done, I was embarrassed in the school system, I didn't want the teachers looking at me thinking that I was this bad kid, and I got along really well at the alternative school, I got along with the teachers, students, and so I chose to stay there. No, I just decided to stay put. The damage was done.

Irene was one of the four individuals the school district enrolled due to a requirement of the court. Her story demonstrates the school's full intent to model a "zero tolerance" culture regarding any alleged offence of school policy regarding drugs or alcohol, despite the circumstances. She also described one family's eventual acceptance and positive approach coping with the situation:

I got kicked out of Riverton High two weeks into my senior year because I had my prescription Adderall with me [in an unmarked prescription bottle]. I [would occasionally] forget to take it in the morning and thought that instead of having to call my mom [to bring my medicine to school] I'd just take a couple pills and a little pill bottle in my back pack. They did a drug search and found them and kicked me out of school for a hundred and eighty days. I didn't know I was doing anything wrong. We had gone to Mexico on a family trip and we had taken all of our medications in unlabeled containers down to Mexico. Nobody knew we were doing anything wrong. I got arrested and they charged me with possession of a controlled substance and narcotics in an unlabeled container on school grounds. I think it got dropped down to paraphernalia, the unlabeled bottle as paraphernalia. I had to go to court and I got community service and fined. I could have gone to jail, since it was more than a day's dose the original charge presented was distribution.

Irene's situation was unusual from many of the others, because her parents actively challenged the suspension through the school district's due process mechanism. Despite their efforts, Irene described the not so positive outcome:

But I got suspended for 180 days and in the first time of the history of the school board, the school board actually went back on what the superintendent did on a drug charge and they were going to let me go back to Riverton High at semester, but I chose to stay at alternative school.

Another reason that makes Irene's situation interesting is that she was the only student I interviewed who described parents who were heavily involved with the Riverton Alternative School program. For example, they partially funded and actively participated in the first graduation ceremony that included gowns and a barbecue for the entire school body and all their families.

School atmosphere

Even though the goals, and for the most part the curriculum, were the same at both schools (Riverton High and Riverton Alternative School), the students perceived a more overt power structure at the district school in comparison with the alternative school. What caused this perceived difference between the two schools, appeared to be an increased level of dialogue between the students and teachers at the alternative school. That is, the closeness and connection many of the former students felt to teachers at the alternative school served to mitigate some of the distancing power dynamics that they experienced at Riverton High.

Bret offered during his interview that, "It's easier to describe how the teachers at Riverton High aren't than it is to describe how the teachers at the alternative school are." What

he meant by this was that it was easy to offer many negative descriptors of the teachers at the Riverton High because he was so disconnected there and felt that the teachers didn't know or care about him. Similarly, Nestor and Irene spoke of the public school in relation to what they liked about Riverton Alternative School:

Nestor: I liked it much better than the regular high school. It was more laid back; it wasn't as much pressure on you. There was stuff there you wasn't able to do at Riverton High. Sometimes we would take breaks and go for walks, whatever.

Irene: I think it helped. I learned more that year about like actual life stuff than I did the whole time I was at Riverton High probably. Like, I mean, it helped with more every day stuff and some people just didn't like Riverton High, and just wanted something else.

As we discussed her current job as an R.N. working with diabetic patients, Andrea relayed another story that hinted at the impersonal, lack of attention many of these students' received from the public school staff. She reported falling out of her chair during school due to hunger caused by having no place to live or money to buy food. No school officials came to her aid, nor were any questions asked by the supervising teacher in the room. From her report, she got up and resumed her seat in the class:

I can remember one time at Riverton High I was in [typing] class first hour and I was so hungry because I hadn't eaten in two or three days and I passed out on the floor. I mean, how many kids are going through that?

Only one student who I interviewed did not disparage the public school environment. It was possibly because that student's mother was a teacher in the same school district. The former student's perceptions of Riverton High are significant because they provide a contrast to the

alternative school, yet at the same time similar power/rules system operated in both schools. This may point to the fact that the environment of the alternative school, as well as the caring teachers, helped to mitigate some of the traditional power dynamics present in education.

Students dropped out or created situations that resulted in their dismissal in both places, yet consistently the students made it a point to discredit their public school experience. For example, Erin contrasted her experiences in both schools, offering, “This place [alternative school] gave me the time of day, and a chance to succeed in life, whereas Riverton High didn't give a crap if you disappeared one day or not.” Similarly, Lee said that Riverton High was “really like, almost restrictive. Regular school is just real strict, no tolerance type of place.” Emily and Gabrielle had shared Erin and Lee’s perspectives:

Emily: At Riverton High, there were just so many people and the teachers didn't really care about the students individually. At least not students like me.

Gabrielle: I didn't get the one on one care, if I had a situation or problem with someone, there was someone always there to help guide you, there was more one on one care, and you can't get that in a traditional high school setting.

Fiona’s situation encompasses elements of bullying and lack of attention to student’s needs. To paraphrase a quote from one of Foucault’s works, we should frame institutional abuses of power resulting in a state of domination as, “relational techniques of government and *ethos*” (Foucault, 1984, p.18); the described *ethos*, or character, of the two schools and their staff was striking in comparison:

Um, I came a long way from Riverton High to alternative. The teacher’s [at the alternative school] if you had a problem they would take you out to the hallway and say,

what's wrong, do you need to talk about something? They don't just say, go in the bathroom and wipe your eyes. Like at Riverton High I would cry all the time because I would get made fun of, they just didn't care. They don't care about that; they just care about if you are passing. They want you to pass and do your school work. You gotta really like your job and it seemed like the teachers at Riverton High just kinda did it because they had to and they didn't really care about working with you. They just wanted to teach it and hand out the assignments.

Overall School Experiences

In summary, the overall school experience of these students from the Riverton Alternative School Program paralleled my previously reported findings by Meers (2004). Meers states there are five factors related to success in alternative school programs: 1) low student to teacher ratio; 2) a felt sense of community; 3) a clear discipline code; 4) clear and understood mission statement; 5) student perception that faculty cares about them; 6) the faculty chooses to teach at the school and enjoys working in the environment of alternative education.

The majority of the interviews followed the template for success as detailed by this alternative school researcher. I found that the students repeatedly mentioned the positive impact of the smaller classroom size. Students felt comfortable with the other students at Riverton, and remarked on many occasions, "We were all in the same boat." The students described clear rules and knew this was their "last chance" for a secondary education. Overall, I found that most of the students desired to continue educational pursuits as opportunity allowed.

The one thing that many students agreed on was the overall caring and empathetic environment cultivated by the teachers at Riverton Alternative School. Without interviewing the teachers, I will not be able to say their exact motivations and rationale for remaining at the

alternative school, but from my experience with the program, most of the teachers seem to stay at that one particular school for many years and one teacher remained at the school from his first assignment until retirement.

In the next chapter, I look at the data I collected concerning the impact of enrollment at the alternative school over time. Obviously all students who attended the school do not necessarily make the same statements about what meaning they attached to the experience. What impact did the process of being suspended, expelled, or voluntarily enrolling at Riverton Alternative School, have on the life of these former students? What meanings do they offer about the experience and has it affected their lives?

