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Trust, Safety, and Relationship Building: A Case Study of Alternative School Education

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ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL EDUCATION

Kermit D. Blakley

Ed. D. Educational Leadership

Submitted in fulfillment

of the requirements of

Doctor of Education

in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

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Approved:

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Abstract

This paper involved researching and studying the social and emotional needs of all stakeholders in our educational system. It used qualitative methods of inquiry to gain knowledge based upon the experiences of children and adults in an alternative school setting. The Wire Academy staff and students experienced the short- and long-term impacts of relationship building and trust required for student achievement, as well as professional growth for the adults that serve children.

This study provides interviews and conversations that were genuine and qualitative, with respect to the climate and culture of the alternative school setting. In addition, it highlights the impact that trust and safety in the traditional school environment. Although this study was performed in a small setting, the results and findings can be applied in any school setting and the broader community.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"Mr. Blakley, why don't you go work at a regular school?"

I thought about that question for a very long time while coming to an understanding regarding my personal preference of working with students referred to my place of employment. Many of these students attended my school because of multiple suspensions or in lieu of expulsion. I didn't originally choose this place but landed here 2 years prior to being asked this very question; a question that left me in a daze. I began questioning my motives for working with students that were often apathetic about learning and who had many personal issues and struggles that often went undisclosed to the adults within the program.

The student asking me this question was an African American male student named Ken who often came to school under the influence of marijuana and would not fully participate in the learning process. Ken was raised by his mom as an only child and lived in a suburban area near the city of Chicago. He was referred to the WIRE Academy, (from this point, referred to simply as WIRE) an alternative school and my place of employment, for his poor grades and truancy. Ken was in his second year of high school and had previously participated on the wrestling team as a freshman at a very affluent and traditional neighborhood high school. Interestingly, his mom attended all the parent teacher conferences and family nights at our alternative school during his placement. She was very aware of the academic apathy of her son and did not approve of his consumption of marijuana. This was clearly a case of a parent that fully participated in school activities and had a genuine concern for her son. Ken posed this question because he thought that I should work at the traditional school he had originally attended. His

perception was that the alternative setting was below or less than that of a traditional school setting. Although Ken posed this question from an adolescent mindset and mentality, he and I had a connection, and his mother trusted our program enough to disclose personal information about Ken's behavior.

What is an alternative school? Alternative education programs are often viewed as individualized opportunities designed to meet the individual needs for youth identified as at risk for school failure. Increasingly, these programs have been identified as programs for disruptive youth who are referred from traditional schools (Foley & Lan-Szo, 2006). Students that I have personally worked with have various social and emotional needs. During initial introductions, as well as during the intake process (where the student and parent or guardian participate), staff find out why the student has been referred for alternative placement before deciding if the student should enroll. Many students enter the program as a result of a bevy of noncompliant and disruptive behaviors. Some students have substance abuse issues, gang involvement, high truancy, and low school attendance. Many student profiles are similar, sharing the same struggles and challenges with peer pressure and anger issues stemming from social emotional development or a lack thereof. Staff can assume that students referred to WIRE experience some sort of disconnect between themselves and the traditional school system. The size of the traditional school setting may or may not be conducive to meeting the needs of students who have been victims of trauma—trauma that in most cases, has occurred in the student's home or social setting. This disconnect may have occurred for very complex reasons and in some circumstances, may occur as a result of a single traumatic experience that the student needs to address. Highlighting a struggle or traumatic experience may be

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more difficult than we as educators understand. Getting into the head of a student can be even more difficult if the learning environment becomes overpopulated or influenced by data driven, high-stakes testing.

I recall an experience in third grade that has greatly impacted my personal life. Even at the tender age of nine, I knew that my first name was uncommon and could become an embarrassment. The teacher began calling names for attendance and upon calling mine, Kermit, someone interjected by asking, *who?* I embarrassingly raised my hand before sinking deep into my seat, trying to go unnoticed. This moment began my fear of embarrassment that carried throughout my life. The experience also provided me the opportunity to have a high tolerance for embarrassment that triggered my ability to be successful in many other areas of my life. Should I have to deal with all this pressure of embarrassment as a child? I often questioned my mother as to why she chose the name Kermit. Furthermore, I wondered why my father allowed this. Where did he stand in all of this? He rarely came around, but when he did, I felt his presence and strength.

Upon reflecting on my school and life experiences, I began questioning my past and how it resonated with my personal choice of working in a small environment with students presently labeled as at risk. My personal fears and past embarrassment allows me to understand that all students have their own personal stories. When I think about how students and staff must socially coexist in the learning environment, the challenges we all face in the school community come to mind. The trust, safety, and relationships between staff and students must be healthy before true academic advancement can be measured.

My first 2 years of teaching in this small environment of students whom had been removed from the mainstream public school population were very stressful and emotionally draining. Sleepless nights and daily slow rides into work were common for me. Students attended our program on a shortened schedule and had a later start time than the traditional school. For me, the shorter school schedule seemed to be a fair trade off for dealing with a student's behavior and social and emotional needs.

During those years, I questioned the decision of continuing working in this environment. I sought employment each summer during those years; only to remain at the same place, experiencing more of the same apathy of students and the emotional draining that came along with it. Teacher turnover in our program was also an issue. As a teacher, I was able to experience and witness the importance of our interactions with students in all settings within a school environment. I learned over time that each and every teachable moment was a critical interaction within the school day. Students labeled or identified as at risk have many experiences with adults, both in the community and in the school setting, that we may not be privy to or truly understand. Unfortunately, due to these unknown circumstances, many students continue the trend of being dismissed or disconnected from adults because of a past experience. This became evident as I witnessed interactions between colleagues and students during my early experiences.

