Alternative Education Programs: 
An In-Depth Analysis of an Individualized Learning Experience

by

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ABSTRACT

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS:
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Alternative education programs are becoming increasingly available in North America, yet they are understudied. In-depth research that addresses the structure of alternative education programs was undertaken to understand if these programs are useful and, if they are, why they are beneficial to students. This research addresses current gaps in the sociology of education literature with respect to understanding the school culture and school climate of alternative high schools within a school board in Southern Ontario. Findings show that student success is primarily defined and measured individually since alternative students are deemed at-risk youth who have a wide range of academic and non-academic needs. Symbolic interactionism, as well as a class-based analysis, to some extent, is useful to explain how student success is defined and measured among alternative students.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Alternative education programs are a recent development in many schools across North America, and Ontario is no exception. Mainly because these programs are relatively new, they have been understudied and are arguably misunderstood. However, since availability of these programs is increasing, it is crucial to understand if these programs are useful and, if they are, how and why are they benefitting students. In the United States, alternative education programs have become more widespread than they are in Canada. Quinn et al. (2006) note (at the time that this study was conducted) that in the United States, over 20,000 alternative education programs are available. This is a dramatic increase from the 464 alternative education programs that were available in the United States in 1973 (Quinn et al. 2006). Studying education at both the elementary and high school level is important because in order to produce functioning adults and citizens in society, children and young adults must be properly educated so that they can prepare for their post-secondary lives. Schools undoubtedly also play an important role in the socialization of young people. As noted by Davies and Guppy (2010), a student’s performance (and consequently their “success”) in school greatly impacts the rest of their life in terms of their opportunities and which path they choose after they leave school. In Ontario, students must stay in school until they are 18-years old, or until they have completed their diploma (whichever comes first) (Ungerleider 2008). While the current structure of the education system in Ontario may work for a large majority of students, there is a smaller population of students who are identified as being at-risk and who do not find the structure of traditional education to be attainable and conducive to their learning needs.

The goal of this study is to shed light on the importance of recognizing that students have individualized needs and if these needs are not recognized some students will struggle a great
deal to complete their education. This research study focuses on alternative high schools located in a school board in Southwestern Ontario. The overall research question of this thesis is: *how is success defined and measured in these alternative schools?*

To protect the identities of both staff and students within this board, names of schools, school boards or individuals will not be disclosed. However, it is noteworthy to explain that my findings are reflective of (1) one public school board and (2) the Ontario education system/curriculum. While I hope that my findings will be applicable to other school boards and perhaps more widespread than Ontario, I am not suggesting that my findings are consistent with the findings in other areas of Canada and/or the United States. While staff members frequently discussed the school district’s respective Catholic board, I cannot confirm with certainty the perspectives that they shared with me because I only conducted my research in the public school board, not the Catholic board. However, the findings were nonetheless interesting and I will discuss some of the perspectives staff members shared with me in regards to alternative students coming from different public and Catholic school boards in Chapter 5.

It is noteworthy that my reference point will always be *traditional* high schools. This will be further discussed in Chapter 5, but it is crucial that my study aims to explain how alternative education programs and these separate alternative high schools differ from programs in traditional high schools (which both offer the same Ontario curriculum). In terms of the students, I will consistently refer to the students as “alternative” students because this is the terminology that was used throughout the research process. Moreover, staff members referred to the students as “alternative” students. It is also important to explain that while I visited four different alternative school locations (or “sites,” as referred to by staff members), my findings are reflective of these schools as a whole. For the purposes of this research, each school has the
same name and for the most part offers the same programming. I will therefore not be engaging in a comparative analysis of these schools. By discussing my findings in a broader scope, this also helps protect the identities of the population, particularly staff members whom I interviewed. Otherwise, it is easier for staff members of different roles to identify who said what in particular interviews as the population of both staff and students at the alternative high schools is much smaller than in traditional high schools.

I conducted my research using qualitative research methods in the form of classroom observations, as well as semi-structured interviews with staff members. Chapter 3 will outline the specific details of the research methods and the benefits of this approach to address the key research question. Quinn et al. (2006) note that there is a need for research that focuses on the social climate of alternative schools, but this is something that cannot be adequately addressed using quantitative research methods since I am interested in the meaning of success. To do so, I immersed myself in the school culture in an attempt to better understand the school climate. In Chapter 2 I will outline the differences between school climate and culture, as they are both significant to my study. In a general sense, MacNeil, Prater and Busch (2009) state that school climate relates to the behaviours and feelings within the school and is reflective of a psychological perspective. Since quantitative methods (i.e. surveys) do not give researchers the opportunity to probe and ensure that participants fully understand the questions they are being asked, it is much more difficult to get a sense of the feel of alternative schools. With this in mind, I set out to address gaps in the literature with respect to a need for more in-depth, observational (qualitative) research, which allowed me to experience the social environment, as opposed to measuring it quantitatively on a more widespread scale.
Throughout my participant observation and interviews different findings emerged and I organized these findings into three key themes. In terms of addressing my overall research question, the three themes that I will outline and discuss in Chapter 5 are: (1) an individual measurement of success / the structure of alternative education; (2) academic/non-academic support; and (3) feeling “safe” / building connections with students. There are sub-themes that will also be discussed throughout Chapter 5 with respect to the three key themes and overall research findings. Relevant literature will be presented in Chapter 2 on the characteristics of alternative students who are primarily at-risk youth, as well as the structure of alternative education programs and the benefits of an individualized learning approach.

To begin, I will provide a literature review in Chapter 2 to provide context regarding alternative education programs and schools. Chapter 3 will discuss the research methods used in this study, including the timeline of the project and justification for the choice in methodology. In Chapter 4 I will provide the context of the alternative schools where this research was conducted. By including excerpts from my typed “journal” that I wrote in after each visit, I will attempt to provide a clear visualization and understanding of what I observed and how I conceptualized my research. In chapter 5 I will discuss my research findings focusing on the three key themes of my research project, as noted above. In Chapter 6 I will relate my findings to the literature that was presented in Chapter 2, as well as literature that was not discussed but is relevant to some of my more unexpected findings. I will conclude this thesis in Chapter 7 by summarizing the key aspects of this research study, as well as some of the limitations and directions for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will begin with a discussion of the main assumptions of symbolic interactionism, the perspective informing my research, followed by a review of some of the research in the area of school culture and school climate. The characterization of alternative education programs, as well as the relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and behavioural factors and academic achievement will also be discussed. This chapter will conclude with an overview of Ontario’s Student Success Strategy.

Conceptual Framework: Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a relevant conceptual framework for this study. An interactionist approach will be relied upon when understanding students’ behaviour, as well as helping to understand the shared meanings in the unique school climate of alternative schools. According to Blumer (1986), a key figure in symbolic interactionism, there are three key premises of this theory. The first premise suggests that “human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them” (Blumer 1986:2). Secondly, “the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows” (Blumer 1986:2). Lastly, Blumer (1986) states that “these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters” (p. 2). When considering these premises, it appears that symbolic interactionism is fundamentally unique because it steers away from traditional positivist research toward understanding social meaning from the perspectives of the participants. The social interaction between individuals, such as those who are a part of the same school institution, allows them to develop shared meanings of their situation. Symbolic interactionism describes meanings as
“social products” that are formed through interactions between individuals who, in this case, are a part of a particular institution (Blumer 1986:5).

It was crucial to take a step back when conducting this research project to ensure that I did not assume meaning a priori when immersed in the school culture. Blumer (1986) states that “to ignore the meaning of the things toward which people act is seen as falsifying the behavior under study” (p. 3). Blumer (1986) explains that often times meaning is “taken for granted” and consequently “pushed aside as unimportant” (p. 2). Taking meaning for granted can be problematic because research findings may be inaccurate. To go along with Blumer’s (1986) assertion that ignoring meaning falsifies behaviour that is being studied, he also states that “the meanings that things have for human beings are central in their own right” (p. 3). According to this perspective, researchers and scholars should not impose their own perspectives when maintaining a symbolic interactionist approach. Doing so would defeat the purpose of trying to understand meaning from the viewpoints of the participants. Thus, symbolic interactionism is unique because the findings are dependent upon how the participants perceive their social world and the perspectives that they share with the researcher. This conceptual framework will be employed when analyzing and interpreting the data for this thesis in Chapter 6.

As a broader field of study, the sociology of education is also useful when discussing alternative education programs. Davies and Guppy (2010), for example, discuss how we are living in a “schooled society” and state that “school attendance is one of the few things mandatory in life” (p. 2). School attendance is not only mandatory; completing high school and attending post-secondary school have become much more common today than in the past, and one’s performance in school greatly influences how the rest of their life will be shaped once they have completed school (Davies and Guppy 2010). Since this particular project focuses on a local
school board in Ontario, it is important to mention the law in the province related to staying in school. As pointed out earlier, Ungerleider (2008) notes that students in Ontario must remain in school until they have either (1) completed the OSSD (Ontario Secondary School Diploma) or (2) turned 18-years-old (some students graduate from high school before they are 18 years of age).

The sociology of education is an obviously relevant field of study in relation to this research topic because whether or not one is considering the implications of receiving an education from an academic versus a non-academic standpoint, conventional wisdom dictates that obtaining at least a high school education will open more educational and occupational doors in the future. Consequently, not obtaining an education may place barriers on an individual’s life chances. According to Davies and Guppy (2010:12-13), schools play a key role in society in terms of: (1) socializing youth; (2) engaging in selection and consequently stratification by ranking and rewarding students, and; (3) both organizing and legitimizing knowledge. Perhaps the second category is the most significant in terms of alternative education because students may fail to succeed when being tested and graded in traditional schools. Consequently, if students cannot process information or function to their full ability in a traditional school setting, their overall education is likely to be greatly affected.

Davies and Guppy (2010) also emphasize inequality in the school system in terms of the influence that family structure can play on students’ school performance, as well as the reinforcement of social inequality. This notion will be further discussed throughout the literature review in terms of how external social forces may constrain students from succeeding, which is often outside of their control. This may be related to the “hidden curriculum” in which individuals are in a sense fed into particular jobs and post-school identities, with respect to their
level of education (Davies and Guppy 2010:44). Based on a student’s home life, socioeconomic status, gender, and race, they may be at an advantage or a disadvantage (Davies and Guppy 2010). In fact, Davies and Guppy (2010) state that “students enter schools with huge disparities in their home conditions” (p. 251).

Thus, it appears that more and more school boards today are operating with the idea that more effort needs to be made in giving each student an equal chance at success, whether it be in a traditional or an alternative school setting. For my research, I am setting out, in part, to understand if alternative school programs are providing a particular group of students with an alternate means of success, compared to more traditional school settings. In doing so I will try to understand why they are effective if they indeed are effective. I will provide an overview of the differences between school culture and school climate, key concepts in the literature.

**School Culture versus School Climate**

The concepts of “school culture” and “school climate” can be easily confused. School culture and school climate are both relevant concepts with respect to my research, thus it is important to differentiate the two. Throughout this study, I immersed myself in the school culture. MacNeil et al. (2009) explain that, according to Hoy et al. (1991), school culture may be “viewed from an anthropological perspective,” whereas school climate may be “viewed from a psychological perspective” (p. 74). They continue by suggesting that behaviour is categorized under climate, whereas “the values and norms of the school or organization” are all characterized under culture (MacNeil et al. 2009:75). According to MacNeil et al. (2009), Freiberg and Stein (1999) explain that school climate is “the heart and soul of the school” (p. 75). Therefore, in order for me to better understand the particular climate at the alternative high schools, I had to immerse myself into the school culture.
A positive school culture and school climate has been shown to be correlated with student success and academic achievement (MacNeil et al. 2009). MacNeil et al. (2009) identify school culture as “shared norms” and school climate as “shared perceptions” (p. 75). It is important to create a learning environment for students that entails a strong belief system with clear expectations in terms of behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs (MacNeil et al. 2009). Norms and values are reflective of the school’s organizational culture and learning environment (MacNeil et al. 2009). School climate is the result of school culture and a positive school climate will aid in student achievement and success (MacNeil et al. 2009). MacNeil et al. (2009) explain that it is crucial to examine the school climate when “measuring the organizational health of a school” in order to identify areas of improvement and strategies focused on students’ ability to learn in the school environment (p. 75).

The Characterization of Alternative Education Programs

Quinn et al. (2006) state that while alternative education programs are becoming increasingly popular in the United States, and there is a growing demand for these types of programs because they are believed to benefit students, more research needs to be done with respect to the specific characteristics of alternative education programs in terms of how exactly they are effective at aiding in student success and increasing the number of students who graduate from high school. For example, Quinn et al. (2006) note that in 1973, there were approximately 464 alternative education programs in the United States. However, Quinn et al. (2006) state that an estimated 20,000 alternative education programs are available in the United States. This number could have very well increased since this article was published in 2006, demonstrating a tremendous growth and a need for additional research.
In the United States, Foley and Pang (2006) outline several key characteristics about alternative education programs, including: smaller student enrollment than traditional schools and therefore smaller class sizes; teacher instruction that is individualized to meet the needs of each student, and; a balance of both academic and non-academic personal needs of the students. Catterall and Stern (1986) extend these findings by stating that another key feature of alternative education programs is that the education students are receiving is in many cases more relevant/applicable to the “real world” by placing a stronger focus on life skills than academics. It is noteworthy that while Catterall and Stern’s (1986) study is now dated, some of their findings remain consistent with more recent studies in terms of the individualized learning approach alternative education programs aim to provide to students. Perhaps this suggests that there are characteristics of alternative education programs that have remained consistent over time because they have been continuously shown to be successful. For example, Franklin et al. (2007:134) also discuss “nontraditional education,” which is similar to Catterall and Stern’s (1986) discussion concerning more relevant and practical education.

Franklin et al. (2007) emphasize that alternative education programs are unique compared to traditional schools because they are individualized. In traditional schools, both vocational education and special education aid students, but they are not the same as alternative education programs (Franklin et al. 2007). There may be some alternative schools that do provide vocational training, but the particular alternative schools where I conducted my research in do not offer vocational training. It is also important to note that alternative education programs often allow students to work at a pace that is comfortable for them (Franklin et al. 2007). However, Franklin et al. (2007) also state that with such a great amount of self-discretion,
students may choose to not return to school on a regular basis because they may not feel like there is a point in self-regulating and completing their work.

Foley and Pang (2006) do note, however, that often there is community involvement with the school in which the alternative education programs are offered. Unfortunately, probation officers are predominately the community members involved with students at the schools, suggesting that there are situations in the students’ lives outside of the classroom that may have a great impact on their ability to remain focused on their studies and engaged in school. Franklin et al. (2007) extend this notion by explaining that “many students who drop out of high school are academically capable and could finish high school if given the right type of educational choices” (p. 133). This statement is significant because it reaffirms the findings across academic literature suggesting that it is not necessarily the academic aspect of school that students may struggle with; often, it appears that students have so much else going on in their lives, that this trouble greatly impacts their ability to learn. This is noted by Foley and Pang (2006) in terms of the school’s cooperation with probation officers and other aspects of the students’ lives.

According to Davies (1994) high school dropout rates in Ontario are decreasing. While Davies’ (1994) study appeared 20 years ago, a report by the Ministry of Education (2011) confirms that high school graduation rates are continuing to rise in Ontario. As noted above by Ungerleider (2008), students in Ontario must remain in school until they are 18 years of age (unless they graduate before they turn 18-years-old, of course). It is important to understand why students dropout of high school; in particular, students who struggle more than the average high school students, such as students who attend an alternative high school. While Davies (1994:345) states that high school dropouts “experience greater difficulties with school” than students who remain in school, there are other reasons that may influence their decision to
dropout. Another key reason why students may choose to dropout is if they “disengage themselves from the culture of schooling, and learn to prefer the ‘real world’ of employment over ‘irrelevant’ schooling” (Davies 1994:345). This finding is consistent with Catterall and Stern’s (1986) discussion of alternative education programs focusing on more practical learning that tends to emphasize life skills over academics in order to provide students with non-academic resources that they often need.

Quinn et al. (2006) also note that a common misconception among individuals, whether they are educators, policy makers, or members of society, is that the reason(s) why a student is unable to succeed in a traditional school is because of an underlying personal problem. There may certainly be behavioural, emotional, and/or social factors related to a student’s inability to thrive in the traditional schools/curriculum, but by suggesting that these problems are primarily personal places a heavy burden and sense of blame on students who function more efficiently in an alternative education setting, and takes the focus away from external social and administrative factors (Quinn et al. 2006). In Leyton’s (1979) book _The Myth of Delinquency_, for example, he states that delinquency is not a necessarily result of biological or psychological factors. Less attention, therefore, should be focused on why students are unable to function in a traditional school and more attention should be placed on whether or not alternative education programs are truly helping students with their studies. If there appears to be evidence that students are doing well in this alternative setting, it is then important to question how and why students are better functioning in alternative education programs than was the case when they were in traditional schools. Other experts believe that the focus should be on the education and system and not the students’ individual characteristics (Quinn et al., 2006).
These findings certainly suggest that students who attend an alternative education program may be receiving an education that may be not of less value and merit than students who attend a public school that is not necessarily specialized to meet their needs. As mentioned above, there are behavioural factors that are noted in the literature, as well as socio-demographic factors that will now be discussed in more detail. These factors are significant with respect to this topic because Franklin et al. (2007) believe that at-risk youth are commonly enrolled in alternative education programs and a student’s home life and SES certainly plays a role in their educational success. For example, students from single parent and lower SES household are over-represented in these types of schools.

*The Relationship Between Sociodemographic Characteristics / Behavioural Factors and School Achievement*

MacLeod (1995) provides an interesting analysis of the relationship between social class and school achievement. While MacLeod’s (1995) research was not focused on alternative schools per se, his findings on the relationship between social class and a child’s success in other areas of their life, such as in school, is relevant. According to MacLeod (1995), the family plays a key role in the socialization of a child. The families discussed by MacLeod (1995) are characterized from being from a lower SES background, since most of the youth he interviewed lived in public housing, had low levels of parental educational attainment, and many, for various reasons, were from single parent households. The structure of the family, including their socioeconomic status and neighbourhood in which the children are raised, will certainly greatly influence a child’s success in and out of school.

As written by Erik H. Erikson, “...hope is the basic ingredient of all vitality; stripped of hope, there is little left to lose” (MacLeod 1995:4). There is significance to this quote in relation
to the research in this thesis. When students lose hope, it is possible that they often lose confidence and the perceived ability to succeed. Whether or not they can handle the academic material, losing hope and an emotional attachment to school may decrease an individual’s likelihood of success and their belief that they can succeed. When describing the outlook of the youth at the beginning of MacLeod’s (1995) book, “utter hopelessness” is mentioned (p. 4). Eight years later, each participant (during separate interviews) held “himself accountable for his condition” (MacLeod 1995:250). While family structure and SES have an impact on a child’s success in and out of school, it is crucial to help students succeed while they are still young and in school so that they do not face as many barriers throughout their teenage years and into adulthood. MacLeod (1995:252) discusses the “intergenerational transmission of poverty” whereby some of the individuals in the study noted that they felt “robbed” of opportunities in life because of macroeconomic and cultural constraints. This research on social reproduction and class are important as it may relate to how success is defined and measured in alternative schools.