CHAPTER V

DATA ANALYSIS FROM SECOND RESEARCH QUESTION

Impact on Present Life

How do the former students link the alternative school experience to the realities of today? How do the former students think about their own lives in relation to their time in Riverton Alternative School? In this chapter, I move past what I learned in the previous chapter about student's experiences at the alternative school, to how the former students see themselves in the present and the ways in which their alternative school experiences may have influenced how they now live.

Certain procedures of "government" landed these students in the Riverton Alternative School. In the previous chapter, I discussed the processes and experiences that led the former students in my study to the Riverton Alternative School. I also provided rich descriptions of their recollections of their alternative school days, including how they compared to their previous school experiences. In this chapter, I examine how individuals, for some up to ten years after the date of being placed in this program, make connections among their beliefs, preferences, and goals for the future to their time spent at the alternative school. That is, I explore the influence that their attendance at the alternative school had on their current identity, or at least how they reflect on and narrate that influence.

Well past their experience at Riverton Alternative School, and all of the events that took place there, I now turn to how the former students described their current life and what is important to them. I divide the data I collected into three areas of discussion:

1. Meanings and interpretations. In this section, I explore how the former students describe what is important to them in relation to institutions and the various strategies of control they have interacted with and how they have affected them.
2. Current status. On the surface, I assumed I would have heard a factual, historical accounting of employment, family, and educational levels attained when I asked my participants about their present realities. While they did provide this information, they also described their current, position in society and how they are continually negotiating that position.
3. Goals, dreams, and motivations. In this section, I explore where the former students say they are going. I further reflect on this in my concluding chapter using Foucault's notion of "games of truth." Here I discuss how individuals constitute themselves, through dialogue, in different ways and in relation to others in society.

Over 50 percent of the former students I interviewed had attempted some type of post-secondary education. Many currently had families of their own; as I mentioned earlier, I counted 52 children named in the interviews. For the most part, the former student's goals and dreams seemed to reflect their current reality. No one still had the illusion of being a professional basketball star, an MTV rapper, or an international model, which are those vocations I heard repeatedly from students when I worked in alternative schools. For most of the former students I interviewed, the reality of vocational possibilities had set in.

"Doing" research with participants, rather than quantitatively "reporting" on it, leads me to believe that my interaction with the students may have played a role in how they described their lives, expectations, realities, and dreams. It is possible that they presented to me somewhat

edited versions of their status and future dreams. Given the degree of openness and the struggles they described, I think their stories fairly match the way they see themselves now.

Meanings or Interpretations

I conceptualize meaning, or interpretations in this study through Foucault's "games of truth" (Foucault, 1998, p. 143). These are concepts that subjects, in this case students, observed themselves and came through their experiences with an ability to interpret what has happened to them, and recognize in this quality of experience a certain, "subjectivity", or how they have been treated and maybe treated themselves, as subjects within the larger institutional environment (Foucault, 1980, 1998).

I argue that the power pathways shaped and influenced the former students by how they interacted between themselves and the institutions, governments, and other social and vocational entities. Within this broad category of meaning and interpretations, a pattern emerged in my dialogues. Specifically, when I asked about their current realities, as compared to their experiences at the alternative school, their responses were markedly shorter. The stories were longer in descriptiveness when we discussed their alternative school days. The comments were more stark and abrupt when speaking about their current existence. I believe this pattern of responses was telling as to just how hard many of the former student's lives continued to be.

Many of the former students expressed frustration at dead end jobs and financial struggles. However, most did not relate stories as stark as the abuse and neglect they had experienced when they were children. For the most part their social class had not improved. A very good example of this was in my second interview when I asked Dorian, "what are doing

now?” and, “how do you get by?”, he abruptly ended the interview at that moment with, “Just making it happen man, turning a legal hustle into a legal hustle, doing what I know.” The reality was in the following week, as I drove by his store, I saw an empty building with a “for lease” sign in the window.

Second Chances and Choices

In this section, I am concerned with how the former students stressed to me that their alternative school years was an opportunity to not be exiled from educational opportunities. When discussing their current livelihoods, the former students described the importance of receiving a second, or third, and sometime a fourth chance, and of making positive choices in their current lives. The former students seemed to take responsibility for where they have landed at this point in their life and did not comment or imply that anyone or any institution controlled, or reproduced their position in society. For example, Barry reflected on the question, “Do you think your time at the alternative school helped or hurt your chances overall, with career plans?”

I would say ... helped! When a kid gets kicked out of public school they kind of have a spin on like, oh where do I go now, what’s gonna happen now? You can’t just snatch an education away from the kids and not leave an avenue for them to pursue an education besides public school.

For Barry, it seemed like he understood the gravity of his situation and was able to make a more serious attempt at pursuing an education at the alternative school that helped to set him on a more successful path. Many of the students addressed personal choices when asked about “chances in life.” These two terms seem to flow together in the students’ minds as they tried to explain how they thought about their opportunities in relation to their personal histories. I asked Jerry, “Do you think taking that path with the alternative school rather than the public school helped or hurt you for chances in life?” He reflected on the positives and on what he might have missed from not attending the public school:

Yeah, it helped me a lot. Also, I think about all of the people that went to Riverton High, I don’t know them because I wasn’t around them. But I am good with that. I don’t have

a lot of friends really. It takes me a little bit to trust somebody. I got a small group of friends. I didn't do all that social stuff that they did but otherwise, graduation wise, what was important, I wouldn't change it.

Chantal, who describes herself as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), challenged by injuries that occurred in a car accident, and as a caregiver for a young son with Asperger's Syndrome, explained why she sought a high school degree in spite of many obstacles, one being a drug addicted father. Her comments are reflective of her present drive to be successful:

I did it for my daughter ... when I graduated and walked at Riverton I was pregnant with my youngest daughter and my oldest daughter was there and the only reason I went back was that I didn't want to be sitting across from her, with her telling me she wanted to quit school, and then I wanted to be able to tell her if I could do it, you could do it.

In a similar vein, when I asked Karen, a young woman who spent a portion of her adolescence in foster care, if she had pursued any further education, she shared her feelings on the importance of knowledge, and expressed regret that she had not been able to return to an educational setting since high school:

Knowledge is power, even if it is nothing more than being able to have an educated conversation with someone in a social setting just to know what you are talking about than trying to fumble your way through it, it's just helpful to have knowledge. I really wanted to get my degree in psychology so I could be a family counselor, or a juvenile counselor. That was my goal, and I wanted to work at the centers, kind of like the civic center, um something like that where kids could go and have recreational things to do, so they didn't have to be in the streets and get in trouble and making mistakes.

Karen also acknowledged the role families play in the process of education and reflected on how chance played a part in people's experiences. That is, she felt that some students get in trouble by luck of the draw, and authorities miss catching others, altogether:

A lot of people I talk to say, I could have been just like them but I never got caught, you know, especially for kids there is not a lot to do. I don't think parents are near as involved with their children as they should be, I know they have to work, but you know the kids, they only grow up once.

From the pool of students who came forward for this project, all mentioned during some point in their interview how important it was for them to achieve a high school degree, or its equivalent, during their adolescent or young adult years. Exactly half of those who I had contact with, including those who shared information just on the social media site, had pursued some type of post-secondary education.

During the course of the interviews, even with students who struggled at the time with real life stressors, addictions, family problems, etc., all of the former students discussed their determination to move closer to a high school graduation, or a GED. For example, Van, a young man who literally walked out of the program without graduating, but in later years, passed his GED, describes his efforts to succeed:

I really had a drive in me to finish high school and as much stuff as I gave Miss J., I gave her a hard time and she knows it, and she still remembers it to this day, but they didn't give up on me. So they kept me there and they helped when there wasn't anybody else that would do that.

Fiona was one of only two of the students I interviewed who did not graduate or complete a General Educational Development Test (GED). With numerous personal challenges defying her attempts to attend school, she related the following insights:

So, I dropped out. I was making A's and B's, so it was a bad decision on my part and I was only a year away from graduating and I still haven't got my GED. I tried, but once you get out of that school setting it's kind of hard to get back into it.

I think the overall atmosphere at the Riverton Alternative School during the years I was involved, and as evidenced from the voices of these students, was of a positive and voluntary environment as opposed to the perceived colder, coercive experience they reported from their earlier school years. It is telling that on one of the student yearbooks that I managed to obtain from that period, had on the cover a phoenix, and statements regarding how they also had come out of the ashes to make this last chance bid to succeed at a secondary education.

In the next subsection, I discuss a pattern of responses that illustrate that the students through the course of various life experiences, some good and some tragic, developed more mature views since their attendance. Many of the former students are now parents with hope for their own children's successes, and most expressed an understanding that their high school diploma furnished them with the key to provide for their families.

Mature views

Towards the latter part of each interview, students discussed how they felt, or viewed themselves now, as opposed to how they felt as adolescents, about their secondary education and what they learned specifically from the Riverton alternative school program. These discussions are crucial to my final analysis because the students revealed what matters to them now, and how they have come to a realization as to what is important in their lives. What was very clear from

all of their comments is that they uniformly agreed that an education, or at least a high school diploma, mattered in their personal history.

I started my questions in this area, by asking, “did your time at the alternative school help or hurt your life’s goals?” This allowed the students to describe either way, how they perceived the impact of their experiences on their present life. It is almost impossible to separate the impact of these former student’s education, and social “status” from the ever-changing economical and vocational chaos of our present day. Many students did refer to their high school degree as being necessary to their vocational survival. For example, Andrea described the importance her employers placed on her high school degree:

I think it definitely helped because if I hadn’t finished high school I wouldn’t have gotten the jobs that I had in human resources and working in purchasing. Every job that I ever had they required you to have a high school diploma, if I didn’t have it I would be in a world of hurt.

Lee, who had an extensive criminal record, placed a great weight on his achievement of a high school diploma for two reasons. First, it helped leverage his chances for employment, and second, it was quite an accomplishment given his admitted early career of all night drug sales and general, “street life:”

I think for me, growing up in the situations that I did, and the stuff I did, as far as running the streets. I think it helped. I think it benefited me, like, I think I wouldn’t be in the good position that I am if I hadn’t had the alternative school. So, I wouldn’t have had a diploma, I wouldn’t have learned that much more, because me going to school, I had to learn some more stuff, I got a little credential to show, you know what I’m saying.

Many of the women expressed clear, succinct goals that put their children first in the equation of when they would either start, or complete, their education. To some extent, these goals and hopes were nurtured during their alternative school experiences. Ingrid, for example, stated she would wait until all five children are in school to complete her education:

When my youngest gets in pre-kindergarten, is when I'll go back. I want my kids to know no matter how long it takes you still can go back and get it done, even though I am not doing it the traditional way.

The students expressed surprise that overall, the teachers, and the administrators at the Riverton Alternative School cared about them and their future success, particularly, after coming from a public school in which they described school people in powerful positions who moved them out of the way. Karen pointed out that she understood the extra effort and patience that the teachers exhibited on the students' behalf at the Riverton Alternative School. Her comments to me also show that there has been continuing contact, communication, and community building between the now adult students and the staff from the Riverton Alternative School:

Miss J., even though we butted heads, I think she still pushed through and still tried to get through to me, still tried to teach me and make me see this was the right way, you know, so I am actually very thankful for that.

Memories of school years can shed light on the nature of one's experience and whether former students felt supported, primarily struggled, or extremely traumatized by the experience. I think it is telling that Karen describes her remembered events "at school" from so wide of a time span from first grade to the alternative school. Why was not anything else between those times as remarkable? Karen reflected on this question:

When I think about school that is the first thing that comes to mind, my first grade teacher and the alternative school. That's the only two school experiences that really stood out. That's the two main experiences that I talk about when we talk about, you know, with my friends when we talk about school, and "I remember school" and that's the first thing that pops up.

Reflecting from a mature perspective, Gabrielle described what a successful life is to her, and reflected on the alternative school years as a touch stone experience that started her on that path:

Right now, I am still in college. I am finishing my bachelors this year. I opened a business, got married, and had a baby. There was just something [about the alternative school experience] that set me up to have a better life. I don't think without the opportunity, I wouldn't have been willing to go to college and start a better life for myself and my family. The tools I left with from the alternative school allowed me to realize that I could do it, I didn't have the focus and I didn't have the means to do it when I was fifteen, sixteen years old so I had to get that confidence from my teachers. They allowed me to get that confidence to do the work. The credit goes to those teachers. They put everything into those students.

Overall, most of the former students had much more mature views about the value of an education now that some time had passed from their time in the alternative school. Life experiences helped to teach them the value of what they learned at the alternative school all those years ago, and several still stayed connected with the adults from the school who believed in them even when they were not making the best choices. In the next section, I discuss how the former students described their current lives and experiences in the specific areas of

employment, family situation, and educational endeavors. As they talk about these areas, they implicitly and explicitly point to some of the ways their time at the alternative school influenced their present realities.

Current Status

In all of the interviews I conducted, the former students discussed topics related to their employment, family situation, and educational endeavors. Many of the stories were lengthy, convoluted histories that you would expect from most young adults. I heard stories of relationships, children, jobs, and job changes. Few shared stories or expressions of satisfaction with their current work situation. Most of the former students described employment that would typically pay close to minimum wage and that most would not consider a profession they would want to stay with for a lengthy career. Barry was the first to describe that type of working experience. He offered, “Well, I got my GED in 02, I had a lapse, and I didn’t do a whole lot of anything except some meaningless part time jobs here and there.”

Many of the female student’s daily efforts consisted of working one or two jobs while also raising children. Chantal described several certifications, degrees, and moves across the country before she settled back in her home-town, disabled and caring for her children, at least one who she described as needing special care due to an autism spectrum disorder. Melissa worked part time as a school bus attendant, cared for her three children, and described working several jobs at a time to, “get by.” Many of the women shared goals of returning to school, hopefully to improve their chances at getting better employment. They planned to do this after they enrolled their own children in school.