Lareau (1987:76) notes that the “educational consequences of family-school relationships” explains why parental involvement in school can provide students with advantages. If parents are on the same page in terms of the goals and expectations of the teachers and administrators then student success is possible. Lareau (1987) explains that low achievers require additional help at home from their parents, and teachers are able to tell if they are getting this assistance. One of the schools where Lareau (1987) conducted her research is in a working-class neighbourhood. Lareau (1987) noted that parents who did not complete high school, or who only have a high school diploma, found it to be challenging to help their children with their school work. Franklin et al. (2007) also mention the impact of the family by
explaining that at-risk youth who are likely to drop out of school, or have more difficulty completing their studies due to additional stress at home with their family life and/or SES, are additionally challenged. These youth need to be treated with compassion as opposed to a disciplinary approach that treats them as delinquent students, which can occur in traditional schools (Franklin et al. 2007). For example, Franklin et al. (2007) explain that the alternative schools in their study offered a free lunch program, which gives students a guarantee of at least one meal a day that they can count on while in school.

MacLeod (1995:11) explains that from a social reproduction perspective, “schools actually reinforce inequality,” thus suggesting the link between success in school and the social reproduction of class whereby students of a lower class are consequently also at a disadvantage in the school system. While alternative schools are not able to guarantee a better outcome for students who come from a disadvantaged household whose parent(s) may not be highly educated, the staff within these schools may encourage students by acting as a support system to give them the confidence they need to complete their high school education and perhaps aspire to pursue some form of post-secondary education. Willis (1977:11), whose research influenced MacLeod, shares a similar perspective in terms of why a “counter-school culture” often times leads students to resent authority and may disengage them because of their belief that the teachers think they are above the students and are acting in a condescending manner. Students also engage in symbolic acts of deviance, such as dressing a certain way that is not acceptable in terms of school dress codes (Willis 1977). Perhaps these forms of opposition and symbolic acts of deviance may be misperceived as innate characteristics of the students in terms of misbehaviour, when the real problem may be the student’s lack of trust or respect for authority, which may lead them to engage in unacceptable behaviour. According to Willis (1977), working
class youth may “develop, transform and finally reproduce aspects of the larger culture in their own praxis...” (p. 2). While in this particular case Willis (1977) is referring to youth seeking particular types of employment, there is a connection with class-based resistance in schools. For example, students who attend alternative schools are most often from lower social class backgrounds (Franklin et al. 2007). Thus, the disadvantages they experience in their lives outside of school may greatly influence how they perceive their self-worth and ability to succeed in school. While this class-based resistance has certainly been noted throughout the literature, students’ perceptions of self-worth and their belief that their teachers treat them in a condescending manner suggest that that this resistance is linked to other factors, such as teachers who may hold racist, classist or sexist views.

Although this is the viewpoint of some scholars, there are others who beg to differ. For example, Brown (1987) finds some of Willis’ findings to be somewhat problematic. Brown (1987) suggests that Willis believes that “working-class pupils voluntarily ‘fail’ themselves” (p. 23). Brown (1987) finds this belief to be troublesome because Willis disregards that many students try and want to succeed, but do not have equal access to the means to succeed. Brown (1987) elaborates by stating that, according to Willis, counter-school culture is “not a consequence of educational failure...but a cause” (p. 23). This is problematic because Willis’ viewpoint suggests that students do not bother making an effort in school because ultimately, they will end up seeking employment in that coincides with their class, ultimately reinforcing class reproduction. Lareau (1987:73) explains that the “social organization of the classroom” may be used to understand how differing class values are reinforced in schools. According to Lareau (1987), since lower-class and working-class families have different value systems from middle-class families, they consequently do not value education to the same extent. This does
not mean, however, that they do not believe that education is important. Rather, lower-class and working-class families are at a disadvantage because the curriculum and the way the material is presented to students (i.e. the language that is used) is reflective of middle-class values (Lareau 1987).

Apple and King (1977) share a similar perspective as Lareau (1987) by suggesting that in schools there is an uneven distribution of cultural capital. This phenomenon can be understood as the “hidden curriculum,” which several authors discuss with regards to the social reproduction of both economic and social norms (Apple and King 1977; Lareau 1987; Davies and Guppy 2010). Woods (1979) suggests that because of the division in society, teachers are, to a certain extent, “forced into reproducing these divisions” (p. 140). Thus, particular norms, values and traditions are normalized and knowledge is consequently unevenly distributed, considering the differing values among the classes (Apple and King 1977). As stated by Apple and King (1977:347), “different ‘kinds’ of students get different ‘kinds’ of knowledge.” Brown (1987) also provides insight in terms of unequal educational attainment, while using a sociology of education perspective. According to Brown (1987), this inequality is not only a result of an unequal social structure; rather, these inequalities are a result of “a technical problem which the educational system has the potential to overcome” (p. 14). By “technical problem,” Brown (1987) is referring to “the existence of a normative value system” (p. 14). By disregarding the different values and beliefs of other classes, low educational attainment among the working-class is consequently viewed as an “inability” of these working-class students to succeed (Brown 1987:14). While Brown (1987) does not use the term “hidden curriculum” in this book, his viewpoints are in line with Apple and King (1977), Lareau (1987) and Davies and Guppy (2010)
in terms of how education and the curriculum are organized in a way that is not as easy to achieve for some students as it is for others.

Franklin et al. (2007) states that students who do well in alternative education programs often succeed because the focus shifts from discipline, as often seen in traditional schools, to care, compassion, and encouragement. While this may be true, quantitative studies have not been able to adequately convey what “thrive” and “success” actually mean, and whether or not these definitions are individual or universal. It is also noted that with a lower student-teacher ratio, educators (especially teachers) in alternative schools are better able to develop relationships with students that allow them to help guide them in their studies, as well as to receive respect and trust from the students (Franklin et al. 2007). Dupper (2008) explains that the goal of alternative education programs is to shift the focus toward education and changing the environment for students to help them succeed, while moving away from a traditional disciplinary approach that seeks to “fix the child” (p. 24). By providing students with an individualized education that is obtainable and encouraged in a compassionate social climate greatly increases their chances of academic success (Dupper 2008). Student “success,” however, is not clearly defined in much of this literature. Whether or not students are succeeding, it is crucial to understand what success actually means. This is what the research in this thesis will set out to explore.

According to previous research, students in alternative high schools have been, and continue to be, labelled as deviants and/or delinquents. Woods (1979), for example, explains that if students are labelled as being “difficult,” then they are consequently distinguished from one another based on their “controllability” (p. 148). When discussing the school that Woods (1979) conducted his research in, he states that while the headmaster described the students in
the school as good children who were not violent, another teacher told him that the students at the particular school were “getting progressively rougher” (p. 5). Staff perceptions of students and the labels that they place upon them have consequences to individual student’s sense of self-worth.

Payne, Gottfredson and Gottfredson’s (2003) research is also relevant as they explain school climate as being a result of both a sense of belonging and stronger commitment to one’s school, which ultimately leads to the “internalization of school norms” (p. 754). When students have increased levels of both commitment and attachment to their school, “the climate of the school becomes warmer and more inclusive and participatory” (Payne et al. 2003:754). Quinn et al. (2006) further expand on this by discussing the importance of the school climate and suggest that alternative schools reduce the prevalence of student behavioural issues because students tend to “believe that their teachers, staff, and administrators care about and respect them” (p. 16). This in turn leads students to respect their teachers and other staff members (Quinn et al. 2006).

Students not believing that they were cared about in their traditional schools relates to their problems of dealing with authority and lack of trust (Quinn et al. 2006). Can this mutual respect between staff and students be considered “success”? Is it possible that some students may be considered “successful” if they simply show up to school and respect the staff, perhaps if they have a history of behavioural problems?

Quinn et al. (2006) note a need for further research that addresses the social climate within alternative schools. Although quantitative research has certainly been beneficial in documenting the growth of alternative education programs, observing and engaging with staff and students allows the researcher to more accurately describe the day-to-day lives in alternative schools in terms of routines, norms and behaviours. Thus, qualitative research is needed to
observe both the school culture and climate to understand how success is measured for each student by observing and interacting with members of the particular institution.

**Student Success Strategy - Ontario**

Over the past decade, the Ontario government has implemented the Student Success Strategy to help students succeed in their academic studies by either encouraging them to stay in school, or by supporting them with their return to school if they have dropped out (Ministry of Education 2011). According to the Ministry of Education (2011), the Student Success Strategy is a “broad, province-wide strategy designed to ensure that students successfully complete their secondary schooling and reach their post-secondary goals” (p. 272). Graduation rates are increasing, and alternative education programs have been said to have certainly played a key role for these increases. It is noteworthy that in 2003/04, the graduation rate was 68% in Ontario and it increased to 81% in the 2009/10 school year (Ministry of Education 2011). However, the majority of current Canadian findings indicate an increased amount of assistance within traditional schools in terms of strategies to assist students with their studies. Thus, there is still a need for research about the effectiveness of alternative education programs that are located on their own, outside of these traditional schools. Unfortunately, the particular school board where I conducted my research has explained that graduation rates of students attending the alternative schools in the district are not available for public access.

The Ministry of Education (2011) released a report outlining the recent developments made to help increase the graduation rates for secondary students in the province across all school boards. “Student success initiatives” is a common term used throughout many school boards and various schools that have been identified as having lower rates of graduates, and in many cases, more at-risk youth (Ministry of Education 2011:279). For example, according to the
Ministry of Education (2011), “male students are less likely to graduate than females” (p. 277). Although these strategies/initiatives have been argued as being successful for increasing graduation rates, whether it be by re-engaging students in their secondary school studies, providing students with increased opportunities for co-operative education, and by providing “Student Success School Support” to name a few, there are still students who are not “thriving” in traditional schools in Ontario (Ministry of Education 2011:283). It is also important to note that these Student Success Initiatives refer to strategies that take place in traditional Ontario secondary schools; the programs offered in alternative schools are different, as mentioned above. This begs the question: how effective are recent government strategies if there are still students who need additional support to be successful?

Ungerleider (2008) evaluated the Student Success Strategy in Ontario. While this evaluation occurred before the more recent Ministry of Education (2011) report, it is likely that there are still significant areas of improvement for providing accessible education for all Ontario secondary students. Ungerleider (2008) reported that a huge drawback of the Student Success Strategy is a lack of student awareness about these new resources. These resources are not referring to the programs offered in alternative schools. Rather, the Ministry of Education (2011) states that resources are made available within traditional schools, which students are often expected to seek out themselves for additional help. According to the Ministry of Education (2011), each school board is given funding for “one student success leader to help implement program initiatives in its schools and funding for one student success teacher per secondary school...” (p. 269). If students are not properly made aware of the support that is there to help them, how effective can these new strategies/initiatives be? In addition, one Student Success Teacher (SST) may not be sufficient per secondary school, considering the larger
student populations at secondary versus elementary schools. Ungerleider (2008) notes that one of the key elements of the Student Success Strategy is to have “an increased focus on a caring school culture” (p. 26). The extent to how successful educators are accomplishing this is dependent upon the staff working together to establish this caring culture that increases a student’s attachment to their school (Ungerleider 2008).

It is interesting to note that although the Student Success Strategy does not focus on alternative schools, a caring and supportive environment is a common theme among alternative schools, which is what helps make them successful (Franklin et al. 2007; Dupper 2008; Quinn et al. 2006). Student Success Team Members do identify external factors, such as poverty and unsafe and/or unhappy living environments as challenging, as well as the importance of establishing a safe environment for the students while they are in school (Ungerleider 2008).

According to Payne et al. (2003), “fear of victimization in schools has also been shown to influence students’ ability to concentrate and learn” (p. 750). Perhaps what makes alternative schools a more successful learning environment for some students is that they are surrounded by fellow students who live in and who have shared similar circumstances.

Overall, past research in this area has not adequately addressed how “student success” is defined or measured in alternative schools. Moreover, because the literature on alternative education schooling has mostly focused on the United States, research is therefore lacking on this topic in Canada (including in Ontario). As a result, I decided to pursue a qualitative research study in an attempt to understand how success is defined and measured in alternative high schools (located within a particular school board in Ontario). In the next chapter, I will outline the research methods that I used when conducting my study.
Chapter 3: Research Methods

Traditionally, researchers study students in schools through the use of surveys/questionnaires (quantitative) or through ethnographic accounts (qualitative). While research has been done on alternative education programs, quantitative research has not been able to address the day-to-day accounts that an ethnographic study is able to focus on. The research question addressed in this thesis is: how is success defined and measured in these alternative schools?

When considering the works of Scott Davies, for example, a leader in the area of the sociology of education in Canada, much of his work has relied on quantitative research methods (cf. Davies and Guppy 1997; Tanner, Davies and O’Grady 1999, and Davies 1994). Yet there have also been qualitative studies that have studied education from a sociological perspective. As opposed to quantitative studies that often focus on macro-level analyses, qualitative studies are more in-depth as they attempt to reveal micro processes in the school setting. Lauder, Brown and Halsey (2009), for example, discuss the change in research regarding the sociology of education in the late 1970s in which researchers increasingly used qualitative methods to include narratives of participants. Ethnographic studies are unique because there is a closer connection to the participants compared to quantitative research studies. MacLeod’s (1995) ethnography, for example, provides a detailed description of the lives of particular individuals living in a low-income neighborhood. Willis (1977) also conducted an ethnographic study to examine boys’ transitions from school to work by using the methods, “...case study work, interviewing, group discussions and participant observation” (p. vii). Woods’ (1979) ethnography utilized participant observation whereby he spent approximately one year in the field (the school where the research
took place). Lareau (1987) engaged in participant observation during her research, as well as in-depth interviews with participants (teachers, principals, and parents).

When reviewing the varying suggestions for future research as noted by different authors with regards to alternative education programs, it became clear that there is a need for qualitative research. For example, Quinn et al. (2006) conducted a quantitative study whereby they set out to understand how staff and students characterize school climate. They administered surveys to students that included “six scales of psychosocial climate measures” (such as both the clarity and fairness of rules, as well as safety), but noted a need for further research that addresses the social climate within alternative schools (Quinn et al. 2006:14). This raises an interesting point of the limitations of quantitative research with respect to certain topics and research questions because my research study was much better suited in terms of understanding the school climate by talking with participants and experiencing the social environment. Franklin et al. (2007) also conducted a quantitative research study and set out to understand the effectiveness of alternative schools “in preventing students from dropping out of high school” (p.133). They stated in their discussion with respect to limitations that they relied on data that were provided to them by the school board (Franklin et al. 2007).

The reason for choosing to conduct a qualitative study is because quantitative studies have not been able to provide a sociological understanding of the definition and measurement of success in these schools. In order to understand how students behave in school and what the interactions are like in alternative high schools, it is important to actually talk to people and observe what is happening, as opposed to conducting a survey with little connection to the participants. This is reflective of a symbolic interactionist approach because, as noted in Chapter 2, meanings derive from interactions and should be understood from the perspectives of the
participants (Blumer 1986). Thus, using a qualitative methodology in the form of semi-structured interviews and participant observation, the purpose of this research project is to address gaps in the current academic literature on alternative education programs.

This research took place over a two-month period. During this time I visited four different high school sites.¹ The sites were selected out of convenience because the researcher was well connected with this particular school board (a former student who attended a traditional high school in this board, in addition to working for the school board at a remedial summer school program over the past three summers with elementary school students). I spent two to three days per week at the various sites for approximately three hours each day (primarily in the mornings into the early afternoon). On days when interviews were conducted, I engaged in participant observation for approximately two hours as the other hour was devoted to the interview(s). There was only one day where I conducted two interviews in the same day, thus cutting back on my classroom observations. Although none of the interviews were an hour in length, I sometimes had to wait around for the staff member to become available, so I would wait in our meeting area or would walk around the hallways and take notes about the physical characteristics of the schools. The reason for the timing of these visits had to do with the fact that after the lunch break several students not inclined to return to class. Because attendance was a reoccurring issue in the afternoons, the timing of my visits was best suited in the mornings. I also found it beneficial to devote a specific week, or consecutive weeks (depending on the site) at a particular location. Factors that influenced the decision to spend more/less time at a particular site included: the population of staff/students, the number of classes that I could visit, and the number of staff members who were interested in participating in an interview. I was also

¹ In Chapter 4 I explain that I visited four different high schools (which are referred to as “sites” by the staff members). These different sites all fall under the same high school name, as they are all alternative high schools located within a particular school board in Southern Ontario.

² In Chapter 4 I explain that I had received ethics approval to engage in passive consent with the students whereby
able to build more trust among the students when they would see me visit their school two to three times a week, as opposed to rotating my visits between the sites over the two months.

The goal of my research project was to be as unobtrusive as possible, especially with the students. I therefore decided to engage in participant observation with the students, and semi-structured interviews with staff members. Liamputtong (2013) explains that unobtrusive research has key advantages. For example, “unobtrusive methods reflect people’s own behaviours more accurately than their own reports of their behaviours” (Liamputtong 2013:115). Rather than interviewing students, I found it to be much more valuable to observe them in a more natural setting, which worked out well as I did not encounter any situations where students noted that they were uncomfortable with my presence, nor did me being there affect their ability to focus on their school work.

Due to the ages of the students that I was interested in observing (14-18), it was a struggle initially to obtain approval from the school board’s research ethics board. In order to obtain parental consent, a parent information letter was prepared and I was able to obtain passive consent\(^2\) from the students, as opposed to requiring written consent from their parents/guardians. Before beginning my research, I took into consideration the troubled lives of many students who are enrolled in these programs. I anticipated that students would either not take the parent information letter home, and if they did, it may not be returned with a signature. I did not want to place an extra burden on the students by asking them to have their parent/guardian sign a form, while also requesting that they bring it back in order to be able to conduct research around the students. It is noteworthy that by obtaining passive consent, I also made sure that the

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\(^2\) In Chapter 4 I explain that I had received ethics approval to engage in passive consent with the students whereby those students under the age of 18 were given parent information letters that I asked them to bring home to their parent or guardian and only return the tear-off part of the letter with a signature to me if their parent or guardian had a problem with my research project.
students were aware that they had a choice to not be involved in the study. Thankfully, none of these letters were returned.

I wanted to ensure that the students understood and/or accepted my role as a researcher. It was obviously difficult for me to confirm with certainty whether or not they really understood what I was saying, or if they were merely agreeing with me. However, I took steps to make sure they understood my purpose in being there. When I visited a classroom for the first time, I would ask the teacher if I could briefly explain to the students my purpose in being there. I told students that I was a graduate student at the University of Guelph conducting a research study on alternative education programs, and I invited them to ask me questions at any time. Students did not really ask me any questions, but several of them read over the parent information letter. One student did say to me, “so you want to learn about the school environment?” If I had visited multiple sites already, I would tell students which locations I had been to already and sometimes they would ask me what I thought so far with regards to alternative education programs and these specific high schools. I would respond by telling them how much I was enjoying my experience so far, how interesting I thought alternative education programs were, and how well my visits had been going.

The parent information letter clearly identified the purpose of my research project by stating that:

I am interested in gaining a deeper understanding about how students learn in small class sizes with an individualized learning focus. My role will be to observe the classroom setting. I will not take away from their instruction or work time because I am only in the class to observe how their school day is structured. Your child’s identity will not be recorded in any of my notes or findings.

At the bottom of the letter, I included my University of Guelph e-mail address in case parents/guardians wanted to contact me at any point regarding any questions/concerns. There
was also a tear-off at the bottom that parents/guardians could sign if they did NOT give their child consent to be involved in the research study. Please see Appendix A for a copy of the parent information letter.

As I mentioned earlier, I spent two to three days per week at various sites. I engaged in classroom observations whereby I sat in different classrooms and observed the students’ interactions with one another, and their interactions with the teachers and other staff members. It was easiest for me to spend consecutive weeks at each specific site, as opposed to traveling to various sites per week. There were several benefits of spending so much time on consecutive days at each particular site. For example, this allowed me to get to know the staff members better, and it also gave me an opportunity to schedule interviews with them because I knew that I would be back at that particular site in the near future.