Karen termed her work experience, as did many of the former students, with the phrase, “factories and restaurants.” She also described finding a satisfying position for a time, working

with people who had experienced developmental delays and mental health issues. Many of the former female students expressed a desire, or a degree of satisfaction, in working at jobs that helped others, or volunteering in some capacity that served that function, such as Girl Scouts or community gardening.

Many of the male students described day laborer, construction, tree service, or other seasonal, temporary jobs that have little future for sustainability of a livable income or decent benefits for them or for their families. For example, Nestor met with me during a weekend evening, while he was in town visiting friends. He lives 250 miles south of Riverton in a southern gulf coast state. I learned from the interview that he was a day laborer on construction sites around his current home area. When I asked him about plans, what he hoped to be doing in 10 years, he responded, “Hah, I don’t know, just trying to live that’s all.”

Less than half of the former students expressed satisfaction from their current positions, and a very small number described what most know as a “career.” We agreed that a career would consist of a livable wage, a relatively secure future of continued employment, and health benefits for themselves and their families. Among the 26 interviewees, while some were close to finishing their degrees, a few felt they had professional jobs, including one registered nurse, two certified tradesmen, and two career military individuals (one male and one female); a dismal five out of twenty six. The others describe themselves in low paying and transitory, employment situations.

Goals, Dreams, and Motivations

I have labeled this third and last topic, “goals, dreams, and motivations,” to illustrate that most of my participants had expressed serious aspirations and goals that they wished to achieve

for themselves and their families. In this section, I explore the former student's desires and hopes in terms of:

1. Vocational aspirations
2. Educational aspirations
3. Generalized hopes and dreams

The conversations with the former students of Riverton Alternative School revealed much information about the circumstances of their enrollment, their opinions about past and current education programs, and facts about their current situations. I developed this final category not from any specific line of questioning, but from comments former students made in relation to other topics, which led them to project a future for themselves, usually more positive and certain, than their current situation.

My own comments to these individuals' hopes and dreams, as I examined the transcriptions, were markedly positive and supportive. As I look back on it, I can see this might have been an effort on my part to encourage further responses. I did this because it seemed like some of the former students made remarks that would indicate that even they did not believe that some of their goals were a possibility. I also realize that as a former administrator in the alternative program, I genuinely cared about these students and really wanted to help them succeed. I found myself trying to help them when I could, for example, by sharing connections, giving advice, and helping them to understand what was required for them to achieve certain goals.

Vocational Aspirations

Vocational aspirations are difficult to separate from educational aspirations because degrees, or some type of certification, are usually a necessity in our society for most

employment. Many of the vocations that these former students discussed required that they have no criminal record. Two of the former students I interviewed had extensive criminal histories and yet they discussed potential employment in fields where they could not pass the state licensing credentials. As I reflect back on it, I am not sure we helped them to fully understand this when they were students at Riverton Alternative School.

Throughout the interviews, I heard students describe vocational goals that for one reason or another did not seem potentially promising. This doubt would usually arise due to their descriptions of chronic health problems, extensive criminal histories, or lengthy involvements with the local drug treatment courts and programs. Erin described jail time and drug court involvement after graduation from high school. She also expressed fear and doubt in her ability to successfully attend school again or be able to use her education once it was completed.

Bret was eager that I interview him because he said he had, “such a good time at the Riverton Alternative School,” and wanted to, “tell me all about it.” He was also very open about his financial problems, alcohol issues, and DUI’s (driving under the influence charge) that culminated in prison time:

I went on a drinking binge and was a little tore up one night, driving around and ended up getting another DUI. It was my fourth one ... yeah, and I wasn’t too polite to the cop (laughter), and I was locked up from [over 14 months].

While Bret’s situation was on the extreme, there were several interviews where the former students described vocational and educational goals that seemed feasible and achievable. These former students exhibited realistic goal setting abilities and seemed to have been making progress toward achieving those goals through to completion. Several gave credit to individuals and methods of study they learned while at Riverton Alternative School. Below I offer

comments from former students who indeed have clear possibilities of completing their vocational goals, if unforeseen events do not block their path. Barry's experience was hopeful:

In 05, 06, I enrolled at (local state university), um, pursuing my BS in criminal justice and minor in social work. I am working at the (state youth services agency) right now to gain experience to put on my resume, so I anticipate after graduation to apply for either a service coordinator or a youth specialist position.

Since Karen graduated from high school, she had been a part time employee at a local school district and had focused on raising her children. Now that her youngest child would be starting school next year, she had expressed the desire to pursue a career as a school social worker:

I want to go into social work because I can see so much needing work there, and it is heartbreaking. I just want to go in there and fix everything. I work with special needs kids and their parents aren't involved with their lives either and it just kills me. They really need the advocates ... they need it so bad.

Don and Rebecca were very specific about the impetus that led them to their vocational goals and current enrollments in university, teacher educational programs. Clearly, the career modeling that occurred from the teachers at the Riverton Alternative School played a part in their decisions:

Don: Because of that place [Riverton Alternative School], that is what I wanted to end up doing, a secondary education teacher. I wanted to be a teacher ...

Rebecca: I am thinking that me being an alternative student, maybe I could go to the alternative schools and teach there. I know what it is like and they are just trying to get

through to graduation themselves. I've been there and done that and I can relate more to those students.

Even if sometimes the former student's goals and plans seemed insurmountable and unclear, I typically found them to be expressing a general motivation to help people. Many referred to the help they received as students as an influence on their "dream job." This finding relates to the caring and empathy that they experienced at the Riverton Alternative School and that many of them described during our conversations.

Educational Aspirations

As I have mentioned, 24 of the 26 former alternative education students who I interviewed eventually obtained a high school degree or a general educational development certificate (GED). Close to one-half of those interviewed also described some type of post-secondary education. As I described in the previous section, some of those interviewed were well on their way toward completion of certain degrees and certifications; others were not.

As an interviewer who is a graduate student, wanting to discuss their educational experiences, I sometimes did wonder if their comments truly reflected a serious intent to continue to completion various degree programs, or if they were giving me the answers they thought I wanted to hear, or that they thought would make me more proud of them. Some of the students were well on their way to a college degree or some other type of certification. For example, Tanya attended several universities to complete an undergraduate degree and was at the time of the interview, finishing her second year of law school. Andrea, at the time of the interviews, worked at a correctional facility as a nurse and attended the local university. She described her educational path to me, as well as her current successes:

In 2010, I went back to school because I had the opportunity to and I am a licensed practical nurse, and then I am doing my RN right now. I am actually going for my bachelors; I am half way through my college algebra class. I hate college algebra. I say I hate it, but I made a 98 on my last test. I was real excited about that. I am on the national honor society at school because I have a 4.0.

After numerous low paying positions, Van returned to the classroom at the time I caught up to him. He had not settled on a degree and was considering a future position that might benefit others:

I am going back to school at (technical community college), it's my second semester. I am thinking about counseling. Because I had a lot of abuse in my past and I know I can help people get through addictions and overcome those things.

Some former students presented ideas and dreams that I could only say to them, "it's never too late to begin," and "I wish you the best of luck!" Lee's almost seven years in the federal penitentiary had certainly reduced his chances of completing his dreamed of engineering degree. Maria was more explicit in some of her barriers to pursuing further degrees:

I told myself that I was going to go to college a year after I graduated, but that year is dead. I was too immature, doing dumb things. I've got into a lot of legal trouble since I graduated, but now I have a son, and I want to go to school, but it is hard to do full time and wanting to be there for my kid. I just can't afford to do part time school and part time work.

Overall, roughly 50 percent of the students I interviewed attempted to return to the classroom since their time at the Riverton Alternative School program. I found this to be remarkable, given

their histories and their efforts to muster the time and finances to do this while working menial jobs and raising children.

The 26 individuals who allowed me the opportunity for dialogue, experienced one of the largest institutional power centers, the public school system, at its worst as school administrators struggled to interpret the newly minted, fear driven, state legislation called the Missouri Safe Schools Act of 1997. The power/knowledge wielders labeled many of them as “at risk,” dangerous to the educational environment, and as one former student described it, “bad enough to require banishment.” With very little judicial or any other type of fair hearing process, school administrators placed them in a separate, isolated facility operated not by the public school system, but by the state judiciary. Yet amazingly, many of them were “successful” in spite of the circumstances. In part, this was due to caring adults at a “last chance” school who were able to be more student-centered, flexible, and responsive than teachers in many public schools.

What we learn from these students is that the educational environment matters. While they still had scars from their exclusion, they also developed powerful relationships and came to value on-going education. Of course, the student group I interviewed may be a unique subset of the students who attended Riverton Alternative Schools: those who had positive enough experiences or outcomes and who were thus willing to share them. Given the wide range of experiences, I heard about, I think my sample was not entirely homogenous.

In the next and final chapter, I reflect overall on what I learned from working with these former students and what this study contributes to the literature I discussed earlier in this study. I also answer my research questions and offer some conclusions and areas for further study.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

In chapters one and two, I examined the historical underpinnings of the Missouri Safe School Act of 1997 and how it changed the lives of students, teachers, and administrators, as a judicial and administrative practice. I described the Act in these chapters as a response to a national and statewide perception of an out of control youth population, and how a handful of horrific acts of school violence set the new laws and resulting policies in motion. In Chapter Three, I discussed the qualitative methods I used to collect information from former students who were subject to the dictates of the Missouri Safe Schools Act and sent to an alternative school.

I presented my findings and analysis from the interviews with former students from Riverton Alternative School and their comments on the social media site in chapters four and five. School district personnel identified these students, and at times, the students self-identified with the student category of “at-risk youth.” My goal was to explore the experiences of the students in that setting in light of the Missouri Safe School Act of 1997 and the zero tolerance policies employed by the Missouri public school districts. I reached many students and had rich conversations with them. Based on these conversations and information they shared on the Facebook site, I now draw some conclusions about the former students, their situations, and the strategies used by school administrators to place them in that setting.

I can summarize my two research questions in one question; “How do individuals who have experienced alternative education as students describe the experience and their current lives?” As we continue to develop and operate many alternative schools and classrooms, research on the impact of this placement on students is crucial. In order to ensure that these

alternative approaches are achieving the goals we imagine for them, we need to understand more about the population of students who are being sent there – both those who currently attend and those who have attended in the past. In this dissertation, I offered rich, descriptive data from a group of students who attended a disciplinary alternative school seven or more years ago and discussed with the former students how they describe and interpret those experiences as adults.

The Research Process

My qualitative method of interviewing former students of the Riverton Alternative School, along with interaction amongst each other and myself on Facebook, resulted in rich data that assisted me in addressing my research questions. With the aid of two retired teachers from the Riverton Alternative School, the closed, social media Facebook page we developed allowed former students from the alternative school to post photos, comments, and stories about their lives and school experiences. Those who desired it contacted me for further discussion in the form of an interview.

I collected data by keeping a journal record of my impressions from the interviews as well as transcribing and coding all of the taped interviews. One of the retired teachers mentioned earlier also read the transcribed material, and discussed with me his impressions of the material including my categorical and thematic decisions. His comments helped me to narrow the categories, see patterns in the responses I initially overlooked, and confirmed the main themes and answers to my research questions. His main recollection regarding the alternative school environment was that life had hardened the majority of the students by the time they had entered the Riverton Alternative School, and it was a daily effort to keep them positively engaged with the curriculum and with each other. One comment I have heard this teacher make many times through the years is, once a student from Riverton Alternative School Program dropped out,

shortly thereafter he would see their names in the local newspaper police report or the obituaries. I heard reports of some violence in and around the school program, yet it was for the most part safer than the streets and the homes of the students.

The former students shared their personal histories and what they remembered from events in their past, which for some were a decade ago. Most of those interviewed were very detailed in their descriptions and expressed strong opinions about those experiences. They also sometimes followed up on interview comments on the Facebook page or with further messages to me. Several of those interviewed have sent me messages regarding job changes since our interview. I have observed many of their comments on the social media sites as they continue to post birthday wishes and make comments on pictures posted by the retired teachers from the Riverton Alternative School Program. Their continued desire to maintain contact and friendships is very evident.

Findings

I chose a tragic event that became the catalyst for the Missouri Safe School Act of 1997 as the starting point for my literature review. This was the death of a St. Louis Missouri high school student, Christine Smetzer, who Missouri legislators, educators, and her St. Louis community remember to this day. This child was victim of both a sociopath and to neglected school policies that were necessary to track students between school districts. None of the former students I interviewed had committed acts similar, or close to that category of offence (2nd degree murder). Moreover, none had shown a propensity for violent crime either before or after their time at the alternative school.

First Research Question

In the first research question I asked, “How (following the Missouri Safe School Act of 1997) do students who attended a Missouri disciplinary alternative education school for at least one year, describe the experience of attending these schools?” Most students began describing the experience of attending by detailing the reason, circumstances, or event that led to their placement at Riverton Alternative School. Although some students had already dropped out and were returning, most described a removal from a public school that used a legal, statutory rationale to justify placement at this relatively new program.

The Missouri Safe School Act of 1997 was the public school administrator’s justification to suspend or expel the former students I interviewed. Even when the student, parents, and principal reached a mutual decision to enroll in the alternative school, the impetus behind the agreement was the inevitability of zero tolerance policies that school board members and the superintendent would uphold if necessary. The population of students “encouraged” to attend alternative schools were disproportionately minority students, students from dysfunctional families, and those with special needs (or as I found out, unidentified needs and disabilities).

The origins of the resulting state legislation called the Missouri Safe School Act of 1997 is important in that it had, and has, major impact on the lives of many students. Rather than a descriptive statistical analysis of the suspension and expulsion rates, a comparison of district disciplinary handbooks, or a survey of school administrators opinions, in my research, I sought the voice of former students and their descriptions of the circumstances of how they came to be enrolled in alternative school programs, and how their matriculation at an alternative school has influenced their current lives.