Participant observation allowed me to gain insight with respect to the school climate and the overall feel of alternative high schools, as well as the day-to-day lives of staff and students. During my classroom observations I took hand-written notes. I felt more comfortable taking hand-written notes because I felt like typing on my laptop would be more invasive and distracting. I also prefer to take hand-written notes as opposed to typing out notes. The notes allowed me to write down details regarding the physical aspects of the sites, as well as general remarks and observations I was making at the time when I would be in a specific classroom. I reminded students that they were allowed to ask me about my hand written notes at any time (no one ever did), but if a student was having a day where they became agitated or emotional, I did not want them to think I was intruding in any way by making hand-written notes about their personal experiences. Whenever I left a site for the day, I would go home and type up a “journal” entry (examples will be provided in Chapter 4). While I was always careful to not
include any details that would make participants identifiable to anyone else in the research setting (for example, if a student or staff member read my notes), I was able to write more freely when I had left the field. My journal entries allowed me to talk about how I felt after spending a day conducting research. I also felt more comfortable writing in more detail some of the day’s events when I was back home. Essentially, these journal entries allowed me to reconstruct what took place during my observations once I had left the field.

When engaging in participant observation, I often sat in a seat that was in a corner of the classroom, or not too close to the students, simply because I did want to be obtrusive in any way. I would often leave one classroom to visit another classroom, and I also wandered the hallways. Across the sites, students’ work is displayed in the hallways. Several staff members told me that alternative students are very creative and artistic, and I saw evidence of this because their work was often displayed on bulletin boards and/or on the walls in the classrooms. Participant observation also gave me the opportunity to engage in conversation with students, without asking them anything about my research project. Often students would talk to me about their interests, hobbies, and sometimes, their goals for the future. One day a female student talked to me about her interest in cosmetology and told me that her goal was to get a job at Shopper’s Drug Mart near her house once she turned 16 to gain more hands-on experience with makeup. At another site, I was visiting the student lounge one day during a lunch break, and a student came up to me and was asking me about my project. She told me that she wished alternative education programs had more structure (as compared to traditional high schools). This was a brief conversation, but I tried to immerse myself into the research experience by absorbing any information I could, especially conversations that provided me with insight regarding the
structure of alternative education programs. These are some examples of specific experiences I had when engaging in participant observation.

There were also opportunities for me to truly participate in activities. For example, one morning I participated in a drum circle in the school’s gymnasium, guided by a musician. Another day, I played dodgeball at another site with one of the teachers and students. These hands-on experiences demonstrate the unique benefits of qualitative research. By participating in activities and speaking with students about their interests, I was able to build trust with the students by demonstrating a willingness to participate in various activities and share enjoyable moments with both staff and students. My participation in certain activities raises an interesting point in terms of my goal of being as unobtrusive as possible. Whenever I was sitting in a classroom and students were supposed to be working on their assignments or listening to the teacher, I remained as quiet and unobtrusive as I could. However, in certain situations I did not need to remain unobtrusive because I was invited to participate in activities and interact with staff and students.

Between my classroom observations and participant observation (i.e. sometimes I would walk past students in the hall and they would acknowledge me by saying “hello”), I interacted with approximately 100 students in total. Across the four sites there are more than 100 students, but I was not at each site each day, and I also did not spend full days at the sites. Thus, with students frequently arriving to school and leaving at different times, I was unable to interact with all of the students. Additionally, sometimes I would see some of the adult (“self-reliant”) students, but my study focused on youth so I did not account for the population of adult students in my findings. From my experience, there typically were not more than 10 or so students in a classroom at any given time (whether it be a S.T.E.P. or a S.C.O.R.E. classroom). Therefore,
during each visit I typically interacted with or observed approximately 20-30 students between the classrooms. Each site varies in population size, but my findings are reflective of the sites as a whole and no comparative analysis was conducted.

The other half of my research project involved semi-structured interviews with staff members of various roles, including: teachers, Educational Assistants (EAs), and Child and Youth Counsellors (CYCs). I had hoped to interview a social worker as well, but this unfortunately did not work out. The social workers do not work exclusively in the alternative high schools. They are only there part-time because they work in traditional high schools as well. I was not able to set up a time to speak with one of them because the time that they do spend at the alternative high schools is limited and is devoted to attending to students’ needs, which I completely respected. I was, however, able to get in touch with one of the liaison police officers at one of the sites and sit down with him to get his perspective on alternative education and the students whom he interacts with, both inside and outside of the school.

I conducted nine one-on-one interviews in total. On average, the interviews were about 25-30 minutes in length. One interview was shorter (approximately 10 minutes in length), while two interviews were approximately 45 minutes in length. I interviewed two male participants and seven female participants. I did, however, speak to three other male teachers (all from different sites) more informally during the 10 minute break in the mornings because they did not have the time to set up a formal interview, but they were still able to have brief conversations that I took into consideration when writing up my results. Whenever I had more informal conversations with staff members, I would take field notes after speaking with them and write about the conversation in more detail in my “journal” after returning home for the day. The interviews were scheduled at a time that worked best for each participant. Staff members either
e-mailed me to schedule an interview (I provided them with my contact information in the staff information letter), or we would schedule a time in-person during my visits. Sometimes staff members would be available that same day, or sometimes we would schedule a time during my next visit to that site. It was imperative that students were not around because I wanted the staff members to feel comfortable speaking freely, without jeopardizing any trust they had with the students. So, it was best to sit down with each staff member at a time when there were no students around during the morning or lunch breaks, or if they had another time during the day when we could meet.

I had prepared information letters that I handed out to staff members during my first visit at each site. These information letters outlined the purpose of my research project, as well as my contact information in case they had questions before/after the interview. Please see Appendix B for a copy of the parent information letter. Participants were also asked to sign consent forms to give their consent to participate an interview, as well as to give consent to being audio-recorded (if they agreed to do so). Please see Appendix C for a copy of the consent form. I was very thankful that all nine of the participants agreed to being audio-recorded (on my iPhone) because this allowed me to focus my attention on listening to what they were saying, without trying to simultaneously take notes. I transcribed each interview verbatim. I felt that the pauses in speech and other indicators of thinking out loud (such as “umm”) were important to include when transcribing the interviews because this demonstrates the thought and time that many participants put into their answers. As well, the longer pauses often occurred when participants began to become more emotional. Liamputtong (2013:67) discusses the importance that “each interview is transcribed verbatim” because it aids the researcher when they are trying to make sense of the data. By including the informal parts of the language, the conversation is recreated by displaying
how both the participant and researcher felt at the time of the interview (Liampittong 2013). Recording the interviews allowed me to not lose any important detail, as detailed observations are crucial when engaging in qualitative research (Liampittong 2013).

I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews because I wanted to give participants the opportunity to discuss the topics that they found meaningful concerning alternative education programs. Many staff members admitted that this was the first opportunity they had been given to share their opinions on these programs and their day-to-day lives working at an alternative high school. While I certainly enjoyed hearing what the participants had to say, I was mindful that I also needed to stay on track in terms of my overall topic and research question with respect to how success is defined and measured in these alternative high schools. I had a single page of questions typed up that I had beside me during each interview in case I needed to glance at it. Liampittong (2013) states that it is best to keep the interview questions to a page in length so that there are fewer interruptions during the interview as it will be easier to follow along. I grew more and more comfortable with the interview process as I conducted each interview and ultimately found myself glancing at the question sheet less frequently (in some cases, not at all) as the interview process went along. Some of the questions from the question sheet that I asked participants focused on the participants’ specific role (i.e. teacher, EA, CYC), what an average work day looks like for them, and how student success is monitored. Please see Appendix D for a complete list of the interview questions.

Since I chose to do semi-structured interviews, this allowed me to go beyond the questions I had on the sheet in order to maintain a focus on student success. The question sheet was prepared before I began my research, so the topics of discussion developed as I continued to
speak with staff members. In each interview, I also made a point to ask each staff member if success is defined individually, as well as how success is measured.

These interviews were also interesting because they all took place within the schools and thus, there were inevitable distractions. During one interview, for example, a student walked into the room and asked the teacher a question and just chatted about a project he was working on. I reassured the teacher after he left the classroom that I would not include anything from that discussion when transcribing the interview. Although a student coming into the classroom (without knowing that an interview was being conducted) was a bit distracting, I wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible throughout the entire research process. If a teacher or another staff member was willing to spend time with me, I was also mindful that if a student needed them at any point, that was a top priority. My last interview was actually three separate audio recordings because I had to keep stopping the recording so that the participant could take care of an issue that required immediate attention. During our interview, another staff member knocked on the door (we were sitting in one of the rooms in the main office) and asked for assistance. I noticed a police officer standing outside of the main office and our interview had to stop twice because of a drug search that needed to happen with female students. These are some of the examples that I encountered while engaging in this qualitative research project.

Throughout the research process when speaking with staff members, I learned that these alternative education programs might not look very effective/meaningful when looking at data concerning credit completion. When speaking with one of the CYCs she had told me that simply measuring “success” in terms of credit completion is not an accurate measure of success in alternative education. If a student is attending school after months of being in isolation because of their anxiety and attempted suicide, is this not “successful,” whether or not they achieve a
certain number of credits per terms? Engaging in qualitative research allowed me to hear these perspectives about why certain students struggle more than other students (in comparison to both fellow alternative students and students in traditional high schools). There were other strengths to this research study in terms of the questions I asked participants that are better suited for an interview, as opposed to a survey. I was able to probe when a participant raised a point that was interesting or unclear to me. These interviews were more valid than a survey in terms of measuring student success because the research findings were much more comprehensive and detailed with respect to the definition and measurement of student success. Additionally, participants had the opportunity to ask me for clarification on any questions, as opposed to surveys where participants may answer questions with less certainty. Since I conducted semi-structured interviews, I was able to reflect on past interviews in terms of common themes staff members were saying (i.e. the prevalence of mental health and Individualized Education Plans [IEPs]) and touch upon these important perspectives during the remaining interviews.

With respect to coding all of my data, I quickly began identifying common themes throughout the research process that eventually became my main themes (as I will discuss in Chapter 5). More specifically, I engaged in thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79). Braun and Clarke (2006) note that thematic analysis is flexible. According to Liamputtong (2013), thematic analysis is also referred to as “interpretive thematic analysis” (p. 249). This interpretive process demonstrates the flexibility of thematic analysis because I was able to have discretion when organizing my research findings in terms of interpreting and organizing them in a way that made sense to me, as well as to my topic and research question.
It is important to be mindful when coding data that the themes are relevant in relation to the research question. In terms of what constitutes a theme, Braun and Clarke (2006:82) explain that a theme “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question.” Braun and Clarke (2006:86) assert that when engaging in thematic analysis, “repeated patterns of meaning” across all of the data should be considered. In terms of my data, I had my hand-written field notes, my typed journal entries, and my interviews. Thematic analysis is an ongoing process (Braun and Clarke 2006). I did not code my data simultaneously because although my field notes and journal entries were ongoing in terms of recording data. I therefore transcribed my interviews after I had completed my classroom observations and conducted all of the nine interviews.

In terms of my field notes, I constantly re-read my notes. With regards to Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six stages of thematic analysis, the first phase of my coding began with familiarizing myself with the data. I moved onto phase two of thematic analysis whereby I generalized “initial codes” by identifying “interesting features of the data” (Braun and Clarke 2006:87). I began to underline different key findings that I seemed to be writing down over multiple visits (i.e. at-risk youth experiencing increased barriers in relation to non-academic stressors, such as poverty and homelessness). Similar themes emerged from my field notes and my journal entries because these reflected similar data with respect to what I observed during my visits and what I overheard (i.e. conversations between students). With regards to the journal entries, I began to code my notes (I did this by colour-coding different themes in Word) by identifying common findings and key terms that I was able to group together into specific themes. Some of the key terms I colour coded were students’ perceived lack of “hope” and their “oppositional” behaviour (“hope” and “oppositional” were the identified terms in my notes).
Transcribing the interviews entailed a different coding process because I was at a different stage in the research process. I had already conducted several classroom observations and I had a general idea of the common findings appearing in the interviews. Thus, I engaged in stage three of thematic analysis because I began to search for themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). After I transcribed my interviews, I began searching for key terms such as “individualized” and “self-paced” throughout the Word document (including all nine interviews). In phase four, I reviewed my themes (Braun and Clarke 2006) across all of the data (my field notes, journal entries, and interviews) to make sure the themes all related to my research question and were relevant to my overall topic of student success. Eventually, I defined and named my three overall main themes that will be discussed in Chapter 5, which is considered to be the fifth phase of thematic analysis, with the sixth phase being writing up the final report (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Overall, I found it to be invaluable to hear what different staff members had to say when sharing their perspectives on alternative education programs and defining/measuring student success. The classroom observations also gave me an opportunity to immerse myself in the day-to-day routines and unique characteristics of alternative education programs (offered in separate, alternative high schools). In order to truly understand how success is both defined and measured, it is crucial to immerse yourself in the school climate in order to experience the everyday lives of staff and students. I witnessed students who had breakdowns, observed moments of laughter and happiness, staff members become frustrated, and many other experiences that carried a range of emotions, which quantitative data simply cannot measure but were crucial findings in terms of understanding how success differs among students. By engaging in qualitative research, I was able to address some of the gaps in the current literature.
with respect to understanding how success is defined and measured in alternative schools, as well as limitations of previous quantitative studies that I had originally set out to do so.
Chapter 4: Context

Qualitative research projects are unique in the sense that the researcher is able to step into the social world of their participants and experience the day-to-day lives of those whom they are studying. I believe that it is crucial to accurately describe the context of this research project in order to allow the reader to visualize or attempt to picture what the research experience was like for me. In this chapter I shall begin by talking about the research process, along with a brief discussion of alternative education programs in Ontario. I will then discuss the enrollment statistics in these alternative education programs, the different roles of staff members who work in the alternative high schools, as well as the demographics of the alternative students (based on my findings). This chapter will conclude with a meaningful excerpt from my journal as a transition into Chapter 5.

Throughout the research process I kept both hand written notes while in the field (mainly during my classroom observations), as well as typed notes when I returned home from a day of researching at a particular high school. My typed notes are written in the form of journal entries whereby I felt that I could re-construct the day’s activities and observations once I had stepped away from the research environment.

Over the course of approximately two months, I visited four different high schools (which are referred to as “sites” by the staff members). These different sites all fall under the same high school name as they are all alternative high schools located within a particular school board in Southern Ontario. I spent two to three days per week at various sites for approximately three hours each day (primarily in the mornings into the early afternoon). There was a distinct reason for the timing of my visits because, after the lunch break, students are much less inclined to return to class. Attendance is a reoccurring issue (which will be further discussed in Chapter
5, along with the other key themes). Thus, the timing of my visits was best suited in the mornings when the attendance levels would be highest.

Alternative education programs vary by school board/district across Ontario with respect to enrollment, delivery of the curriculum, and structure of the programs (i.e. alternative education programs offered within traditional high schools versus separate high schools). Ungerleider (2008) explains in his report regarding the evaluation of Ontario’s Ministry of Education’s Student Success Strategy that alternative education is an option that provides students with more flexibility by taking into consideration an individual student’s strengths, weaknesses and interests. It is noteworthy that alternative education programs in Ontario are not as fully equipped and adequately funded as traditional learning, particularly with respect to independent learning resources being made available, lack of support staff, as well as a lack of actual physical space for these alternative programs to take place in (Ungerleider 2008). My particular research project focuses on alternative education programs that are located in separate physical spaces than traditional high schools.

Before painting a picture of the context concerning my research project, it is important to provide some detail with respect to the alternative education student enrollment statistics within this particular school board. Before beginning my research, I had e-mailed the principal who is the head of all of the sites to inquire about the enrollment in these programs. The principal informed me that there are approximately 1,800 students enrolled in the different day school programs throughout a given school year within the school board. This number fluctuates more often than the enrollment in traditional schools because students are continuously being admitted into a particular program and/or dropping out. There are also continuing education programs that serve approximately 9,500 students a year. These programs, however, are not a part of my
particular research study because these programs target the adult demographic and may include online courses, night courses, or other forms of learning that I did not study. Thus, this particular research study focuses on the day school alternative education programs, and I specifically focused on 14 to 18 year old students as I chose to omit adult learners (deemed “self-reliant” learners by staff members) from this study, thus keeping the emphasis on youth.

With respect to these day programs, the principal informed me that there approximately 85 staff members who work in the day school programs within the school board. These staff members work in various roles (such as teachers, Educational Assistants, and Child and Youth Counsellors) and, luckily, I was able to interact with several different individuals, which provided me with a comprehensive and detailed perspective on alternative education programs. Over the same e-mail exchange, the principal provided me with a PowerPoint attachment of a presentation with more detail with respect to statistics and enrollment of adult learners (data was collected from fall and spring student surveys), thereby making my research project more relevant in terms of studying youth. To further explain the context of the research environment with respect to the participants, I will outline the different staff member positions, as well as the demographics of the students. It is noteworthy that the demographic trends that I discuss throughout this chapter are based on my observations. Based on my correspondences with the principal, I discovered that there are not available data regarding student demographics. While engaging in participant observation, I observed and recorded various notes, including demographics of the students whom were present during my visits. This data is based on visible information (with regards to gender and race) that I observed during my visits, not on formal information concerning the students.
Staff members play a crucial role in the everyday functioning of the alternative education programs and, most importantly, the well-being of these at-risk youth who are enrolled as students across the different sites. It is important to explain how the sites function each day and who is in charge of overseeing the daily activities. As previously mentioned, there is one principal who is the leader of all of the sites. However, it is obviously impossible for one person to be present each day at all the sites. There are two vice principals who oversee two of the four sites and they spend their days rotating between their assigned schools. The schools also have a “site head,” who is essentially in charge of the site. While the site head works under the principal and respective vice principal, they often (based on my observations) have the most insight in terms of the students and everyday situations at their particular site because they spend each day there. There are also teachers, Educational Assistants (EAs), Child and Youth Counsellors (CYCs), and social workers who also share their time with nearby traditional schools; consequently, the social workers are not always present. There are also co-op teachers who coordinate co-operative opportunities for students, teachers who are alternative education program leaders, and a teacher who is the head of special education. Non-school board staff also includes police officers who get to know the students well at their designated site, while also providing guidance, warnings, and pay routine visits to the sites. I was very fortunate to have interacted with staff members of every role at some point or another, sometimes more briefly than others, but nonetheless the experiences were insightful and significant.

The students are unique individuals because they each have a story that has quite often led them to being enrolled in an alternative high school. However, their stories are also similar with respect to mental health, behavioural issues, and drug use/abuse, which will be further discussed along with the key themes in Chapter 5. In terms of demographics, based on my
observations and from speaking with staff members, there are more males enrolled in the alternative education programs than females. Socioeconomic status also plays a key role because these students are quite often living in more impoverished areas, while some students do come from more fortunate backgrounds. Staff members are well aware of the students’ individual situations because students are typically comfortable disclosing information with them. As well, administrators have formal information on the students (i.e. their parental situation, if they are in foster care, and their medical history). Sadly, however, many students are homeless or are renting their own apartment and are struggling financially to live on their own due to their troubled home lives.

Throughout the two months in the field, I spent time in approximately 10 classrooms, which are divided by grades 9 and 10 together, and grades 11 and 12 together. There are more than 10 classrooms total across the different sites that I briefly visited when I initially introduced myself to the teachers and students, but did not spend as much time in for reasons that will be discussed below. The grade 9 and 10 students are enrolled in S.C.O.R.E., which stands for “School Community Outreach Experience,” and the grade 11 and 12 students are enrolled in S.T.E.P., which stands for “Secondary Teen Education Program.” Before beginning this research project, I had anticipated devoting half of my time in S.C.O.R.E. classrooms and half of my time in S.T.E.P. classrooms. However, this initial plan quickly changed as I began my classroom observations for a few reasons. To begin, the S.C.O.R.E. students are all together in one classroom with one teacher and one EA, and they spend each day together in their classroom. The S.T.E.P. students rotate from classroom to classroom and from teacher to teacher, depending on which course material they are working on. Thus, there are more often than not fewer S.T.E.P. students in a particular classroom at a given time, thus there was simply
less for me to observe in the S.T.E.P. classrooms. In addition, the S.T.E.P. students, from my research experience, tend to work more quietly and independently than the younger S.C.O.R.E. students. I wanted to remain as unobtrusive as possible throughout the research process and felt that it was best to not engage in any participant observation or classroom observations if the older students in S.T.E.P. were working efficiently. Thus, many of my classroom observations and participant observation took place in the different S.C.O.R.E. classrooms at each site.

The first day was a bit intimidating for me, and this remained the case whenever I visited a different site for the first time. I always made sure that I introduced myself to the staff members, particularly to the teachers at the beginning of the day to make sure that they were aware of my presence and I would remind them what my research project was about. I also wanted to make sure that they were comfortable with me popping in and out of their classroom to sit down and take notes and experience the classroom environment. When trying to explain what the research process was like for me, I often tell people that I essentially went back to high school; I had to find the high schools, find the classrooms, sit down in an available seat and blend in with the class as much as possible. While I thoroughly enjoyed the aspects of participant observation whereby I engaged in conversation with several students about topics unrelated to my study (often with regards to their own goals and interests), I was very adamant about making sure that the students understood my role as a researcher. When I visited a classroom for the first time, I would ask the teacher if I could briefly explain to the students my purpose for being there. I told students that I was a graduate student at the University of Guelph conducting a research study on alternative education programs. More specifically, I told them that I was interested in understanding how alternative education programs are run by getting a feel of the school environment. I would attempt to make them feel more at ease with me being
there by talking about how I was a former high school student within the same school board years ago and that I had always been interested in this particular high school. Students were reminded that they could ask me questions at any time.

As a former traditional high school student in the same school district, I had a fairly clear reference point to compare my findings to, as this particular research project does not include observations within a traditional high school. Although I graduated high school nearly seven years ago, I was still able to observe differences between the two settings. For example, alternative high schools are more relaxed and less formal than traditional high schools. No bells ring between periods and the Canadian national anthem does not play at the beginning of the day, along with announcements. In addition, students are often late for class. In traditional high school, this would often carry some sort of penalty, but attendance is such an issue in alternative education that some days when things become hectic, a student arriving late may be the least of a staff member’s worry. Based on my observations, a hectic day may include a student’s behaviour escalating to the point where they have an outburst and yell and swear at a staff member, a police officer being called to the school to search a student for drugs, or a student becoming emotional and crying in class because of their stressful home environment. There are also elements that are missing that students in a traditional high school experience, such as: sports teams, dances, grad formals, and other extracurricular activities between high schools.

For the most part, staff members are on a first name basis with students in an alternative school setting; a decision each staff member makes. Throughout my research I only encountered one EA who remained on a more formal name basis with the students. Thus, it was shocking for me at first to hear students casually say, “hey!” to whichever staff member they were speaking to, while referring to them by their first name. In addition to this, there are fewer administrative
staff at these alternative high school sites compared to traditional high schools. Thus, teachers carry much more responsibility in terms of tracking student attendance. Quite often, I would see teachers calling different students’ households, or answering parents who called the classroom phone, to discuss a student’s whereabouts. Due to the fact that many students suffer from mental health issues and self-harming is a prevalent occurrence according to staff members of various roles (the CYCs in particular), their safety and knowing their whereabouts is necessary if they have not arrived to school in the morning, or if they have left class. Whether it was during an interview or during a more informal conversation, almost every staff member with whom I interacted brought up the prevalence of mental health. Teachers are frequently e-mailing parents and guardians as well with regards to attendance and/or positive or negative updates concerning their child. The lack of administrative support adds more stress on teachers as these phone calls and e-mails take them away from any kind of teaching of the material or tending to student needs who are there. This also relates to the program funding that alternative education programs receive. I was able to witness this added stress when teachers would be on the phone with parents and simultaneously have to manage the classroom if students were trying to get their attention, or if they were acting out. During one of my interviews with a teacher I was told that there are days when she has to spend the time she would like to devote to grading students’ work to e-mailing and calling home because she has to make sure she is up-to-date with her communication with parents/guardians.

Engaging in qualitative research with at-risk youth is tricky because there is often a struggle with trust, particularly between students and adults and/or those in roles of authority. Thus, I wanted them to fully understand that I was not writing anything down about them individually if they saw me taking notes I also reminded them that, at any point, they were
welcome to ask me questions about my project or what I was taking notes about, I told them that I was not “spying” on them, and I also explained that they had the right to ask me to not be around them if they felt uncomfortable with my presence in any way. In addition, I had received ethical approval to engage in passive consent with the students whereby those students under the age of 18 were given parent information letters that I asked them to bring home to their parent or guardian and only return the tear-off part of the letter with a signature to me if their parent or guardian had a problem with my research project. Luckily, none of these forms were returned, nor did any parents or guardians contact me with any concerns. To my surprise, however, students often read the parent information letter themselves after I had handed copies of the letter out. I believe that they were, in part, making sure that I was telling the truth about my purpose of being there, as well as the findings I was looking to observe and record. Below is an excerpt from my journal that I wrote during one of my first visits:

Another student seemed skeptical of me at first. I am under the impression that many of these students have frequent encounters with authority figures (such as parole officers - I have heard this unofficially from some staff members, not about any students in particular). I need to not only gain their trust, but also maintain it. I carefully explain the nature of my visits - not to mislead them, but to make sure they understand and are comfortable with my presence. I began to say that I am not there to watch them and take notes about them individually, and the student finished my sentence by saying, “so you want to learn about the school environment?” I think that this is telling as to how intuitive they are (as well as smart). These are sharp, bright kids. I want to earn their trust because this is their space, not mine.

To go along with my feelings during the visits with regards to my interaction with students, below is another excerpt to provide an example of another interaction with a student:

It was one student’s first day back after what seems to be a long time. I could tell right away that I was perhaps a threat. Some students assume I’m some kind of undercover person (maybe a teacher) who is “watching” them. She actually read the information letter for parents - I feel like this was to make sure what I verbally explained to her was correct and not misleading. She decided that I was “safe” (my interpretation). I want to make sure they are all comfortable, so I tell them that they can ask me anything and let them know that I am not recording anything about them.
I can tell that they are awesome kids - bright, quick, smart, intuitive, but sadly, misled.

Writing these journal entries proved to be beneficial to me because I am able to review them and remember how I felt during my visits to the sites.

The different high school sites varied by their size (both in terms of student enrollment and actual physical space), but they all fall under the same high school name and run the same alternative education programs. One location is unique because it has a program that allows students to gain more hands-on experience. This program, T.R.E.X., stands for “Trades Exploration Program,” and is only available at one of the sites. While my findings focus on discussing the sites as one universal high school, this is a noteworthy program to mention. While I did not spend any time in T.R.E.X., I was told by one of the teachers that it is extremely popular as alternative students often enjoy hands-on tasks as opposed to strictly academic work, thus making this a suitable option for many students. This point ties in with what I learned throughout my research journey with respect to funding. On the first day of my research at the first site that I visited, I saw different information posters on the wall in the hallway for different programs, but some of these programs have unfortunately been cut due to funding. For example, there used to be a program available for young mothers with children, but unfortunately, this program is no longer available.

Alternative high schools are not built or designed for alternative education specifically. These sites are former traditional high schools, elementary schools, portables, and one site is actually located within a medical building that has a community centre. Thus, staff members are restricted to the physical building they are assigned and they try to make the environment as welcoming as possible, while also trying to maintain the “feel” of a high school. These sites are
also unique because while they may not all contain every aspect of a school that traditional high schools do (for example, not every site has a gymnasium), they have unique characteristics.

One of the most distinct aspects of these alternative high schools, in comparison to traditional high schools, is that they have student lounges and student kitchens (some sites are more equipped than others in terms of what is available). A local agency donates healthy breakfast food items to each site monthly so that students can eat while they are at school. However, these donations must be carefully allotted to the students. I observed many students who came to school hungry because they rely on these donations, but the food runs out quickly and they only receive a shipment once a month. In addition, students at most sites enjoy the benefits of having a student kitchen where they can learn hands-on skills as to how to prepare meals and cook different foods, as many of them are living on their own. Students must be supervised at all times in both the student lounges and kitchens by a staff member to avoid conflicts, as well as items going missing. Below is another excerpt from my journal I wrote after one of my visits:

I have been told that the doors are locked for the different rooms (student lounge, student kitchen, etc.) so that they do not go in there freely and steal items. As well, the kitchen is locked so they do not steal knives. One student was juggling apples today beside me and I did not give him a reaction. He dropped one and the EA had to throw out the apple because it had fallen on the floor. He said, no, we can peel the skin. He said (something along the lines of), “what are we gonna do, stab someone?” when he was reminded that there are no available knives in the classroom to peel the apples.

Clothing donations were also available at the different sites. However, these donations were more readily available at some sites than at others in terms of student accessibility (freely taking clothing donations as opposed to not being as aware of the donations and/or having to have a staff member take them to a separate room to see the clothing). One site was well laid out in the sense that the clothing donations are located in the student lounge, so that on breaks students
may take a look at the donations and are free to take whatever they want/need. Nonetheless, these donations appeared to be, for the most part, highly taken advantage of by students. Students rely on staff members to donate clothing, as opposed to an outside agency, such as the one who donates breakfast food items. I had actually donated several bags of clothing months prior to beginning my research as I have a relative who works at one of the sites, so it was rewarding to see that the clothes that I had donated were for the most part, picked over and taken by students.

Participant observation provided me with a unique experience to immerse myself in the school culture/climate, as well as to get a sense of the day-to-day lives of both staff and students. I wanted to find a way to interact with the students whenever possible to let them know that I was not simply observing them. Thus, any opportunity I had to have a more engaging experience was rewarding and memorable. For example, one day I was in a S.C.O.R.E. classroom and the students were getting quite restless as it was close to lunch and it was a Friday. The teacher recognized their behaviour and suggested that they go to the gym to play dodgeball. I assumed that I would leave the high school at this point because I typically left the sites when students had their lunch break, but the teacher invited me to come along, and the EA quietly suggested that I do because it would make the teacher happy if I participated in an activity with the students. This is another important point to raise because while trust among students was a top priority, I also wanted to be respected and accepted by the staff members, so I accepted the invitation.

Upon arriving in the gym, I was hoping to watch the game rather than participate. But I pushed myself to play with the students and the teacher, and I believe that this significantly improved the receptiveness I experienced from all participants. By displaying a willingness to
participate, I gained more trust and credibility, especially among students, who after that experience were very happy to say hello when they would see me again and talk to me about their own interests, current events in the media, or popular trends on social media. I always made sure that I was not befriending the participants, but I also wanted to engage in participant observation to fullest extent that I could. At another site, I joined both the S.C.O.R.E. and S.T.E.P. kids one day in their gym to participate in a drum circle with a musical guest who has been visiting the sites for years. The purpose of the drum circle was to engage students and have them participate in a hands-on, non-academic activity, and it seemed to increase their attention to the task and reduce some of their stress. When participating in activities like these, I was able to see the students as who they truly are: youth and young adults. Aside from the behavioural issues and other classroom disputes and/or outbursts by students, I was constantly reminded by staff members and could see for myself that these students are dealing with adult responsibilities, as well as situations in general that no human being should have to deal with, such as homelessness, drug use/abuse, conflicts with the law, and domestic and/or parental abuse. Certain experiences stand out more than others to me, and I will continue to appreciate these more enjoyable moments I experienced with staff and students.

A typical day for me in the field did not always include an interview with a staff member, but I did interview nine individuals in total, thus taking up a large portion of my visits on some days. The interviews all went well and each participant was willing to share their perspectives and thoughts about alternative education programs and their individual experiences as staff members working in an alternative high school. Each participant appeared to be comfortable with the interview process and I was granted permission to record all of the interviews on my iPhone. This helped a great deal when transcribing these interviews at a later time.
As far as the interviews were concerned, the staff members (including the one non-staff member whom I interviewed, who is a police officer), were all very helpful. I felt that all of the semi-structured interviews went well. The participant in my first interview teared up a few times because she has such a strong connection to the students, as well as a passion and commitment to helping these at-risk youth succeed. She apologized for getting emotional, but I reassured her that I was looking for these types of findings that are raw, which is a major benefit of qualitative research. I shared laughter with the participants, watched them get emotional at times, and always tried to simply listen to them. Below is an excerpt from my journal after the first interview:

I actually had to hold back the urge to cry during the interview. I know that it would have been okay for me to cry, but I wanted to keep it in and let her feel the emotions. These staff members really care about their students and their well-being. After the interview was complete, she said (something along the lines of), “who do these kids have, aside from us?” She cried again. I do not think she anticipated getting so emotional, but I also do not think staff members have had an outsider talk to them about the amazing work they do. There is such a strong sense of compassion toward these students. She also said (again, something along the lines of), “these kids all have a story to tell...they’ve experienced more than most young people.”

After an interview was completed I often stopped the recording on my iPhone, but the staff member would continue to talk. I would simply listen and continue to engage in conversation with them, and then rush and write hand-written notes (or typed notes once I had arrived back home) about anything else they had said after the fact. I felt that by starting a new recording, there would be a pause in the flow of the conversation, thus I enjoyed the minutes post-interview where staff would continue to speak with me more informally.

Overall, the research experience was insightful, interesting, and very rewarding. I would like to conclude with another excerpt from my journal. Although it is lengthy, I hope to provide
a clear sense as to what the qualitative, hands-on experience was like, as well as my thoughts along the way:

Today in the classroom, I didn’t take nearly as many notes - I wanted to listen. Not in the sense of spying on the students, but more so to see how they interact with each other naturally. They are so supportive of one another - I have actually been so overwhelmed at how inclusive and understanding they are of one another. I get the sense that they can sigh and take a breath because they have finally made it to the place where they feel a sense of belonging (and truly do belong). The interactions, surprisingly (for teenagers) appears to be male-male and female-female. As I suspected, there are several males and not as many females, so this probably explains why the girls are sticking together. I overheard two male students talking about (in deep conversation) about all the “shit” they’ve gone through. They were truly listening to one another and being honest. One said that “booze adds to everything” (or so to speak). He clarified that by mixing alcohol, situations have become much worse. The girls also confide in each other about relationship problems, whether it be about dating or friendships. There is not a sense of judgement among the students - it’s a fairly tight-knit group. There was a new student in the classroom and he was not completing any work. One of the females sat with him and was pointing out everyone in the room by name and asking how he was doing. He must have said that he does not like school because she was telling him to “stay in school” because “it gets better.”
Chapter 5: Results

Throughout the research process, several themes emerged while trying to understand how success is defined and measured in a non-traditional learning environment. By the second interview, common themes were arising, and the reoccurrence of themes continued as I spoke with more and more staff members. Three key themes emerged which will now be discussed to address the overall research question of this thesis, which is: how is success defined and measured in these alternative schools? It is important to note that the reference point is always traditional high schools; thus, this discussion of the three main themes will all aim to explain how success is defined and measured differently in alternative high schools than in traditional high schools. It should be noted that I refer to the students who are enrolled in an alternative education program as “alternative students.” As noted previously, this is the terminology that staff members used throughout my research when speaking about the students, and this is the terminology that will be used in this thesis.

To begin, one of the most crucial questions was to understand whether or not success was defined universally or individually, an issue that was raised in the literature review. Success at a traditional high school is primarily based on academic achievement and standardized grading. Students are expected to attend classes regularly, hand in assignments on time, write tests/exams, and strive to achieve high grades in order to be “successful.” The students who earn the top grades are deemed to be the most successful, while those with the lowest grades are the least successful. I wanted to try to understand how success is defined and measured in alternative high schools because if students cannot function in a traditional high school and be “successful,” what are some of the reasons why they were placed in an alternative high school? Are they successful or unsuccessful in alternative education programs? If so, how is success defined?
Whom is success defined by? Thus, this relates to the first key theme: an individual measurement of success and the structure of alternative education. It is noteworthy that there is often an overlap in the themes that will be discussed throughout this chapter. To begin, I will discuss how success is defined and ultimately measured in alternative high schools.

1: An Individual Measurement of Success / The Structure of Alternative Education

Before discussing how success is measured in alternative high schools, it is important to first explain how it is defined. The definition of “success” is much more difficult to define in alternative compared to traditional high schools because alternative students are all considered to be unique. When considering the definition of success, the alternative high school’s motto is, “whatever it takes.” Since success is not universally defined or measured in alternative high schools, the definition of success is doing whatever it takes to provide alternative students with a learning environment that is better suited for their perceived individual learning needs, since they were not successful in the traditional school system. Success is defined by doing whatever it takes to help each individual student because a student who is self-harming and rarely showing up to class, versus a student who is attending school and completing work, do not share the same definition of “success.”

Based on my research findings, there is no doubt that success is measured individually in these alternative high schools. This begs the question: if success is measured on an individual basis, what criteria are used? There are various sub-themes that go along with success being measured individually. To begin, I learned that alternative education is unique in the sense that there is a focus on self-paced learning. According to a teacher during an interview:

For students who are looking for an alternative placement, we do something called self-paced learning and the strength of that is that in a traditional school setting, the class goes on...and if a student is away, they come back and they've missed a whole
bunch of work. Self-paced learning means that we go by the student's pace, not by the teacher's pace, so it's just a flipped model.

It is important to understand with regards to self-paced learning that a student who is working at their own pace is not necessarily working more slowly than students at a traditional high school. In some cases, students get frustrated with having to work at the pace of other students in a traditional high school classroom and want to complete their high school diploma as quickly as possible. As a result, students are able to work as slowly or as quickly as they want/need/able to.

As mentioned in the above quotation, students often become overwhelmed when they miss school and perhaps struggle to catch up when they return to their traditional high school. Hence, by removing the stress of falling behind and feeling defeated and overwhelmed, self-paced learning was said to allow students to return to their alternative high school and pick up where they left off without facing the consequences that occur in traditional high schools where both the teacher and fellow classmates move ahead. The flexibility of self-paced learning and the structure of alternative education programs caters to students, which is related to student success being measured individually.

When I met with the principal for the first time she informed me that these alternative education programs follow the same Ontario curriculum that traditional high schools do and it is only the delivery of the curriculum that differs. I made a point to discuss the delivery of the curriculum in my interviews with different teachers in order to understand what this meant because when I initially met with the principal I had not begun any of my classroom observations or interviews. With respect to the delivery of the material and self-paced learning, one teacher stated that “we give them the material all ahead of time so that they can work at their own pace and then as they need help, we just work with them one-on-one.” I learned from talking to different teachers that the delivery of the curriculum differs in alternative high schools compared
to traditional high schools in the sense that the material is not necessarily modified, but it appears to be delivered to students in way that is accommodating to their individual needs.