Implicit in many of the comments made by students is a power relationship between the school district and the students that positioned the former students as “subjects” to be “governed”

(Foucault, 1984). One of my initial goals was to look at the origins of this power to remove, place, and expel students as a legislative construct. In the empirical portion of my study, I let the students speak for themselves as to the personal and far-reaching impact, or what Foucault (1984) would call the power structure's trajectory. The former students in my study described their relegation to the alternative school community as a 'fait accompli,' or an inevitable, accomplished act. Their sending schools, without juridical prosecution, and with no other due process challenges, would "encourage" their enrollment at the alternative school. These students and their families tended to perceive this encouragement not as a choice, but as the only option available to them. Neither the students nor their parents had the knowledge or the means to seek due process redress of that situation. The students' experiences also support Giroux's (1981) early analysis of the relationship between the authority of schools and the mechanisms of cultural and social reproduction that affects those involved.

Despite their placement in what might have been a stigmatizing place, a disciplinary alternative school, a major theme from my analysis of the data was that the students felt largely positive about their school, even more so than their previous schools. They described a small, safe, caring environment at the alternative school, with fellow students having the same goals to graduate and get past a difficult period of their lives. This group of former students attached themselves to the alternative school community through dialogue with teachers, negotiation of the curriculum, and by expressing interest in the curriculum. They engaged with teachers in the learning process, and from their own descriptions saw these teachers as surrogate parents.

From the ways they describe their involvement in the alternative school, the former students in my study seemed to accept the power system in place, including their placement, and they desired to be successful in the school. This finding seems to belie the literature, which

suggests that “at-risk” and marginal students tend to resist the educational system (Bell et al., 1994; Dryfoos, 1990; Huizinga et al., 1995). Many of these former students described their concern, then and now, with completing as many educational credentials as possible.

Another surprising finding for me, as someone who happened to be the local juvenile court administrator at the time these individuals attended the alternative school, was that the students described the local juvenile court as being less punitive, in practice, than their sending school districts. These students spent little or no time in juvenile detention centers and the juvenile court (an official action) did not supervise them. As a whole, I did not perceive this group of students as serious, hard-core delinquent offenders. Unfortunately, the school officials apparently did see these same students as dangerous to the educational environment.

The students reminded me that when the court gave up the control and funding of the Riverton Alternative School in 2007, it became a much more punitive place. The school district installed security cameras throughout the building and removed counseling services from the budget. Leaving campus for lunch became against the rules, and the district allowed lower grade students to attend the school, which brought many more behavioral problems. This change signaled a more surveillance style culture than what students had experienced during the court’s administration years (between 1997 and 2007).

Pedagogy and Relationships

The size of the alternative school (in contrast with the administrative bureaucratic hugeness of the public school), the 10 to one ratio in the classroom, the overall smallness, and the school based management contributed to the care, trust, and meaningful relationships that the students developed there. Former students also continued these relationships with selected teachers in their adult life. Unfortunately, while the students had many positive things to say

about their educational experience at Riverton Alternative School, it was hard to discern from their comments much about the quality of their educational experiences. When the former students did discuss classes, they described a relatively basic, teacher-driven curriculum. This finding coincides with the research on various evaluations of alternative schools (Cobb et al., 1997). Many former students could not remember, or did not have many comments on exactly what they did in their classes, including the styles of pedagogy used or the curricular foci.

Looking at the idea of pedagogy from the student's descriptions, I could see the battle they engaged in with the Riverton Public School system. Teachers told them to sit down, wake up, quit crying, look at the board, and complete assignments, but what the students wanted to do was relate to someone in a meaningful way – both to the curriculum and to the people around them, including teachers. As a reaction to not getting these educational and relational needs met, some students passively withdrew while others resisted by speaking out of turn, breaking the general rules, and engaging in other various forms of misbehavior.

Fortunately, for the students I interviewed, they experienced a different environment while at the alternative school. The teachers seemed to have concentrated on relationships as much as academics; at least this is what the students experienced. This focus on relationships as a precursor to learning is consistent with the philosophy of critical theory. For example, Giroux (1981) stated, "... power in the classroom must be both democratized and humanized. It is only on the basis of this premise that a foundation can be built for developing more specific classroom practices" (p. 83). To achieve a strategic positioning with the students where they had a chance of getting through to them, in spite of the power relationship they had within the school, the teachers engaged the students in dialogue about many things not included in the curriculum. The teachers (according to the students) were patient with dramatic outburst, put up with minor rule

aberrations like “smoke breaks,” and seem to have concentrated on building relationships rather than dwelling on the behaviors that might have foreshortened the student’s time at the alternative school.

A general agreement by all students who shared their stories was that there was a felt sense of trust, care, and respect involved in the relationship between the teachers and students at the Riverton Alternative School. Although the students agreed that the main goal was completing class credits, and eventually graduating, the relationships established held a pedagogical content of their own. By this I mean that, students acknowledged a marked reduction of stereotyping (by class, gender, and race) in their experience, which, in part, allowed them to focus on curriculum content. They also discussed forming relationships with students they would not have associated with in any other school environment. Further, when told they could return to public school, many chose to stay where they had established a comfortable identity and a learning environment that suited their needs.

The teachers encouraged students and most felt they learned that they had the skills and ability to learn in a classroom setting, but ultimately what they remembered most was relationships. That is, they remembered teachers who cared about them, listened to their situations, and were flexible and accommodating. They also developed a desire for further education, with most still pursuing educational options even after getting their high school or GED degrees.

Second Research Question

In regards to the second research question, “How (following the Missouri Safe Schools Act of 1997) do students who attended a Missouri disciplinary alternative education school for at least one year, perceive the impact of their experience on their present life circumstances?,” the

former students were not as animated and descriptive as they had been while speaking to me about experiences years before. Many former students described their school experiences in a positive way. Unfortunately, their lives remain difficult in ways that are different from when they were children, but now from a more mature realization of vocational and social barriers they most likely will face the rest of their lives.

From the earlier stages of doing this research, I assumed that cultural reproduction theory would play a role in my analysis of the data and in making sense of the lives of the students. Describing the ways in which schools contributed to reproduction, Giroux (1981) stated that, “schools cannot and do not intend to transform social relations... they are subordinate to the prevailing social/political and economic order” (p. 2). I assumed that schools would play a large part in contributing to poor eventual outcomes for these former students. By the end of the study, I saw from the family histories, stories, and experiences that the former students reported that there was also much going on in their lives, over and above what was taking place at school, including parental neglect, poverty, and drug and alcohol abuse. There seemed to have been as many societal factors as school factors effecting these students, yet they also acknowledged the impact of tracking, exclusion from extracurricular activities, a non-engaging basic curriculum with very few elective type classes, and the lack of information regarding post secondary opportunities that would have been available at Riverton High School. A chaotic and dysfunctional existence seemed to have plagued these students during their adolescent years, and the dynamics of cultural reproduction theory may explain much of their life stories thereafter.

One of Giroux’s ideas is that acceptance of the dominant culture is a lot more common than critical resistance or critical insight about the dynamics at play in one’s situation. The students I interviewed who struggled with their circumstances, and the alternative school

administration, subsequently dropping out of school, said that they felt it was not “the schools fault.” Most of those students expressed regret and acknowledged a continuing struggle to complete their educational goals. It is common for marginalized students to blame themselves when they are not successful – to adopt other’s perceptions of them and to assume if they had only made better choices, they would have had access to privileges granted to others (Giroux, 1981; MacLeod, 1995).

Yet, at the same time, the former students of the Riverton Alternative School did not minimize the history of their second chance provided by enrollment at the Riverton Alternative School, recognizing that they were better off having that alternative than dropping out. Many of the jobs they had would not have happened without a high school degree; yet their lives, for the majority, remained hard with minimum wage working class jobs just to “get by”, or as one student put it, “some meaningless part time jobs here and there.” The most telling answer from the question, “where have you worked?” was, “factories and restaurants.” Some former students located employment that they felt was satisfying and described those positions not in regards to adequate salaries, but in their ability to help others, such as nursing, counseling, education, and volunteering as Girl Scout troop leaders. I have discussed in previous chapters that many students gave credit to their teacher role models and their learning experiences at Riverton Alternative School when they sought positions in fields that directly help others.

Many of the women I interviewed put aside goals of college degrees and other post secondary certifications due to family responsibilities or due to being the primary caretaker of their children. The majority of the women in this study described themselves as single moms, divorced, or having husbands in jail or prison.

With a few exceptions, the male former students found employment in positions that I have previously described as having little future for sustainability of a livable income or decent benefits for them, or their families. More of the male students felt constrained by criminal histories that they understood employers would hold against them when seeking work.

As I reported in chapter four, only five out of 26 former students described themselves as having full-time professional, or income-adequate careers, yet close to half of those interviewed had attempted to return to the classroom following their high school degrees. What this ultimately shows is that even though the staff at Riverton Alternative School worked hard to create a nurturing, caring learning environment, the Missouri Safe School Act of 1997 added a layer of politicizing to traditional school policy that was not unique to Missouri, but legislators duplicated across the country in other “safe school” laws. The safe school and zero tolerance policies have been fundamentally exclusionary, possibly supported racist and sexist policies, and have affected career opportunities for many students over the past fifteen years. Moreover, as critical theorists argue, they helped to ensure that the working-class status (at best) of these students (and their eventual families) would continue.

Implications for Practice

In the end, it is useful to reflect on how findings from this study might influence current educational practice, especially when it comes to creating options for students who have committed violations or who can't function well in public schools. As I was only able to talk to a small sample of students who went to the alternative school, it is hard to make any sort of overall assessment. Riverton Alternative School had some success in keeping students in the program, although many dropped out. I learned from my interactions with the former students that many develop strong relationships with teachers at the alternative school, and that almost all

desired further education. Most students graduated from high school, or got their GEDs, and at the same time, struggled through multiple working class jobs with little hope of a career.

The factor alluded to most by the students as influencing their desire to stay in school and succeed, besides caring teachers, was a small student-teacher ratio. Small classes helped students to develop the commitment to stick with the process of education rather than take the less structured way out of dropping out. Not surprisingly, those who did dropout had come to regret that decision. Since most students desire to stay in an educational setting, one significant implication for practice is that we should work toward providing a reasonable student-teacher ratio whenever possible, particularly for those students needing more assistance. A low student-teacher ratio is much more conducive to the kinds of caring and connected learning these students need than the more typical, large and impersonal classrooms of most public high schools, especially those in urban areas.

The main deficiency in the Missouri Safe School Act was the rigid structure that encouraged a high level of suspension and expulsion and very little other alternative disciplinary action such as peer mediation, individual counseling, or the variety of other available in-school programs and efforts. No one I interviewed felt that the existing due process system applied by the Riverton School District worked in their favor; even when later the schools retracted their initial “sentence.”

It is hard to say whether these students were ‘at-risk’ and what the concept of “at-risk” really meant. In some cases, it seems that the school district interpreted these students as a risk or danger to others. Thus, they required an almost immediate, long-term removal from the public school environment. The challenges that students faced at home, which put them ‘at-risk’ for successful learning, seemed less important. After gathering these stories, I argue that

revisions to the Missouri Safe School Act are required. First, we should explore the full context of student's situations and needs. Zero tolerance policies lead to school administrators placing many students in alternative schools who would have been fine in the regular school setting.

The former students' candid reports of their life circumstances and many factors surrounding the events that contributed to expulsions, suspensions, and reluctant transfers to the alternative school, led me to question zero tolerance policies and to recommend that the Missouri Safe School Act should be revised to require attention to the mitigating factors in each situation that modifies placement of a student. I would also encourage development of proactive programming and cutting the length of suspension to fewer days except on the more violent cases. If school districts gave a shorter suspension or did not allow a suspension during the appeal process, I believe that many of these students, based on their mitigating circumstances and the lack of juvenile court intervention, would have been able to remain at the public school. A change of this nature in the current Missouri Safe Schools Act would influence the options and disciplinary practices of Missouri public schools. I believe the students I interviewed would have benefitted from such a change. They also seemed to have benefitted from the more caring and open environment of the alternative school, which can provide lessons for how we can make public schools more welcoming and supportive for all students.

Recommendations for Further Research

As I mentioned in my literature review, we do not know much about how students subject to expulsion from public schools and placement in alternative schools have fared. The option of removing at-risk students from the classroom is still popular. My research is a step towards hearing the voices of students subject to removal and zero tolerance policies.

Ultimately, the conclusions I draw about these students are mixed. While pulling them out of the public schools was in many cases traumatic, many nonetheless found a community and support in the alternative school they attended. Yet in the end, most of them are still stuck in challenging realities not so very different from those of their families. While they report enjoying aspects of the alternative school, I could find little evidence that their experiences there gave them the tools to transform their challenging realities, even as there were some notable exceptions among the students I interviewed.

One of the main limitations in my study was the voluntary way in which I recruited participants. It is possible that because they self-selected into my study, my participants were a unique group. That is, they may have been the ones with the most positive memories and/or were the most reflective about the choices they made. They certainly do not represent all students that school districts place in alternative, disciplinary schools. Moreover, I looked at only students in one specific alternative school that was able to function, for most of the time, as a small, caring environment with dedicated teachers who stayed close to some of the students. This too may be unique. Yet, we still need more research on this population and on the short and long-term effects of alternative educational placements. Based on the findings from this study, and my work with this population of students, I would recommend that researchers complete more studies concerning alternative education in the areas listed below:

1. Longitudinal studies on student achievement and retention at alternative education sites.

This would bring in more data over time, and at more sites, to understand the issues around the at-risk category of students and how to encourage their success. We also need to study these alternative schools themselves, including their design and curriculum. Are some more successful than others? If so, what accounts for this success?

2. Longitudinal and comparative studies about vocational outcomes between alternative school students and similar students from the public school population. Former students in my study described situations of lack of opportunity for extracurricular programs, advanced class opportunities, and vocational certification pursuits. Although Riverton Alternative School seemed to have adequately covered the basic subjects, students consistently reported that they did not have many opportunities for extracurricular activities. These activities might have expanded their horizons and helped them to build connections and skills that would be useful later in life.
3. Researchers should conduct more, and similar, research with student populations in other alternative schools to see if they find similar experiences. If they find similar success, but also similar deficiencies, researchers could place concerted pressure on the various policy makers (both school administrators and legislators), to reevaluate alternative education's impact on a student's life, long after they acquired other skills, educational credentialing, and vocational direction.