During my classroom observations, I gained a deeper understanding of the meaning of self-paced learning. For example, if there are 10 students in a given S.C.O.R.E. or S.T.E.P. classroom, this does not mean that they are working on the same assignment, let alone the same course. When speaking with one of the teachers, I was able to get a sense as to what self-paced learning entails. When asking the teacher how the delivery of the Ontario curriculum differed in an alternative versus a traditional high school, she responded by explaining that:

Umm...well, they get to start at any point in the year. So, if they find that their regular school isn't working out, they can sign up here whenever they want, so it's...very individualized in that they work at their own pace...they work on different tasks. So, I could have five kids working on the same course, but they could be at different stages in the course. And the fact that I don't have to formally create lesson plans to give to a whole class gives me more time to circulate and to sit down with the kids one-on-one and help them work through the stuff and change the booklets if I want to.

The flexibility that teachers have in alternative high schools compared to teachers in traditional high schools is believed by teachers to link to student success. Since success is more vaguely defined on a case-by-case basis, staff members (predominantly teachers) are able to get to know students individually and try to incorporate their interests into their work. For example, when I spoke with a teacher from the same interview as cited above, she explained that:

I had a kid where we did a whole unit on death metal because that's what he want into and it got him doing the work...and he was still using the concepts, but, umm, just using a topic that he liked! So, it definitely...gives us a teachers a lot more flexibility. Umm...while I feel that some days we don't necessarily get as in depth in the curriculum as they do in other [traditional] schools, I feel confident that these kids are getting what they need to get and that they're developing the skills that are going to be most important to them, without any of that kind of additional filler that sometimes come into teaching.

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3 As discussed in Chapter 4, the grade 9 and 10 students are enrolled in S.C.O.R.E., which stands for “School Community Outreach Experience,” and the grade 11 and 12 students are enrolled in S.T.E.P., which stands for “Secondary Teen Education Program.”
It is noteworthy that this individualized learning approach where students work independently on booklets is slowly shifting toward a new model that is more reflective of the structure of a traditional high school. During my classroom observations, I saw evidence of this because the S.T.E.P. students were typically working more independently and they rotate from classroom to classroom, whereas the S.C.O.R.E. classrooms were more similar to those in a traditional high school in terms of more classroom discussions and formal lessons. When speaking with one of the resource teachers, we discussed the different delivery of the Ontario curriculum in alternative education programs. When I asked her if it is just the delivery of the Ontario curriculum that differs in alternative versus traditional high schools, she responded by stating:

Yeah. Actually, we're kind of going through changes in terms of how that goes...it used to be very much an independent learning program...umm...where they would get booklets. But now, they're trying to...like you have witnessed in the S.C.O.R.E. program...a little bit more class, like, let's talk about this as a class. But, they can still work at their own speed on their individual assignments...umm...and that's so that you can kind of get some interesting conversations going. You know, sometimes it can be a bit deadly if they're all reading their individual booklets, and not everyone, for example, students who have issues [such as] an IEP [Individualized Education Plan] with reading and writing...a booklet can be really daunting. Especially if you look at some of the college level, it's pretty heavy. Umm...I think sometimes our courses are more difficult than they are in a regular [traditional] school because if they're doing a 4C, they end up with a lot of reading and writing...whereas in a traditional school, you'd have a lot of group presentations, group projects...so we're trying to encourage that a little more. So, if you're both doing a 4C course, why don't you both do a project together and...that's a little different than it used to be.

The booklets that the participant is referring to are used to deliver the curriculum to students. Since students are not all working on the same task at the same time like they do in a traditional high school, there are few, if any, formal lessons where teachers present information to students more formally. So, students are given booklets that correspond to different courses and units for each course that they work on individually at their own pace. However, as noted above, this model is slowly changing from handing out booklets to creating a more engaging classroom.
environment. Alternative students, so I was told, learn the same material that students are learning in traditional high schools because the alternative education programs must still follow the same Ontario curriculum. However, students in traditional high schools are not given the same booklets as alternative students because they work on the same assignments simultaneously, whereas alternative students are all working at their own pace. These booklets are based on the curriculum and are designed to deliver the required material to students.

It is also important to mention that teachers explained that students rarely enroll in university-level courses; alternative students primarily enroll in college-level courses. There are also students who are able to take essential-level courses. Consequently, this is a different level of success among alternative students compared to the measurement of success in traditional high schools for students who take university level courses. When speaking with some of the teachers more informally during breaks or when students went for lunch, I learned that for some students, simply getting a passing grade of 50% is successful because alternative students rarely go onto university (I was told that they are more likely to attend college if they choose post-secondary at all). As a result, many students want to get out of high school as quickly as possible and will complete the bare minimum in terms of work in order to get their high school diploma. Students who have a lower average and are content with receiving a passing grade may find essential-level courses to be best suited for them because these courses are for students who are hands-on learners and who generally, have lower academic achievement (in terms of objective grading) and who benefit from self-paced learning. Students within this

4 It is noteworthy that in grades 9 and 10, students may take academic, applied, open and in some cases, essential-level courses. In grades 11 and 12, they may take university, college, university/college preparation (mixed), workplace preparation, and open-level courses (this remains the same in both traditional and alternative high schools in Ontario). Academic and university-level courses, for example, are the same “levels,” they just have differing terminology, dependent upon the grade that a student is enrolled in. However, alternative high schools have much smaller populations compared to traditional high schools and the staff members all referred to the courses as university, college and essential-level, even for the S.C.O.R.E. students in grades 9 and 10. For simplicity, I have used the terminology that the staff used.
school board are encouraged to consider which “pathway” they want to pursue after high school, whether it be university, college, and apprenticeship, or entering the workforce. Based on my fieldwork, it appeared that teachers believed that it made more sense to help students choose courses based on their individual learning needs and abilities, as well as their future goals.

To become enrolled in an alternative education program I learned that students typically need a referral from their current traditional high school, whether it is within the school board, or if they are coming from a different school board. When speaking with another teacher who predominantly handles the referral process across the sites, it was stated that, “sometimes, they [the students] come seeking us, or the parents come seeking us...but the expectation is that there's a referral from the local schools.” Some transitions from a traditional high school to an alternative high school are smoother than others, particularly if the student has a teacher or another staff member at their former traditional school who was invested in their success and recognized that the move from traditional to alternative education as the best option for that particular student. In other cases, students are no longer welcome at their traditional high school and have less support and encouragement from their former traditional high school with respect to the transition to alternative education.

It is noteworthy that S.T.E.P. has a continuous intake whereby students may enroll at any point if there is space available at the particular site they wish to attend. S.C.O.R.E., however, does not have continuous intake. Grades 9 and 10 students who wish to enroll in the S.C.O.R.E. program may do so at specific times in the year when there are scheduled intakes for the program. As mentioned in the previous chapter, S.C.O.R.E. is structured differently than S.T.E.P. in the sense that students are in one classroom all day and remain with the same teacher throughout the year. Thus, there is a greater shift in the dynamic in a S.C.O.R.E. class when a
new student is enrolled. S.T.E.P. students are older and rotate throughout the day to different classrooms and work with teachers, and as a result, students may be continuously enrolled. As previously discussed with regards to the referral process, in some cases, students seek alternative education themselves because they do not want to remain in their traditional high school. When speaking with one of the teachers, I was informed that students cannot legally be expelled from school if they are under 18. However, they can be made to feel so unwelcome by teachers, principals, and/or vice principals that they feel forced out of their former traditional high school.

Throughout the research process, I learned that the students themselves are very unique with respect to various Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and/or learning disabilities, thus reinforcing the need for individualized learning. During an interview with one of the resource teachers, I had asked approximately how many students have IEPs and was told that, “I would say probably at least 50% do...maybe even 60% do. A lot of them do.” Due to the fact that students who attend alternative high schools are coming from traditional high schools, it is more challenging to keep up-to-date with their various individual circumstances. For example, I quickly learned that students who are enrolled in an alternative education program might be coming from various traditional high schools within the same school board. There are also students who come from other school boards, as well as students who switch from the Catholic to the public school board. I asked the same resource teacher if students come in with IEPs or if they are identified once they are enrolled in an alternative education program and they responded:

Yup. A lot of them are coming in with them. Sometimes I discover that a lot of them have been in previous boards and they had an IEP, then they lost it when they came here and in a big school, it goes unnoticed...but we can tell pretty quickly if they are struggling in ways, and then when we start talking and I go through their OSR [Ontario Student Record], then we may find that actually, yeah, they did have one!
Additional challenges arise when students are coming from a different province. Staff members try to understand how each student works and what some of their disabilities (learning, behavioural, cognitive) may be in order to better support them. It is interesting to note that students in alternative education programs are already getting more support than students in a traditional high school, whether or not they have IEPs. For example, alternative students receive more one-on-one attention due to the smaller class sizes, as well as access to staff members that are not always found in traditional high schools, such as Child and Youth Counsellors (CYCs) and Educational Assistants (EAs). Therefore, students who have an IEP in an alternative high school need even more support. During the same interview, the resource teacher explained that:

All students really get the same accommodations...the only difference is that I can scribe for students who have say, reading or writing problems...they may have an actual prescribed laptop, that makes it a little different if they have an IEP. They can also have text-to-speech available to them, but you can't if you don't have an IEP. So...some things are very specific to IEP students, and then some accommodations apply to everybody.

It is noteworthy that students with IEPs quite often have common learning disabilities. The most common learning disabilities relate to problems in English and math. In terms of accommodations, one teacher explained that the different delivery of the curriculum in alternative high schools also means that students can take other courses in place of the required French credit that students must complete in traditional high schools. In fact, French is not actually offered in the alternative high schools. In recognition of students’ learning disabilities as well as their overall lower academic achievement compared to students in traditional high schools (for example, as previously noted, students rarely take university-level courses), setting different requirements for alternative students reflects what is done for these students to help them be successful, while understanding their individual needs. Since the level of success
among alternative versus traditional high school students differs, it appears that this different measurement of success is reflected in the delivery of the curriculum with regards to accommodations.

Throughout my research I discovered (through talking to staff members, as well as by engaging in participant observation) that students enrolled in alternative education programs tend to be stronger hands-on as opposed to academic learners. For example, many students are talented artists, whether it be their artwork or ability to play instruments. Thus, in order to keep students engaged, co-operative (co-op) education is an overwhelmingly popular option that allows students to earn credits, while also earning money at their place of employment. Co-op education is offered in traditional high schools as well, but alternative students differ because they are able to obtain paid as opposed to volunteer placements. The structure of co-op will be further discussed in the next section, along with other unique structural characteristics of alternative education programs.

To go back to the original question posed in this section (how is success measured for students?) in terms of individual measurements of success, it is important to carefully consider the non-academic needs and situations of alternative students. As a result, mental health quickly became one of the most frequent reoccurring themes throughout the research process. One of the key purposes of primarily measuring success individually in alternative education is based on the understanding that alternative students are all unique and, on average, face many more academic and non-academic challenges than students enrolled at a traditional high school. When speaking with one of the participants who works with the students closely by addressing their non-academic needs (primarily with respect to their mental health), I was able to gain insight into why alternative students struggle, as well as how their unique challenges in life as
teenagers/young adults impacts their academics. Below is a lengthy, yet crucially significant quote from that particular interview with a CYC in response to my question regarding the measurement of student success in alternative education:

For a couple of our kids, getting through the day without self-harming is a huge success. Uhh...for some of them, that's not...possible. Umm...but them coming to school...just being here. Umm...(long pause)...some of our kids use the school in order to get their outside sources. Like, they'll work with the social worker really intensely, and she will sometimes be working with the family as well...and set them up with outside sources. So, some of our kids...just...just coming in the building is a huge step up from everything that they've been doing. Like, some of them have sat at home for months and months and months on end...haven't left their rooms, let alone their house to come into a school. So...and it's also different because with our kids, they...they struggle day-to-day. So, something that could take like a regular, mainstream high school student a semester will take a kid here a year...working on it every day. So...I think that it's very individualized and unfortunately, a lot of the stats that you hear about...they've been talking about it recently...they were talking about the amount of credits that kids have gotten, things like that. I don't think that that's an appropriate reflection for this kind of school. So I think there's a fight to kinda...take the aim off the academic because for some of us, they can't focus on the academic when they have no food at home...or, you know, when mom is deathly ill...or, do you know what I mean? The focus is so much on education that those things really aren't taken into account...it's all about how many credits they get and it's like yeah? Well, that kid was in the hospital for three months because they tried to kill themselves and now they're here interacting with other kids and feeling like life is hopeful. How do you gage that?

The participant’s tone was compassionate throughout the interview and became even more compassionate during this particular moment. In terms of measuring success, alternative education is unique because success does mean something different for each student. I was able to see evidence of this throughout my classroom observations because certain students would work more diligently and attend class more regularly than other students. More often than not, students did not stay on task for a long period of time. I observed some students who never attempted to complete their work, students who might work for a few minutes then stare at their page or go to sleep, and some students who would work diligently for perhaps a half hour or so...
then go for a walk or disengage entirely from their work. Students were easily distracted by one another, whether the behaviour they were engaging in was positive or negative (for example, encouraging each other to do their work, or engage in conversation with one another, while ignoring the teacher). It was interesting to observe the behaviour of individual students. More often than not, students were more efficient when other students whom they tended to frequently interact with were not in class because they were not tempted to get distracted and socialize. In some cases, however, students would motivate each other and feed off each other’s positive work ethic.

There are many unique characteristics with regards to the structure of alternative education programs that aim to accommodate students’ needs, which relates to the individual measurement of student success. Throughout the research process, I was able to observe the patterns of students whose attendance is more consistent than other students. Due to the small class sizes, it was easy for me to quickly observe how individual students behave and if they stay on task and complete work during the scheduled class time. In terms of completing work and handing in assignments, alternative students do get graded on the work that they complete, just like students do in traditional high schools. Alternative students must meet the requirements that satisfy the Ontario curriculum in order to obtain credits for the courses they are enrolled in. In many cases, students do not receive a credit for all (or any) of the courses they are enrolled in during a semester because they fail to submit all of their work and/or write their tests and final exams. This was noted by a teacher whom I spoke with more informally one day after students went for their lunch break, but we did not have time to conduct a more formal interview.

Therefore, the structure of alternative education programs in general, as well as the structure of the alternative high schools that I visited, is very different from the structure of
traditional high schools. Smaller class sizes (which coincides with a smaller student population) is one of the distinct characteristics of alternative education. For example, a class of 30+ students at a traditional high school with one teacher means much less individual attention per student than a class of up to 10 students in an alternative high school with a teacher and an EA. Dependent upon the particular site, some classes that I visited were smaller or larger than alternative classes as they are restricted by the physical size of their classrooms/buildings, but the classes are still much smaller than those of a traditional high school.

The social climate itself and overall atmosphere of an alternative high school is less formal, compared to the structure of a traditional high school. The particular formal structure of traditional high schools is structured in a way that many alternative students found it difficult to be “successful” at their former traditional high schools. For example, at non-traditional high schools, there is less administrative staff, the principal/vice principals are not at each site every day, there are no bells that go off at the beginning/end of the day or between the different periods, there are no morning announcements or the singing of “O Canada.” At a traditional high school when a student is late for class, immediate repercussions typically ensue. However, since attendance is an ongoing struggle for alternative students, a student walking in to class late is not always considered to merit a formal punishment because the student will likely just take off and leave the building if they are punished for being late. Parents/guardians are always notified via e-mail or a phone call if their child is late and/or if they leave class and do not return after lunch or a break. Since authority is such an issue for many alternative students, a teacher confronting them about why they are a bit late typically makes the student shut down and refuse to do work, or leave the school entirely, as explained by the teachers whom I spoke with. When I spent mornings visiting the different sites, students would often walk into class anywhere from
a few minutes late to an hour late. Teachers would often greet the particular student and in some cases make a joke about them being late and ask if they were sleeping in, or they would casually greet the student without making a fuss about them being late. Based on my observations, students seemed to be content with this non-confrontational approach and would remain in the classroom.

The type of authority that is enforced in a traditional high school is often a problem for alternative students, simply because they have had, and continue to have, many negative experiences with authority figures. For example, I was told by a CYC that the formal hierarchy of staff to students in a traditional high school often frustrates alternative students and tends to make them act out. During the interview with the CYC whom I interviewed, I was informed that a lot of the negative behaviour that students engage in (whether it be behavioural and/or drug use) was said to relate to them not having positive adult role models in their lives who they feel that they can trust. Their behaviour consequently results in them having a label as being a “bad” student placed upon them, ultimately making them feel like those in authority do not like them and/or cannot be trusted. Again, this does not imply that there is not any structure/authority in alternative high schools, but the structure differs in a way that alternative students are more likely to be “successful.”

One of the most interesting findings from my participant observation was seeing the dynamic between staff and students. Each staff member whom I interacted with (except for one staff member who was supplying for the regular staff member) maintained a first-name basis with students. As I moved along with my research and conducted more interviews with participants, I would discuss some of my observations thus far to hear their perspectives on the topic. I was very interested in understanding the reasoning behind the first-name basis. For
example, one of the teachers told me “I think that that sort of helps take the confrontational nature out of traditional sort of, staff-student relationships. If it helps to disarm them to call them by our first names, then I'm all for it!” Below are some additional quotes from staff members from various interviews on the topic of the first-name basis between staff and students. One of the CYCs stated:

You know, for our guys, like I said, they struggled with adults their whole lives. So...to maybe have that "Mr" and "Mrs" taken away, might make it that much easier and more comfortable. And the respect piece, really, it's...you have to give it to get it, so...and I find that all of the teachers here...like even the administration, everybody goes by their first names, and it doesn't show, I don't think, a lack of respect. I think quite the opposite.

An EA shared similar viewpoints and said:

I mean, it's hard to get used to it at first...it felt kind of weird...and I was concerned that if you call me by my first name, you're gonna think I'm your buddy and not your teacher. But, I think what it did was...you know, it brought me down to a human level, like a person just like you...I'm no better, worse. I know things that you don't know, but I want to help you learn them...so, it kind of breaks down that barrier between teacher and student that I think a lot of schools put up. I mean, and there are reasons for it too, right? You want to make sure you keep professional...but, definitely makes it feel less intimidating, less judgmental.

One of the teachers stated:

A lot of them don't like adults, or don't like people that they see being in disciplinary roles...so I think this just reminds them that I'm not here to bust their butts about stuff, I'm here to help them and I want to work with them and...level with them. I think that's the nice part about it.

This demonstrates a common perspective among staff members with respect to authority and how to gain and maintain respect with students, while also enforcing that they are, in fact, in roles of authority. I discovered throughout the research process that is often the micro-level findings (such as the first-name basis, as opposed to larger, more macro-level findings) that likely go unnoticed from an outsider’s perspective when considering student success. However,
what were considered at first to be “minor” findings ended up having a larger impact for understanding student success.

The structure of alternative education programs offers students more flexibility than what is offered in traditional high schools. As mentioned earlier, co-op is a popular option for several students. Co-op is more unique and individualized at the alternative high schools than it is at traditional high schools because not only do students typically get paid at their placements (as opposed to unpaid work through co-op opportunity in a traditional high school), they are also able to earn their credit by working in the afternoons/evenings and attending school during the day. This allows students the chance to be successful in more than one way because they are obtaining co-op credits (many students earn several co-op credits), while also gaining hands-on job experience, while also getting paid. In traditional high schools, co-op placements must take place during school hours, thus making the opportunity more restrictive for students, particularly students in alternative education programs who typically need to work as much as they can and whenever they can to support themselves financially. When I interviewed a teacher who was formerly in charge of co-op education for the alternative education programs across the sites, I asked if many students take part in co-op opportunities and she responded:

Tons of them, yeah...ridiculous amounts of success in co-op. Most of our students are doing paid co-op because we find they're motivated by the job. Umm...we don't do a lot of unpaid placements, although we do do some, so the ministry of education allows for that exceptionality for specialized programs, which alternative programs are...that students can connect their full time or part time job to co-operative education, as long as it meets the ministry's standards for supervision and safety and evaluation.