Personal Reflections

As I come to the close of this study, I learned a lot about myself as a researcher, about the former students who attended alternative schools that I was in charge of, and about the challenges of overcoming rough family and life circumstances. Among other issues, as I got deeper into the research, I became very concerned by the student's accounts of experiencing prejudice, bias, and arbitrary punishments while at Riverton High School and Junior High School or from whatever public school they attended. Many of the students I interviewed were not from the student population (court ordered) that I thought was in the majority of those attending, and I was surprised by the blatant misuse of the court funded alternative school as a "catch all" or

“dumping ground” facility. Yet of the students I interviewed, most described their move to the alternative school as a positive experience that they still reflect on. As it turned out, it was beneficial that policy wise, there were no barriers to their enrollment due to their lack of court involvement.

The former students I interviewed came from unhealthy and unhappy existences in the public school, so blocking their attendance at the “court ordered school” or intended, disciplinary alternative school, would have been unfortunate as well. It would be interesting to figure out exactly what percentage of students attending the Riverton Alternative School during the years covered by this study were indeed court ordered; unfortunately, this data does not exist.

Many of the former students who participated in this study had continued relationships with one or two of the former teachers who had since retired. What this means to me is that I was collecting data from a social group of individuals who valued a connection with those who taught them and cared about them when few others did. It would be interesting to know if any of the alternative school administrators have a list of social media, or email contacts, from those days also. I would guess that this is unlikely, especially since none of my participants mentioned it.

The alternative school teachers were the student’s main contact point and former students rarely mentioned administrators during the interviews. Quite possibly, there is another group of students who would have been ambivalent or negative about the experience at Riverton Alternative School; however, they did not come forward. It would not be surprising if students who were unsuccessful at the alternative school would choose not to talk to a researcher about their experiences. Moreover, they would also be unlikely to stay in touch with their former teachers and classmates.

I was most interested in the student's perceptions and stories from the Riverton Alternative School program. I also felt it was important that memories, concerns, and experiences at the local public schools were included in this work. I believe the student's impressions and histories at the public school informed their parallel experience at the alternative school even though many described a radical difference between the two places.

As I reflected on all the interviews, I identified an implicit idea I call trading pain for pain. The former students seemed to recall causing disruptions in the classroom, and in turn received "pain" back by being surprised that administrators and principals were so quick to remove and ultimately exclude them from public school. I asked a former teacher with 14 years experience in alternative school classrooms to read the transcripts and share his impressions. He recalled the population of students was, "right where they needed to be." He felt that the school district placed many of the students at the alternative school on very weak reasons, but once there, showed evidence that they were in the right place. He further explained that most of the students had severe anger problems, and that the better teachers in the Riverton Alternative School program were able to apply strategies to encourage and build appropriate behaviors. Would these students have resisted their continued educational path at the public school without the impetus of the Missouri Safe School Act? Possibly, because there will always be those who chafe from the panoptic styled institutions, so we should offer options such as the model provided at the Riverton Alternative School program.

The Missouri Safe School Act is at the crux of experiences, both good and bad, that the former students of Riverton Alternative School described between the years of 1997 and 2007. I imagine that Michel Foucault would have likened the legislation to a faulty machine, or apparatus that acts as a conduit for the power of the educational institution and that allowed too

much control over certain members of the student population. I showed that at least in the case of these students, their conflicts and misdemeanors were not the reason for the rise of the disciplinary alternative schools in Missouri, despite popular perception that students in alternative disciplinary schools had committed serious infractions.

In some ways, I went into this study wanting to challenge the logic behind zero tolerance policies, yet I was surprised to find that many of the students subject to these policies had a positive experience at the alternative school. What ostensibly might have been a stigmatized environment for these students represented a caring and supportive place, free from some of the power displays and bureaucracy of the public schools. This was indeed a surprising finding, and one that caused me to wonder if there might have sometimes been a positive aspect in zero tolerance, at least for students lucky enough to wind up in a small, community-oriented, caring alternative school.

There is a historical and philosophical split between the early reform alternative schools and how the disciplinary alternative programs function in the modern era. Yet, the students from the Riverton Alternative School Program described a basic education and almost parental care at the hands of empathetic teachers, which from what the literature describes, was common in the “free school” programs of almost 50 years ago. I cannot predict the future for these former students, but I was given every indication that many of them are successfully balancing busy lives of jobs, children, and for some, college classes. For those skills, former students gave some portion of the credit to the teachers at the Riverton Alternative School. Their life struggles should leave us with the cautionary tale of what happens with stark interpretations of school legislation. Not paying attention to real world situations and mitigating circumstances can result in lifelong consequences for students.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Interview Schedule

I am interested in learning about your experiences at the alternative school you attended and what you have been doing since that time. My questions are open-ended and you should only tell me what you are comfortable sharing. I will not pressure you into telling me anything that you are not comfortable talking about. Remember, all that you tell me will be kept confidential, and all personal references, names, and other identifiers, will be removed or changed, when this material is included in my study.

Research Question:

- 1. How do students who attended for at least one year or graduated from a Missouri alternative education program (following the Missouri Safe Schools Act of 1997) describe the experience of attending these schools?**

1. What year did you graduate from high school?
2. Can you describe the high school you graduated from?
3. What were the circumstances, or the back story around how you happened to attend the alternative high school? Were you Court Ordered to attend? Did you have a choice? Were you or your parents reluctant to allow you to attend?
4. (If dropped out and returning) Was returning to school hard for you? Did you have to make any lifestyle changes to attend school again?
5. What changes, if any, occurred in your life due to attending the alternative school (friends, habits, family, living arrangements)?

6. What were some of the struggles you experienced? What were some of the successes? Can you tell me a story that best sums up you and your fellow student's time at the alternative school?
7. Were there any adults at the school that you felt help you achieve your goal of graduating?
8. Were there any major roadblocks, and how did you get past them?
9. Did you feel that you had any say in the curriculum offered? Were the conversations, dialogue, and relationships you had with the classroom teachers similar to what you had experienced in the regular school?
10. As you know, many students dropped out during the time you attended. If you had some say in the set up of the alternative school what would you have done to increase graduation rates?
11. Have you ever heard the term zero tolerance, what does it mean to you/ do you believe it is, or was, evenly applied? Can you remember any examples?
12. Do you have any friends who graduated that you think might speak with me?

Follow-up Interview (or second part)

I would like to ask you a few more questions about what you are doing now, and what you plan to do in the future - some of which you talked about during the first part of the interview ((While we spent most of the time during the first interview talking about your time at the alternative school, I would like to ask you some questions about your life now).

Research Question:

- 2. How do students who attend for at least one year or graduated from a Missouri alternative education program (following the Missouri Safe Schools Act of 1997) perceive the impact of their experience on their present life circumstances?**

1. What have you been doing since graduation?
2. Have you attended any other schools since graduation?
3. What jobs have you held?
4. Do you think your time at the alternative school helped or hurt your chances in life?
5. What are your plans now? What are you hoping to have happen?
6. What other stories from your life should I know?

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