Although the ultimate goal of education is for students to successfully obtain their high school diploma which therefore requires them to complete all of the required credits to do so, credit accumulation is not as easy, on average, for alternative students as it is for traditional students.
This is not to suggest that all alternative students struggle with obtaining their credits. As previously discussed, some alternative students do, in fact, work faster than students in traditional high schools. However, for the most part, alternative students require more flexibility and hands-on attention than traditional students. For example, students enrolled in an alternative education program may take the remaining credits they need to graduate (this more-so reflects S.T.E.P. students and adult “self-reliant” learners). Alternatively, students may take a reduced course load, as opposed to the full course load that is required of students in traditional high schools. During one interview, a co-op teacher explained this by stating that:

So...if someone were to come for example, let's say a student graduates from high school, but they need an extra credit, or they need to upgrade an extra credit...or they realize they needed physics and they only had chemistry...they can come here and take that one credit. You can't do that at a conventional [traditional] high school, you have to take a full course load.

Therefore, the unique structure of alternative education was deemed to be beneficial.

Cross-registration is another popular option among alternative students. Dependent upon the proximity to a nearby traditional high school, as well as the behaviour of the particular student, students may be cross-registered at an alternative high school as well as at a traditional high school. The reasons for cross-registration are centred around opportunities for students, as well as increased flexibility. For example, many traditional high schools offer hands-on learning opportunities (often related to cosmetology, hairstyling, and culinary opportunities) that students do not have the same opportunities to engage in at an alternative high school. So, some students spend half of the day at a traditional high school and the other half of the day at an alternative high school, dependent upon the scheduling of the opportunities they want to partake in at each school. As previously mentioned, alternative students are often very creative and are stronger hands-on learners. Therefore, they typically find it easier to focus on their academic work at an
alternative high school where there is more one-on-one support available for their individualized learning needs. A greater amount of both academic and non-academic support is needed for alternative students, which will now be discussed.

2: Academic and Non-Academic Support

A greater amount of support staff is needed in alternative high schools compared to traditional high schools because the students have unique needs and were said to often lack positive adult role models in their lives, as discussed by the CYC whom I interviewed, in particular. One of the co-op teachers also touched upon similar findings. As mentioned in Chapter 4, staff members of various roles work together in the unique setting of alternative education. Teachers, EAs, CYCs, and social workers all work closely with the students to address their learning needs. Since alternative students have such a range of individualized needs with respect to learning disabilities, mental health issues, IEPs, and so on, the academic support that they receive is crucial to their success. However, alternative students also require additional non-academic support, especially in comparison to students’ needs at traditional high schools. I will now focus on non-academic support as increased academic support was discussed in detail with regards to the first theme concerning the individualized measurement of success.

Unfortunately, according to what I was told, homelessness and poverty are common among alternative students, along with the frequent contact with the youth criminal justice system. Thus, the increased flexibility and support in terms of academics is not sufficient on its own, as many alternative students are dealing with a variety of non-academic stressors in their lives. Over the course of my research I wanted to understand why students act out and were not “successful” in terms of credit completion. To address this, one must consider that these students have basic human needs that impede on their academic success. For example, during
one of my last interviews, the teacher with whom I spoke with was passionate about this
particular topic by stating that:

The recognition needs to be the investment in those students...it's important for the
future, so that they're not robbing people, they're not in prison, we're not looking
after them, they don't shoot somebody in a bad drug deal. So...if we get them on
some sort of a better path, are they going to be doctors and lawyers? No. Do we
need to invest in doctors and lawyers? Yes. But, we need to invest in all of society,
and especially those if you have the resources...it's almost like a moral obligation, I
feel.

Due to the fact that the population of alternative students is overwhelmingly comprised of at-risk
youth, the non-academic needs of these students were considered to be much more dire than the
needs of students in a traditional high school. I learned that quite often, the life skills that
individuals take for granted often pose the most challenges for these alternative students. As
stated by one of the teachers during an interview:

It's pretty easy to get through a high school diploma if you have lots of support and
money isn't an issue and health is not an issue, physical or emotional...it's pretty okay
to get through high school that way, right? But when you're dealing with it could be
homelessness, it could be poverty, it could be mental health, it could be physical
disability...when you put those barriers in front of someone, high school credits kind
of go to the bottom of the priority list. And sometimes, we gotta put the priorities
where they ought to be and sometimes, that's putting a roof over your head or food in
your mouth before school can be an option.

Alternative students are often dealing with adult issues when they themselves are not yet adults.
For example, students who are neglected at home and have to take care of themselves and feed
themselves when there is no food available because mom and/or dad is physically absent or may
be abusing drugs and other substances and is consequently emotionally unavailable often find
themselves in difficult situations outside of school. During an interview with one of the co-op
teachers, I asked if they interacted with certain students more frequently than others and was told
that:
Yeah...the frequent flyers are the ones who struggle the most and they're the ones who, you know, they're wandering the hallways, they need more hands-on in terms of making sure that they're in class. Uhh...the ones who have violent history or who have a lack of coping skills, for example...and there's quite a few of those. You know, they've had behaviour issues in their home school...they might have attendance problems, their home life is difficult. They're homeless, they don't have food, they need a bus pass...they're here for life care in a lot of cases. We offer a real good circle of care, particularly to our younger students and so they're here because it's the only place they get it.

In terms of “frequent flyers,” the co-op teacher was referring to students who staff members interact with more commonly. She further explained that she often has the same students stopping by the office to talk to her (she does not have a formal classroom), and in many cases, the particular student needs an adult to confide in and vent to if they are frustrated or upset with a situation.

Although the staff members appeared to work as hard as they can to support students, funding often poses challenges in terms of student support. Thus, many students both take advantage of and heavily rely on clothing donations and the breakfast food that is available for them. Personal hygiene kits are also made available for students in need (these kits are often given to homeless students or students who live on their own). These personal hygiene kits contain products such as deodorant, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and shampoo. Food runs out quickly when there are numerous hungry students coming into school each day and sadly, the breakfast that they can eat at school is sometimes the only meal they eat in a day. When speaking with the CYC who is in charge of the food donations and placing orders when food runs out, she explained that many students eat breakfast at school and may not eat another meal until the next school day. Unfortunately, lack of funding also leads to programs cuts. For example, I learned that a few years ago, a program was cut that was, and would continue to be today, useful for the young female students. There used to be a program to help support female
students who were pregnant and/or had young children. However, with this program being cut due to funding problems, the students who have children have to make the choice between attending school regularly and finishing high school, or taking care of their child (ren) because daycare or other forms of childcare are too expensive for teenage girls to be able to afford, unless they have some sort of familial support at home.

I learned that non-academic support is crucial in terms of student success because if students are able to come to school and have some of their everyday stressors taken care of in terms of having at least one meal a day and a selection of clothing donations to choose from, this ultimately helps them be more successful academically. One of the teachers described a student’s inability to focus on their academics as “life getting in their way,” which I felt was a good description of the non-academic challenges alternative students deal with. The teacher stated that:

Most of the people I deal with had life get in their way...and in a regular [traditional] high school, there's lot of students who if you think about their story, it's pretty comfortable, you know? One or two parents working, no barriers, there's no mental health issues, there's no financial issues, no one's moving around, there's no physical or emotional abuse...and their journey is pretty comfortable.

Having “life get in the way” was widely thought to impede students’ academic success. In alternative education, unlike in traditional high schools, I learned throughout my research that success is both academic and non-academic for alternative students. If a student shows up to school and is physically in the building and having access to food, clothing, and other academic/non-academic resources, this tends to eventually lead to greater academic success, once some of their everyday stressors are taken care of. Thereby, along with academic and non-academic support, I learned throughout my interviews with different staff members that it is crucial to build positive connections with students and allow them to feel safe while they are in
school, which is often drastically different from the other relationships they have and their feelings of vulnerability as at-risk youth.

3: Feeling “Safe” / Building Connections with Students

Throughout the research process, one of the themes that emerged almost immediately was the notion of student safety. Staff members universally discussed how important it is to create a safe environment for students where they feel like they are taken care of and do not experience the same scrutiny and judgment that they do at home and in the community. I learned that feeling safe does not simply mean creating a physical space that students feel safe in; it also means creating a safe space for students where they feel emotionally safe and are able to feel better about themselves. Acting with compassion and having students feel safe at school coincides with an understanding of their unique strengths and weaknesses. Rather than discouraging students if they do not fit in with the specific “mold” of the traditional high school model in terms of being “successful,” one teacher stated that “working with those students and helping them be the best that they can be and understand what their best is and having expectations of them, while also understanding what they can do and what they're good at” is an important teaching approach.

To go along with feeling safe, a sub-theme, stigma, emerged alongside this theme, as well as with regards to students not fitting into a specific “mold.” Students not fitting into one particular “mold” was often mentioned by teachers with regards to the structure of traditional high schools not offering students with the flexibility that alternative students need to succeed. During my interview with a CYC, the notion of feeling safe was frequently discussed. I learned that alternative students are often victimized and emotionally and/or physically abused,

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5 I have chosen to use the term “mold” because it was a term I heard throughout the research process when speaking with various staff members with respect to the constrictive structure of traditional high schools.
particularly at home, and their self-worth and confidence is consequently diminished. In order for alternative students to be successful in their academics, added stressors (such as feeling victimized and unsafe) need to be removed so that they may focus on their work. When speaking with one of the EAs (not during a formal interview), I learned that in general, the self-esteem of alternative students is lower than the self-esteem of traditional high school students. I also discovered that many parents do not encourage their children for their achievements. Consequently, this can lead students to feel less inclined to push themselves to be successful academically. The staff appear to work hard at encouraging students to succeed, while praising them when they are being successful. I observed certain students have breakdowns in the classroom. One S.C.O.R.E. student in particular did not want to complete a history assignment where the students had to design their family’s coat of arms because she does not have a good relationship with her family. The teacher told her to put the assignment aside and asked her to write down her achievements in life and the student cried saying that she had not achieved anything and did not have any goals past high school because she did not want to live after high school. If staff members are able to help students build confidence in themselves and encourage them to work toward a future after graduating from high school, this is another measurement of success.

Alternative students often have additional needs that make it challenging for them to function in a traditional high school setting. For this reason, they are often stigmatized at their traditional high school and they may consequently internalize the stigma they receive from peers and staff members as being “bad” kids or “stupid” students who are not as smart as their peers. Stigma is an important theme because the staff members at these alternative high school sites, from my observations, worked very diligently to create a safe space where it appeared that
students did not experience the same type of stigmatization that may exist in a traditional school setting. These findings were interesting because the staff members seemed to be very protective of the alternative students because they were aware that aside from their respective roles as staff members, they saw themselves, more often than not, as the only positive adult role models in these students’ lives. During one of the interviews with a female teacher, she told me that as a mother, she feels a maternal instinct when building connections with the students to protect them, just as she does when protecting her children.

I discovered that it is also important for students to be able to develop positive relationships with the liaison police officer who visits their site because if alternative students had problems with authority and/or legal issues prior to attending an alternative high school, their interaction with police officers typically continued. When I visited one of the sites and spoke with the liaison officer, he spoke about building connections with students, since he knows many of them well. He told me that:

The other hat that I wear is, I call it the "face time" with the kids. So, I present a face of our service to these kids. They get to know me, they refer to me as Officer [omitted first name], I interact with them in more of a social aspect than the regular patrol officers. I participate in school events and bridge that gap between police and the youth, so they get to understand that all police aren't a-holes to them, whatever you wanna call it...that there is a person behind that and...that's my role.

By building positive relationships with those in positions of authority, such as police officers, this can also be considered a measurement of success. This does not mean that the students will refrain from getting in trouble. The police officer told me that the students begin to feel less defensive in thinking that the police are out to get them because they are able to get to know the liaison police officer as another human being. When speaking with the police officer, I learned that many of the alternative students have been (or still are) involved in criminal/deviant activities. Having a police officer who is willing to get to know the students and trying to
explain to them the consequences of their behaviour, as opposed to solely punishing them, may help the youth to better understand repercussions they may face in the future. Building positive relationships with the students appears to be a measurement of success, as these students typically have, and continue to have, problems with trusting adults.

With regards to the theme of stigma, I also found it interesting that the staff members wanted to avoid any further potential barriers that may inhibit a student from succeeding. When speaking with different teachers during the interviews, they would often praise the work that the principal had done. The principal has not held this role for very long, yet she has been able to apply for funding that allows students to engage in different activities, such as fully funded field trips. I was told that she has been very hands-on in terms of trying to understand how alternative students learn and what works/does not work for them in order to make changes when necessary. I also learned that many staff members attempt to raise awareness with the community, as well as other employees in the school board who do not work in alternative education that these alternative high schools are not for students who are not “smart” enough to be in a traditional high school. Alternative education programs follow the same Ontario curriculum and are simply a different means of delivering the curriculum. Staff members were aware of the biases traditional high school staff members and students have and do not want alternative students to feel further discouraged. For example, a resource teacher stated that “I think [that this school] is a really valuable school and even though it may have a reputation [stigma] on the outside as oh, "last chance school," I just think it's so valuable.”

Some staff members told me that some traditional students are actually jealous of the flexibility that alternative students benefit from. I was open with staff members with regards to my previous biases when I was a high school student in this same school board, as I truly
believed that it was a “last chance school” for students who were not very intelligent. Sadly, without proper awareness, these biases do exist from a lack of understanding, even within the school board. This is partially why this project has been so meaningful to me because I wanted to challenge my own previous biases, while opening my eyes to what really goes on in these alternative high schools. In doing so, I hope to enlighten others who have, or who have had, similar perspectives and biases with regards to alternative education programs.

When speaking with staff members about alternative students, I learned that these students were often labelled as “bad” kids at their former traditional high school. I observed that sometimes it was frustrating for the staff members, particularly the teachers, to handle certain behaviours such as swearing or talking rudely to the teachers. It is important to recognize that more often than not, the behaviour of alternative students is deviant, and they likely (according to the teachers I talked to) engage in this behaviour because they have few, if any, coping mechanisms to deal with what is going on outside the classroom. Thus, acting with compassion was deemed to be necessary when working with alternative students. When I asked one of the CYCs, “from a student perspective, what do you think they enjoy most about coming here?” she responded:

They’ll say the food and the gym is my guess. But if you really get them talking, you'll hear them say things like...so there's the one kid who made a comment about [their teacher] saying "[my teacher] is the best teacher I've ever had..." and [this teacher] makes him want to come to school. This is a tough kid who feels hated by every adult in his life...and all of a sudden he's feeling this connection.

This particular student faces daily challenges with drug abuse, homelessness, and he is also on probation for various criminal activities. He also suffers from mental health issues, thus adding to the cumulative effect of challenges that must be faced daily in his life as a teenager. However, does this make him a bad kid? Or, is he a kid who is doing “bad” things? If one was to ask a
teacher at a traditional high school if he was a “bad” kid, the answer would likely be “yes.”

However, I was able to observe this student firsthand and he was one of the most thoughtful and kind students who often confided in another male student, while also building other friendship bonds with fellow students in the class. This is the case with many students; non-academic stressors were thought to tremendously impact their ability to focus on their school work and earn their credits. Building positive connections with both staff and fellow students allows the students to become less defensive about being labelled as a “bad” kid, thereby allowing them to focus on their academics and ultimately, be more successful. When I interviewed the police officer, I asked him if the behaviours that alternative students tend to engage in (whether they be deviant and/or criminal) are similar to the behaviours and issues that arise in traditional high schools. He explained that:

I would say most of the kids that come here have a lot against them to begin with. Umm...I think poor education, or poor performance and education is simply an offshoot of what's going on at home. So, you know if they come from a broken home or they have addictions issues or there's mental health issues or there's conflicts with the law...that's gonna manifest itself, it's gonna prevent them from essentially doing well in a regular [traditional] school and force them to come here. And then while they're here, with, you know, a bit less structure, it's either gonna help them or it's gonna make it even worse.

In terms of the actual behaviour that alternative students engage in, the police officer stated that:

In the [alternative] schools, it's a little bit of everything. So, you have the drugs...kids will get found with drugs on them, or, we will be proactive and we'll see them smoking weed or whatever. Umm...assaults...kids up here tend to want to fight every so often, settle their grievances that way. So, if there's assaults, there's arrests there. Social media is big as far as threatening each other on Twitter...Facebook, whatever...and that's because it's so immediate for them, and it's so pervasive into their home life.

Sadly, homelessness, poverty, and the engagement in criminal activity are common among alternative students, as discussed above. Building connections and creating a safe environment is one of the biggest successes, according to a co-op teacher that I interviewed. Alternative
students do not often trust adults and other authority figures as easily as students in a traditional high school typically would. When conducting my first interview, I asked the co-op teacher if the students really trust her. While she was crying a bit, she stated:

They do, and they're so sweet...and I'll say like what is wrong? What's happening? And they'll just say "I'm having a bad day." And I mean, you couldn't do that in a conventional [traditional] high school...you may happen to find someone that you connect with and whose available to you, but, umm...I do, I think that the vibe that you talk about that's here...umm...caters to a lot of our younger students...who have struggled in a traditional school setting. So that, that would be one of our biggest successes.

The “vibe” the participant was referring to was in regards to our discussion earlier on in the interview with respect to there being a different “feel” in alternative high schools. In regards to the “vibe” and the “feel” of the school, this directly relates to the literature concerning school climate in terms of the climate of the school feeling warmer and more compassionate (Payne et al. 2003; Quinn et al. 2006; Dupper 2008; MacNeil et al. 2009). I had stated that I could feel that the school was a more comfortable and welcoming environment. This likely goes along with the determination to create an environment that students feel safe in, as opposed to judged and stigmatized. As a result, by acting with more compassion as opposed to a more traditional, authoritative approach, based on my observations alternative students are often more receptive to improving their unfavourable behaviour, as well as working toward improving their attendance and/or work ethic. However, this is obviously easier said than done. Based on what I observed in the classroom, plenty of students would arrive late and/or leave early. Students would sometimes spend an entire day at school without completing any school work. However, for the most part staff members agreed that a student who is physically at school is more “successful” than a student who does not attend school at all. There are various reasons for this being a measurement of success. For example, if students remain in school during the scheduled school
hours, this is time that they are not wandering around in society causing mischief, whether it be the involvement in criminal or non-criminal, deviant activity.

Thus, when considering the three main themes that have been outlined, along with their respective sub-themes, it becomes clear that success is both defined and measured individually as opposed to universally in alternative high schools. With respect to the first main theme (an individual measurement of success / the structure of alternative education), it has been clearly outlined that there is an emphasis on self-paced learning in alternative education. Alternative students are able to work at a pace that is best suited for them, as opposed to traditional high schools where students are expected to work at the same pace. Since many alternative students have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), they require accommodations. For example, a teacher or an EA may scribe for a student if they have a learning disability in English and students may also have prescribed laptops to complete their work if they have been identified as needing one. With regards to the structure of alternative education programs, it is more informal compared to traditional high schools. For example, there is a first-name basis between students and staff, which makes students feel more comfortable as opposed to the formal “Mr and “Mrs” that staff members go by in traditional high schools. Contrary to what I predicted, a first-name basis does not seem to make students respect staff members any less as authority figures; rather, it removes a barrier in terms of formal structure that they struggled with in their traditional high schools. In terms of credit completion, success is measured objectively in that regard as I learned that students’ work is graded and they must meet the requirements of the Ontario curriculum to obtain their credits. On the other hand, I discovered throughout the interviews that success is measured individually and consequently subjectively at times because “success” for one student does not necessarily mean the same thing for another student.
The second main theme (increased academic/non-academic support) emphasized the importance of both academic and non-academic support in alternative high schools. In addition to the individualized academic needs of alternative students, non-academic stressors such as poverty and homelessness are highly prevalent among alternative students. In addition, the engagement in deviant and/or criminal activity are common among the students. These students are not yet adults, yet they are dealing with adult issues because their parents are often emotionally and/or physically absent. As a result, there are programs in place to give alternative students non-academic support while they are at school to relieve some of the burdens that have been placed upon them. As discussed, many alternative students both take advantage of and heavily rely on clothing donations and the breakfast food that is available for them. Mental health issues (such as depression and anxiety) are also highly prevalent among alternative students, which also impedes on their ability to concentrate on their academic success.

With regards to the third main theme (feeling “safe” / building connections with students), the importance of creating a physical space that students feel “safe” whereby they are not judged by the staff is crucial. By taking the time to get to know students and understand their unique strengths/weaknesses, staff members work toward creating a learning experience that is more feasible to their overall potential of being “successful.” Alternative students have often had labels placed upon them as being “bad” or “stupid” kids, and this stigmatization consequently lowers their self-esteem. Since these students have typically had issues with authority (especially within their previous traditional high schools), being able to make a connection with staff members and non-school board staff (such as liaison police officers) while feeling a sense of support ultimately aids in their academic success.
The next chapter will focus on drawing connections between the material presented in the literature review (including theoretical perspectives) and key findings that have been outlined in this chapter. Thus, in Chapter 6 I will address the current gaps in the academic literature concerning alternative education programs. I will interpret my own findings in hopes of raising awareness with respect to the misconceptions regarding the unique structure of alternative education programs and schools.
Chapter 6: Discussion

This thesis has explored the question of how success is defined and measured in alternative schools. The findings from my research study provide insight into the everyday routines and lives of both staff and students at the alternative high school locations I visited in this study. In this chapter I will relate these findings to the literature that was presented in Chapter 2 of this thesis. I will also introduce new literature that relates to some of my research findings that I did not anticipate being significant. I will briefly summarize each of the three key findings pertaining to my results, while drawing upon relevant literature. To begin, I will discuss my first key theme, which was first introduced in Chapter 5.

1: An Individual Measurement of Success / The Structure of Alternative Education

Success is primarily defined and measured individually in the alternative high schools where this research was conducted. I noted that many students are identified as in need of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) because many alternative students were reported by teachers to have learning disabilities (students most commonly struggle with English and math). Because alternative students differ from students in traditional high schools in the sense that they are often not working on the same tasks as their peers at the same time, self-paced learning was noted by staff members as being highly beneficial for the students. This is reflective of the structure of alternative education programs because unlike traditional high schools, alternative students who miss school pick up where they left off, as opposed to falling behind.

Class sizes are also much smaller in alternative high schools. Students and staff also refer to each other on a first-name basis. Although the same Ontario curriculum is offered in both traditional and alternative high schools, the delivery differs in an attempt to meet the
individualized needs of alternative students. They key finding that I learned is that “success” is defined and measured individually because “success” has a different meaning from one student to the next. Staff members have been able to develop an understanding of the students’ individual needs and circumstances through an interpretive process between themselves and other staff members, as well as between themselves and the students. As noted by one of the Child and Youth Counsellors (CYCs), one student getting through the day without self-harming versus another student sitting completing school work cannot be compared in terms of their “success” because each student is unique because they face a different set of challenges.

There is relevance between my findings and the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. As a broader field of study, the sociology of education has been useful when trying to organize and make sense of my findings. For example, Davies and Guppy (2010:12-13) note that in society, as was discussed in Chapter 2, schools play an important role in terms of socializing youth, ranking and rewarding students based on selection and stratification, and legitimizing and organizing knowledge. Davies and Guppy (2010) explain that there are inequalities within the school system that impede student success. In terms of the roles that schools play in society as mentioned above, these pose particular challenges for alternative students. As discovered throughout this research, alternative students do not fit within the specific “mold” that exists in traditional schools. Many alternative students had a very difficult time functioning in traditional schools because of the more constrictive learning environment. In traditional schools, success is measured universally and students are expected to be working at the same pace as their peers. Thus, this type of learning environment made it difficult for alternative students to be

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6 Since success does not necessarily mean the same thing for each student, I often include quotations around “success” and “successful” as I did in Chapter 5 because these terms are subjective.
7 I explained in Chapter 5 that staff members often said to me that alternative students typically did not fit within the specific “mold” in their former traditional high schools in terms of the lack of flexibility and different delivery of the Ontario curriculum (as compared to alternative high schools) in terms of student expectations.
“successful.” I learned, in many cases, students who struggle end up becoming enrolled in an alternative education program and in this case (based on the specific school district where my research took place), students attend an alternative high school that is separate from a traditional high school. Based on the perspectives of staff members, students who attend these alternative high schools experience pros and cons of being separated from traditional high schools. Since the prevalence of mental health issues is high among the alternative student population, so I was told, many students appear to be more comfortable and at ease in a separate school. However, staff members also told me that alternative students miss out on “normal” high school experiences, such as attending dances, being a part of sports teams and clubs, and having the opportunity to interact with a larger population of peers.

As noted in Chapter 2, the “hidden curriculum” relates to the reproduction of social and economic norms because this curriculum favours middle-class values (Apple and King 1977; Lareau 1987; Davies and Guppy 2010). Class-based resistance is an important perspective with respect to my research study. As discussed in Chapter 2, MacLeod (1995) explains that class is socially reproduced within schools. As a result, students of a lower class are faced with challenges and experience disadvantages because social and economic inequalities are reinforced in the education system (MacLeod 1995). MacLeod’s (1995) findings relate to the concept of the “hidden curriculum” with regards to the social reproduction of norms in relation to class-values (in the case of the “hidden curriculum,” middle-class values). In relation to my study, these findings are interesting because while the “hidden curriculum” has been discussed among scholars, my particular study focused on an alternative high school where the curriculum itself was said to be the same as the one offered in traditional high schools.
As noted in Chapter 2, in terms of a class-based analysis, Woods (1979) explains that, to a certain extent, teachers are “forced into reproducing these divisions” (p. 140). This is an interesting perspective because my findings may run counter to this conception. Staff members, arguably, work at trying to not reproduce class divisions. According to the CYC whom I interviewed, very few of students’ families are middle-class in alternative schools. Almost every staff member whom I spoke with identified alternative students as being “at-risk,” particularly with respect to their home lives (in terms of their familial/financial situations). Thus, by legitimizing and organizing knowledge in a certain way, this makes the delivery of the curriculum in traditional schools unobtainable to many students. When considering the number of alternative students who have IEPs, it makes it much more difficult for them to be “successful” with respect to the delivery of the curriculum. Not only do they have different class values that is reflective of the curriculum, but they also have learning disabilities, which makes it even more challenging to “succeed” in traditional high schools. Lareau (1987) states that the way that the material is presented to students is intertwined with class values. For example, the language that is used resembles middle-class values and not all students share these values (Lareau 1987). When speaking with staff members, they would assert that alternative students are not “stupid” kids; rather, they were in a learning environment that was not conducive to their individual needs, making it near impossible to be “successful” in traditional high schools.

However, what this research was unable to determine is whether or not working class youth who attend such programs experience some degree of upward socially mobility after they graduate.

Brown (1987:14) suggests the reason why working-class youth have lower academic attainment is perceived as an “inability” of these students to succeed. Brown (1987) further notes that when considering the structure of education, a “normative value system” exists (p. 14).
Thus, students of a lower-class are assumed to be unable to respond to this structure and succeed because of this value system (Brown 1987). When speaking with staff members, especially with one of the CYCs, I learned that this misperception of an inability (or a lack of desire/motivation) to succeed is common among non-alternative staff members. Thus, I was told that staff members in traditional schools often believe that alternative students are “bad” kids who lack motivation. In fact, according to the same CYC as mentioned above, many alternative students have a hard time trusting adults because they have been made to feel like they were unwanted and essentially pushed out of their schools. This perceived “inability” to succeed as noted by Brown (1987) is relevant to my study because when speaking with staff members, I learned that the more formal, disciplinary approach in traditional high schools creates a confrontational environment where alternative students were not able to function in.

Although students should be held accountable for their actions, so I was told, I was also informed by teachers that disciplining alternative students (i.e. for being late and/or missing class) is counterproductive because students will choose to not come to school all together. Treating alternative students with respect, while also taking a less formal approach (i.e. the first-name basis between staff and students), may take away some of the stress students are used to experiencing in terms of being labelled as “bad” or “stupid” by peers and teachers/administrators. It was interesting to learn throughout interviews with different staff members (as noted in Chapter 5) that because of alternative students’ negative experiences with authority figures, a less traditional (more informal) structure is better suited for students. One of the CYCs told me that alternative students actually display more respect toward staff and those in authority in alternative high schools because they feel less judged. According to the CYC, the first-name basis “breaks down barriers” between staff and students. Quinn et al. (2006) explain
that alternative students need to believe that staff members respect and care about them because this increases their likelihood of reciprocating respect.

It is crucial to consider why the key findings from this study have been demonstrated to increase a student’s likelihood of “success,” or at least the likelihood of keeping them in school longer. When considering how success is measured, along with the structure of alternative education programs, it is clear that this is much more than a simply a class-based analysis.

While class certainly plays a role in an alternative student’s likelihood of being “successful” in terms of the structure of the curriculum and the delivery of its content in traditional schools, it is not sufficient to categorize all students as class-based resistors. If class was the defining factor that impacted a student’s willingness/ability to “succeed,” then all lower-class alternative students would therefore be demonstrating resistance in school. While I was not able to gather data with respect to the proportion of alternative students who come from lower-class backgrounds, I can comment informally on this population. Since staff members repeatedly commented on the prevalence of homelessness and poverty among alternative students with regards to their familial situations, as well as their individual circumstances if they live on their own, there is a clear understanding that most alternative students are not of a higher-class.

When considering the viewpoints of Willis (1977:11) regarding “counter-school culture,” there are connections between my findings and these notions because in some cases alternative students do disengage in school if they feel like they are looked down upon by staff members. However, not all students disengage from school. I observed one student, in particular, who came to school every day and worked diligently to complete her school work. Yet, there were days when she would have outbursts where she would become frustrated and in some cases breakdown and cry. I know from speaking with one of the Educational Assistants (EAs) that this
student does come from a lower-class background (as do many alternative students). However, there are other areas in her life that impede on her academic success, namely mental health, familial, and financial stress which not be directly attributed to class background/position of parents in the labour market.

From a criminological standpoint, Sprott, Jenkins and Doob (2005) suggest that there are indeed individuals “from high-risk environments who do not become seriously involved in delinquency” (p. 59). When considering alternative students who have many risk factors in their lives (i.e. in relation to their family, neighbourhood and peers) but still “succeed” in school, this demonstrates that there is something in their lives that is motivating them to work hard. Working “hard” is intertwined with the notion of “success” being individualized. For some alternative students, working “hard” means coming to class semi-regularly and producing some work. For other students, working “hard” means coming to class regularly and completing the required assignments to obtain their credits. Sprott et al. (2005:59) state that the “phenomenon of remaining healthy in spite of serious adversity has been labeled resilience.” Sprott et al. (2005) note that schools have typically been classified as a “risk factor for delinquency,” but more recent research has shown that schools may actually protect at-risk children if there is a “strong commitment to school and education” (p. 60-61). These notions will be further discussed in this chapter in terms of creating a “safe” space for alternative students.

These findings demonstrate the need for a more comprehensive analysis with respect to student success. I have addressed limitations in past research by going beyond a class-based analysis to provide context with respect to how success is defined and measured, as well as how the different structure of alternative versus traditional high schools relate to student success. Ultimately, the goal of education should be to find a way to keep students in school who are at-
risk of dropping out, or not succeeding to their full potential. My research findings are comparable to Dupper’s (2008:24) viewpoints because he explains that alternative education programs are structured in a manner that changes the environment so that students can “succeed,” as opposed to trying to “fix” them by providing students with a compassionate learning environment and an individualized learning approach. It has been demonstrated that an individualized focus that encompasses self-paced learning, along with a less traditional structure, alternative students have a greater opportunity to be “successful.”

2: Academic and Non-Academic Support

Academic and non-academic support was identified as the second theme in the previous chapter. I demonstrated that both academic and non-academic support are imperative in terms of student success. The relationship between increased academic support and success is perhaps more clear because students who receive more support that focuses on their academics are more likely to be “successful” in terms of conventional measurements of success. However, non-academic support is also related to “success.” Non-academic support is imperative in terms of student success because when alternative students have some of the burden of everyday stressors taken care for them, there is a greater chance that they will be academically successful. I mentioned a quote in Chapter 5 that a teacher said to me during an interview that really stuck with me. The teacher told me that when students cannot focus on their academics because of non-academic stressors, this is a result of “life getting in the way.” By providing students with different forms of support, they may initially become more “successful” by improving their attendance rate and showing up to class. Staff members informed me that when students become more comfortable in the school environment and utilize the non-academic support that is
provided for them, they are consequently able to focus on their school work and display individual measurements of “success” with respect to their academics.

With regards to alternative education programs, Foley and Pang (2006) assert that the individualized focus of these programs addresses the academic and non-academic needs of the students. This was a significant finding of my research study which relates to Foley and Pang’s (2006) beliefs in terms of academic and non-academic supports being made available to students. In Chapter 5 I was able to demonstrate that in terms of academic support, alternative students require more support staff than students in traditional high schools do in order to tend to their various needs. As previously noted, Teachers, EAs, CYCs, and social workers work diligently in their different roles to address the various needs of the students. Staff members must also work closely together to support students because in many cases I was told that certain information would be passed along to a different staff member. For example, if a teacher or an EA suspects that a student is at-risk of attempting suicide or is putting themselves in danger, they often communicate this to the CYC and/or the social worker so that they may take the appropriate steps to help the students. Thus, in order for alternative students to be able to better concentrate on their academic studies, it is crucial to also provide them with non-academic support.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Leyton (1979) states that delinquency is “the end product of a series of sociological events in which the society rejects the family and the family rejects the child” (p. 15). This statement is significant in relation to my findings because I learned throughout my research that alternative students face an uphill battle and often deal with challenges that teenagers and young adults with minimal support have a difficult time dealing with. Without adequate support, students may disengage from school and become involved in criminal/delinquent behaviour. When speaking with one of the liaison police officers, I was able
to gain a more criminological perspective in terms of alternative students engaging in illegal/deviant behaviours (most commonly related to drug use and trespassing notices when they walk over to the traditional high schools). Without parental guidance and support, familial rejection carries many consequences for alternative students, including homelessness and poverty. In terms of students facing an uphill battle, Davies and Guppy (2010:251) explain that dependent upon a student’s home condition, students consequently enter school “with huge disparities.” These non-academic factors impede on a student’s life at school and negatively affect their ability to succeed.

Alternative students are often self-sufficient in the sense that many of them do not live with their family and consequently struggle to provide for themselves financially, while also attending high school. There are some alternative students who do live with their parent(s), but experience emotional abuse and neglect at home if they are not being taken care of. In terms of non-academic support, many alternative students need support developing important life skills so that they can take care of themselves. Catterall and Stern (1986) note that alternative education programs provide students with opportunities to develop life skills that are more applicable to their everyday lives, as opposed to solely focusing on academics. During some of my visits, students would be given the opportunity to step out of class and go to the student kitchen to work on life skills. Many students enjoyed being able to learn how to prepare meals use different kitchen appliances. It is noteworthy, however, that one CYC told me that sometimes students have a difficult time transferring these skills at home. She followed up by explaining that students feel more comfortable in the school kitchen and sometimes their parent(s) restrict them from using appliances, or there is often not food available for them to cook. Nevertheless, life skills are important and providing alternative students with both academic and non-academic
support makes going to school more meaningful and applicable to them in their everyday lives, ultimately increasing their attendance rates.

I explained in Chapter 5 that poverty and homelessness are a reality for many alternative students. There were some research findings that were significant in relation to a student’s ability to be successful and focus on their academics while addressing non-academic needs. I had certainly not expected these factors to play such a key role and without visiting the schools, I would not have known about some of the important resources students take advantage of. As I discussed in Chapter 5, clothing donations are made available for students, as well as personal hygiene kits. However, these resources are extremely limited. With a lack of funding, sometimes these resources need to be allotted to specific students. For example, one of the EAs told me that the personal hygiene kits (containing products such as deodorant, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and shampoo) are limited and are most often given to homeless students. I also explained food donations (healthy breakfast items only) are made available to students.

When reading the literature on nutrition, there appears to be a relationship between nutrition and school performance. I learned that many alternative students do not have the means or available access to food on a regular basis. I witnessed students who would arrive in the morning and the first thing they would do is ask to go to the student lounge to get something to eat for breakfast because in many cases breakfast is the only meal they will eat in a day, dependent upon their financial and/or familial situations. Alaimo, Olson, and Frongillo (2001) define food insufficiency as “an inadequate amount of food intake due to a lack of money or resources” (p. 45). Alaimo et al. (2001:45) use the terminology “food-sufficient” and “food-insufficient” children and teenagers and explain that in comparison, food-insufficient students are absent more often from school and in addition to their academic success, they also have more
psychosocial issues. These findings certainly make sense in relation to my study. I was able to visibly see the connection between food insufficiency/malnutrition and academic success because the students whom were hungry and dealing with several non-academic stressors (namely financial and familial) were simply not able to focus on their school work because they were not in the right frame of mind.

3: Feeling “Safe” / Building Connections with Students

One of the themes that quickly emerged throughout my research was the importance of students feeling a sense of security/safety while they are at school. When I initially learned about alternative high schools providing students with a “safe” environment, this notion was not initially clear to me. The idea of creating a “safe” space for students has been discussed by scholars. For example, while Fetner et al. (2012) article concerning safe spaces is not directly related to my topic as their focus is on sexuality and gay-straight alliances, they do focus on high schools and it is noteworthy that they aim to define what creating a “safe space” means. According to Fetner et al. (2012), the concept of “building ‘safe spaces’ for vulnerable groups is a common-sense notion that recognizes the negative consequences of social isolation and marginalization” (p. 189). Fetner et al. (2012:190) recognize that while defining a “safe space” is difficult because this term is quite subjective and is interpreted in different ways, there is no doubt that these safe spaces are necessary because high schools are “sites of bullying and abuse.”

In relation to this particular study, staff members overwhelmingly noted the importance of creating a “safe” space for students in terms of not only their “success” as students, but as well for their overall well-being. Payne et al. (2003) explain that in order for students to be able to concentrate on their school work and learn more efficiently, it is crucial to work toward

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8 As mentioned throughout Chapter 5, staff members frequently spoke to me about creating a “safe” environment for alternative students whereby added stressors (such as feeling victimized) need to be removed in order to create a more conducive work environment for students where they are not treated like “bad” kids who are a burden.
decreasing students’ “fear of victimization” (p. 750). Ungerleider’s (2008) viewpoints are in line with Payne et al.’s (2003) because he also mentions how important it is to create a safe environment, especially since many students (not solely alternative students) are faced with daily challenges in their lives that impede on their school performance. These notions are reflective of the school climate because as emphasized by Quinn et al. (2006), students need to feel like they are cared about, which relates to creating a “safe” environment and a warmer social climate. Whether or not alternative students complete a lot of school work during a day or a certain number of credits a term, it can be argued that these youth physically being in a “safe” space while they are at school is better than them not being in school at all.

Sprott et al.’s (2005) research is relevant to this study, particularly concerning the importance of creating a better learning environment for students. With regards to this research study, this implies creating a “safer” environment for students. Sprott et al. (2005) explain that if students feel “bonded to school” and feel like people care about them and have an invested interest in their well-being, this sense of connectedness may actually be able to “compensate for environmental risk and earlier behavioral problems” (p. 71). In fact, Sprott et al. (2005) note that boys who have a “weaker school bond” or delinquent peers are more likely to engage in nonviolent offending (p. 69). However, boys who have a “strong school bond” and delinquent peers are less likely to engage in nonviolent offending (Sprott et al. 2005:69). These findings suggest that by creating a “safe” environment where students feel connected and included in the school community, school may act as a protective factor (as opposed to a risk factor) for delinquency (Sprott et al. 2005).

According to the Ministry of Education (2011), “male students are less likely to graduate than females” (p. 227). This is reflective of students in general across Ontario, not students who
attend alternative high schools. Perhaps males are less likely to graduate from high school than females because they are more likely to engage in nonviolent offending outside of school, as discussed by Sprott et al. (2005). In relation to my study, I noticed a disparity in the gender ratio between males and females during fieldwork. In many cases, there would be one or two females in a classroom at a given time, and the rest of the students would be males. The Ministry of Education’s (2011) findings are reflective of the population of students within traditional schools and many of these findings are consistent within alternative schools, the population of students is just smaller. There is no doubt that staying in school and graduating from high school is important. Students who are physically at school as opposed to dropping out and/or missing a lot of class are safer in the sense that for so many hours a day, there are not outside engaging in criminal/delinquent behaviour. Creating an environment for alternative students that feel safe in and giving them the opportunity to develop social bonds with staff members and peers may protect them from engaging in risky behaviour outside of school if they begin to invest in their academics and believe in the value of obtaining their high school diploma.

Throughout the research process, I learned how important it is for staff members to develop strong connections (social bonds) with the alternative students. Additionally, immersing myself in the school culture allowed me to understand that feeling “safe” means much more than creating a physical environment for students that is “safe.” These findings relate to the literature concerning the notion of “school climate,” which was discussed in Chapter 2. As discussed by MacNeil et al. (2009), school climate is the psychological aspect of the school environment. Payne et al. (2003:754) explain that when students feel attached to their school, the climate becomes “warmer” and students feel like they are included and cared about. When speaking with staff members, I learned that students who feel a sense of inclusiveness typically
demonstrate better behaviour because they feel safe and less judged. I included a quote from one of my interviews with a CYC in Chapter 5 that relates to these perspectives on school climate and building connections with students. This interview was significant to me, especially when she told me during the interview that a particular (male) student has felt “hated by every adult in his life” but expressed to her how he suddenly feels a connection to a teacher who makes him want to come to school.

Overall, my research study certainly shows that success is primarily defined and measured individually. This is not to say, however, that students are not graded equally. While the delivery of the Ontario curriculum may differ from student to student to meet their unique needs, at the end of the day, teachers have to evaluate students’ performance based on certain criteria. However, there is a better understanding of individual student needs within these alternative high schools that allows staff members to recognize varying measures of “success.” Whether it be a student’s attendance rate improving, a student completing one credit in a term as opposed to not being in school, or a student completing all of their required credits, there is more diversity within alternative high schools (as compared to traditional high schools). Many staff members told me that they did not think it was fair to solely evaluate student success objectively in terms of credit completion and academic achievement. Davies and Guppy (2010) recognize inequalities within the education system, and from a theoretical standpoint Blumer (1986) notes the importance of understanding meaning from the participant’s perspective. If “success” means something different for each alternative student, this is important to research in order to understand how and why students are benefiting from alternative education programs, as well as areas of improvement.
By conducting a qualitative research study whereby I was able to hear the perspectives of staff members, I got a sense that there is so much more to these alternative schools than has been previously researched. By this, I mean that I have developed a deeper understanding about how alternative schools keep these kids in school. Throughout this thesis I have tried my best to accurately discuss my research findings without imposing my own beliefs or judgments, which is reflective of a symbolic interactionist approach. Qualitative research is interesting because the researcher is able to experience the social world of the participants. This is exactly what I did; I immersed myself in the school culture in order to get a sense of the everyday routines and lives of both staff and students. When reflecting upon my research experience, there is relevance to Blumer’s (1986:3) notion that “the meanings that things have for human beings are central in their own right.” I made a point to ask whichever staff member I was talking to at the time to clarify something (such as the terminology of different courses) to make sure I understood the meaning from their perspective. Since “success” is very subjective, a qualitative study was an appropriate way to try to make sense of how success is defined and measured.

In conclusion, I have been able to demonstrate with respect to my three key themes that success is not only defined and measured individually; there are unique characteristics to alternative education programs that are able to keep students in school who are primarily at-risk youth who could not function in their previous traditional high schools. An individualized learning approach that encompasses self-paced learning, academic and non-academic support, and a “safe” learning environment and positive connections with staff members/authority figures has been demonstrated to increase students’ attendance, as well as their ability to focus on their school work (while becoming more “successful” students). While class certainly plays a role in terms of impeding on alternative students’ academics, my research findings are able to provide
an understanding that class on its own cannot explain why some students are more successful than others because some students are indeed resilient. Students’ home lives, homelessness, poverty, family and peer relations, mental health, and learning disabilities are all factors that greatly affect their ability to focus on their school work and be “successful.” By conducting interviews and engaging in participant observation, I have been able to relate my findings to the literature, as well as extend on other researchers’ findings, particularly with respect to the importance of going beyond a class-based analysis in order to understand how student success is defined and measured, and why alternative education programs keep these students in school.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, the notion of student “success” has been explored. More specifically, I set out to understand how success is defined and measured in the alternative high school sites that I visited. By using a qualitative methodology, whereby I engaged in participant observation in the classrooms and conducted nine one-on-one semi-structured interviews, I was able to gain a deeper understanding as to how “success” is defined and measured within this context. After I finished gathering my data and began to organize my findings into themes, I was able to identify common findings from both my observations and interviews. As discussed in Chapter 5, the three key themes that emerged throughout the research process in relation to student success and the structure of alternative education programs were: (1) an individual measurement of success / the structure of alternative education; (2) academic/non-academic support; and (3) feeling “safe” / building connections with students.

There was an overwhelming consensus among staff members that “success” does not mean the same thing from one alternative student to the next. More specifically, staff members did not believe that it is accurate to measure “success” universally (as it is measure in traditional schools) because alternative students display different indicators of “success.” For some students, simply coming to school and physically being in the classroom with their peers is a measurement of success. For other students, “success” is measured in terms of them completing their school work and earning credits toward their high school diploma. Since mental health (mostly anxiety and depression) and learning disabilities are highly prevalent among alternative students, the unique needs of each student affects their ability to focus on their academics. I do not mean to suggest that students in traditional high schools do not face similar struggles, because many certainly do. However, I learned that alternative students are primarily at-risk in
terms of the many non-academic challenges that they are faced with daily. Many alternative students have troubled home lives and experience familial/financial stress, homelessness, poverty, and have multiple mental health issues. Thus, when they are at school, it is often very difficult for them to focus on their school work because they are dealing with several non-academic stressors in their lives. These findings provide an understanding about why students were not able to function in traditional schools. Unlike much of the previous literature in the sociology of education that has examined “deviance” in school, this is much more than a class-based analysis because whether or not alternative students are of a lower-class, they typically have multiple issues/characteristics aside from class that impede on their ability to be “successful.”

In order for alternative students to be more inclined to come to school, both academic and non-academic supports have been put in place to help support their various needs. It is noteworthy that I learned throughout my conversations with staff members that unfortunately, funding cuts limit the ability for staff members and administrators to assist students to the necessary degree. Clothing donations, personal hygiene kits and healthy breakfast food items that are made available to students are very popular and widely used resources among alternative students. However, clothing donations are primarily supplied by staff members and it is therefore not guaranteed that there will always be enough donations available for students in need. Monthly food donations are provided to the schools so that alternative students have access to at least one meal a day (breakfast). Staff members must be careful that they consider how many students rely on eating breakfast at school in relation to the donations that are provided because otherwise, food is consumed very quickly and students have to wait until the next donation is made available.
In addition to the non-academic challenges alternative students face, many alternative students are identified as needing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). I learned that English and math are the most common subjects that alternative students with learning disabilities struggle with. It is noteworthy that IEPs also exist in traditional schools, but the population of students with learning disabilities is not as great as in alternative high schools. However, alternative students typically require more assistance than students in traditional high schools and cannot function in a restrictive (traditional) setting. The Ontario curriculum in these alternative high schools was explained to me as being the same curriculum that is offered in traditional schools and it is the delivery of the material that differs. For example, self-paced learning is a huge benefit because as opposed to students who miss class in traditional schools, alternative students who miss class (for whatever reason) do not fall behind. Rather, when they return to school, they pick up where they left off because although they are in a classroom with their peers, they are not necessarily working on the same assignment (or the same subject) simultaneously. Smaller class sizes in alternative high schools are also a positive feature because there is a smaller student-teacher ratio, thus allowing teachers to devote more attention to individual student needs. In addition to teachers, Educational Assistants (EAs), Child and Youth Counsellors (CYCs) and social workers work diligently in their different roles to assist alternative students with their academic and non-academic needs.

Feeling “safe” is important in an alternative school setting. This does not simply mean feeling physically safe at school; rather, this means creating a safe atmosphere where students feel welcome and cared for. This notion relates to the concept of school climate because it is important that the feel of the school is non-judgmental. Alternative students have many issues with authority, both legally from a criminological standpoint, as well as with parents and other
authority figures (such as teachers and administrators). Non-alternative staff members often place labels upon alternative students as being “stupid” and “bad” kids. However, many alternative students acted out in their previous traditional schools because they could not function in larger classes and in a more traditional/formal learning environment. By building positive connections with alternative students, staff members told me that over time, a students’ behaviour and attitude typically *improves* at the alternative high schools. By treating alternative students at a more compassionate, human-level, staff members are able to develop trusting relationships with the students. Many staff members attribute the more informal school structure (i.e. first-name basis between staff and students) as being highly beneficial in making students feel more inclined to come to school and feel like they are cared about. By addressing the various academic and non-academic needs of students, school suddenly becomes more enticing and meaningful for alternative students.

**Limitations**

There were some limitations to this research study. The key limitation was the timeline. Because this study is for my MA thesis, I had to be mindful of the size of the project so that it was feasible to complete in a timely manner. I would have liked to have spent more than two months devoting my time at the sites because I was able to develop a sense of trust with students when they began to recognize me after consecutive visits and they were more at ease with my presence. Another limitation is that I only conducted my research in one school board and it would be beneficial to understand how alternative education programs are structured in different school boards in Ontario. As I discussed throughout this thesis, there were some findings that I learned about with regards to the district’s respective Catholic board that I would have liked to have looked into in further detail, but I did not have ethics approval for that board.
It also would have been nice to hear the students’ perspectives. To maintain my timeline, I decided to not apply for ethical clearance to interview students. However, their perspectives would be both insightful and beneficial in terms of understanding what they like about alternative education programs and what areas of improvement they believe should be examined.

**Directions for Future Research**

In terms of what future research should look at, I believe that there is a disconnect between understanding how a student’s experience in elementary school influences their experience in high school. I have worked for a remedial summer school program in this particular school board for three years with grade 7s and 8s and strongly believe that there is a need for action *before* at-risk students enter high school. I learned from staff members throughout this research study that many alternative students had never been identified as needing IEPs when they were in elementary school. Thus, by not providing students with support when they are younger, it makes it much more challenging to support them once they enter high school and they are older and do not have adequate coping strategies to deal with their emotions. Thus, future research should address what support is being made available to elementary students in order to try to prevent some of the larger issues (i.e. criminological) that students engage in once they are in high school.

In addition, a comparative analysis between traditional high schools and alternative high schools would be highly beneficial. The Student Success Strategy that has been implemented by the Ontario Ministry of Education (as discussed in Chapter 2) should be further analyzed. If additional support is being made available to students within traditional schools but there are still students (i.e. alternative students) who cannot function within these traditional schools, it is
important to understand why. Future research should also examine why the Student Success
Strategy is only offered within traditional schools and not in alternative schools.

Lastly, future research should examine what happens to these alternative students after
they leave high school. Questions to consider are:

- Do they end up in the criminal justice system?
- Do they gain employment?
- Does obtaining their high school diploma help them in other aspects of their lives such
  as by providing them with fundamental communicative and life skills?

While my research study was not able to address what happens to students after they leave high
school, I suggest that the research reported in this thesis is a step in that direction.
References


Quinn, Mary Magee, Jeffrey M. Poirier, Susan E. Faller, Robert A. Gable, and Steven W. Tonelson. 2006. “An Examination of School Climate in Effective Alternative Programs.” *Preventing School Failure* 51(1):11-17.


Appendix A: Ethical Considerations

This study involved human subjects and ethics approval was necessary. I received formal ethics approval from the University of Guelph’s Research Ethics Board (REB) on December 18th, 2014. The REB number is: 14NV028.

Ethics approval was also obtained from the School Board’s Research Advisory Committee.
Appendix B: Parent Information Letter

Dear Parent/Guardian:

I am a graduate student at the University of Guelph and I am conducting a study that will be looking at alternative school programs offered by the XXXX School Board (XXXX) at XXXX High School (XXXX). Education is an important aspect of any child’s life, and it is crucial that each student is given an opportunity to succeed. I hope that this project will lead to a better understanding of alternative school programs, as well as the benefits XXXX students receive from learning in an environment that is individualized to their learning needs.

Over the course of the next two months, I will be spending approximately three days a week sitting in classrooms observing the everyday school lives of XXXX students. It is noteworthy that I will only be recording my observations by taking hand written notes. There will be no video or audio recording of students; my goal is to be as unobtrusive as possible. I am interested in gaining a deeper understanding about how students learn in small class sizes with an individualized learning focus. My role will be to observe the classroom setting. I will not take away from their instruction or work time because I am only in the class to observe how their school day is structured. Your child’s identity will not be recorded in any of my notes or findings.

The XXXX School Board’s Research Advisory Committee and, subsequently your child’s school Principal, have officially approved this study. When the study is completed, a report on the findings will be available in the school library for interested parents.

If you are not comfortable with your child being involved with this study, please complete the form at the bottom of this letter and return it to your child’s teacher as soon as possible. If you are fine with me observing and interacting with your child, then you do not need to have them bring the form back.

I sincerely appreciate your co-operation. If you would like to receive more information about the study, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you,
Child's Name ______________________

I do NOT give permission for my child to participate in the University of Guelph study conducted by Robin Lafferty

Signature of parent/guardian ________________________________
Appendix C: Staff Information Letter

Staff Information Letter:
A Research Project Examining the Benefits of Alternative Education Programs for XXXX Students

Investigator:
Robin Lafferty
Graduate Student
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Guelph, Ontario, Canada
laffertr@uoguelph.ca

Supervisor:
Bill O’Grady
Professor
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
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wogrady@uoguelph.ca

Purpose of the Study
As a graduate student at the University of Guelph, I am researching alternative education programs offered in the XXXX School Board (XXXX) at XXXX High School (XXXX) for students with unique and individualized needs. This study is important because while other studies suggest that alternative school programs in various school boards, both in Canada and the United States, are effective, it is important to understand why students and staff find success in these programs. By observing students in their daily classroom setting and by speaking with staff members, a deeper understanding of these alternative school programs at XXXX can hopefully be reached. This study will benefit future research and educational policies.

Procedures of the Study
The research for this project will be conducted through semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 30 minutes with staff members like yourself. Together, we can set up a convenient time for me to speak with you at the school. Essentially, I am interested in gaining a deeper understanding of how alternative education programs offered at XXXX are structured. This will include: how students become enrolled in a specific program; what are the greatest aspects of the programs that have proved to be successful and beneficial; and what are some areas of improvement that could further enhance students’ learning? If you are willing to participate, I would like to audio-record the interviews. This will allow me to take notes at another time, thereby making the conversation run more naturally. The information that I will collect will only be used to
help me with the research project, and all information will be kept secure and confidential.

**Potential Risks**
There are no foreseeable risks for you as a participant. The interview does not need to be recorded should you decide not to be recorded. If you do consent to the interview being audio-recorded, but decide during the interview that you no longer wish it to be recorded, the recording can be turned off at any time with no consequence. If any questions make you uncomfortable, they do not have to be answered, and there will be no consequence.

**Potential Benefits**
The research may allow the sociological community to better understand how and why students benefit from alternative education plans that are suited to their individualized needs. It may also allow educators and administrators to better evaluate their programs and policies in order to continue to help each student in the XXXX succeed to their full potential. There will be no direct benefits to you that I am aware of at this time.

**Confidentiality**
All of the information that I will gain will be kept confidential, and no names or descriptors of any sort will be used in my findings. Any information I gain will be used explicitly for the purpose of writing my Master’s thesis. I will keep all of the audio-recordings, and any notes, secure and away from everyone other than my advisory committee. I will not reveal any names in my final project, therefore keeping your identity confidential. Privacy will be respected, and I will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality.

**Participation**
I am happy that you will allow me to conduct this study. My contact information can be found at the top of this information letter. If you choose to withdraw from this study at any time, you can of course do so without consequence, and your personal information will be destroyed immediately.

**Information About Study Results**
Once this research is complete, you will be provided with an executive summary and a copy of the thesis.

**Information About Participating**
If, at any point, you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at the contact information above. Please address any questions about ethical concerns and your rights as a research participant to: S. Auld; Director, Research Ethics; reb@uoguelph.ca; 519-824-4120 X56606
This study has been approved by the XXXX School Board’s Research Advisory Committee, as well as the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board.

Thank you for reading this letter. I hope that you will be interested in participating in this study.

Sincerely,

Robin Lafferty, B.A. (Hons)
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
University of Guelph
Appendix D: Staff Consent Form

Consent for Participation in the Interview

I have read and understand the attached information about the University of Guelph research project, and have had all of my questions answered adequately. I consent to being interviewed by the graduate student researcher.

Signature: _________________________
Date:  _____________________________

I give consent to this interview being audio-recorded. I understand that it is my right to have the recording stopped and the information destroyed at any time.

Signature: _________________________
Date:  _____________________________

If written consent is not given, the interview will not be audio-recorded.

Thank you for completing the consent form.
Appendix E: Staff Interview Questions:

How long have you been working at XXXX?
What is your specific position/role at this location?
What made you interested in working in the Education field?
What field did you study during your post-secondary education?
Did you previously work in different schools other than XXXX? (Whether it be elementary or secondary schools)
What have you enjoyed the most thus far working in XXXX?
What does an average work day look like for you?
How does a student become enrolled in a program at XXXX?
While enrolled, how is a student’s success monitored so that they can successfully complete high school?
Are certain programs more popular or perhaps more successful than others?
How similar or different are these alternative education programs to the Ontario curriculum offered in schools?
Are there vocational programs for students who are not as interested in academics?
Additionally, are there co-op opportunities made available to students?
Are XXXX students eligible for the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP)?
Do you tend to work or interact with certain students more than others?
If students were unable to function in a “normal” school setting, what would be the main reason(s) why?
From a student perspective, what seems to be the aspects of these education programs that they enjoy the most?
Alternatively, are there potential areas of improvement, whether it be from a student or staff perspective?
Upon the completion of high school, are additional resources made available for students after they leave, perhaps to seek employment?