Mr. Miles, a White male originally born and raised on the East Coast of the United States and with recent experiences as a student teacher in an affluent suburb of Chicago, was hired to teach life skills, physical education (PE), and social studies at a location further west of WIRE. Mr. Miles and I were teamed together to teach a larger class of students for a PE program at an off-site recreational center. In addition, I had the

experience of teaching alone (a PE class) and this observation opened my mind about the importance of relationship building with students. I began relying on my original experiences in this environment, which taught me that the micro-interactions—even during the PE class—were critical in getting students to comply with simple requests in the academic environment.

After joining WIRE, I became part of a team of individuals on a committee that provided the curriculum and built a framework within our PE program. We were charged with using the framework of, *Teaching Responsibility Through Physical Activity,* in the setting of physical activity developed by Don Hellison (2003). Even though I gained enormous knowledge from this experience and realized how effective the concepts of *Teaching Responsibility Through Physical Activity* were, I was not ready to train others early in my career. Physical activity instructional settings hold the potential for such development because as environments, they are emotional, interactive, and for some kids, attractive. Physical activity classes allow opportunities for students to learn—not just play games and be active. Life in the gym provides seemingly unlimited opportunities for intervention and for the demonstration of personal and social qualities—not only in games but also in exercises, drills, discussions, and informal student actions (Hellison, 2003).

During the experience of coteaching with Mr. Miles, I realized that the relationships between he and the students were not great and many of the negative occurrences and interactions between he and the students were lasting—carrying over throughout classes during the day and even the week. Unfortunately, due to the lack of trust and relationship-building between Mr. Miles with the students, as well as the

inability of Mr. Miles and the school administrator to see eye to eye regarding discipline issues, he was not offered the opportunity to return to WIRE the following year. This was a clear indication of the importance of making connections and having trusting and safe opportunities to grow in the educational profession.

This experience taught me the importance of being in an environment that provided structure and consistency. If nothing else, I learned how trusting and safe relationships impact education. Each year that I returned, I found myself at a new beginning for building relationships with new staff and a few new students. I continued asking myself why I kept coming back, even after being offered a position to head a department for students with behavior issues within a traditional program. I had completed my student teaching so had the experience of working in a traditional school population. Instead, I declined, returning to my alternative school home. Was I afraid to start over? No, that couldn't be true because every year, I started over with new students and new staff at WIRE. What I finally realized was that I had an attachment to the alternative school setting. One of the most impactful concepts I realized during this time was the holistic approach to creating a safe environment consisting of staff members that students trust academically in a positive way with support through social and emotional development. More importantly, there needed to be a sense of safety and trust modeled between the adults for students to observe.

After 4 years of teaching in this environment, I began feeling differently. More specifically, I felt positive about my experience as a teacher in alternative education. As I continued building relationships with the students, staff, and parents, I began appreciating

WIRE's small environment experiences and how effective these experiences were for the students.

The bell rang and I released my students for the day and began organizing work that had been turned in during class. As I was paper clipping this and that, the door opened to my room and there appeared Tina. Tina asked me if she could do her detention in my classroom. I said yes, asking her why she had a detention. As she explained, her eyes began to well. She cried while explaining that she was late a lot because she was responsible for making sure that her two younger siblings made it to school each day. She continued by explaining that she wanted to be on time but the director of WIRE did not understand that her mother was not acting responsibly in the home. I sat quietly, listening to her story.

I wondered why she picked me, of all staff, to tell her story?

Over time, I began to know why Tina had shared her problem with me. It was her trust . . . in me. She knew that I *had her back.* During my experiences at WIRE, the students attending our program began responding to my presence as more than just a teacher. The students that I once thought to be apathetic and who did not fully participate in the academic portion of the program were beginning to share in a relationship with me as a caring adult. As I continued allowing the cultivation of a more caring relationship with the students, natural interactions and connections became the foundation for what I have now discovered as my niche for working with students considered at risk in the alternative school environment. Too many times I have heard teachers discuss where they went to college, where they got their master's or doctorate's degrees, or whom they know. The fact of the matter is that urban students do not care about that stuff. They want

to know if you are *keeping it real*. They want to know that when the chips are down, you will *have their back* (Simmons, 2006). This personal and professional experience inspired me to research WIRE, which I have a growing passion for ever since being a classroom teacher and even more so now as director. Cultivating an environment that includes both academics and relationship building amongst students, staff, parents, and the wider community is the goal as I conduct a case study of WIRE.

The intent of WIRE is in providing a safe school environment for students that need attention and time to focus on the social issues that prevent many of them from having success academically. The traditional school setting provides a learning environment for the mass of students that have the coping skills to manage both academics and social emotional development. Many students referred to WIRE have been identified as at risk of failing or dropping out of school. The smaller environment at WIRE may ensure safety by its ratio of one teacher for every 10 students. In addition, WIRE focuses on the social and emotional needs of students by employing a full-time social worker and art therapist. The concept involves balancing the opportunities of building relationships and trust by magnifying opportunities to listen to the stories of traumatized students struggling in the world of academia. Currently, there is little that educators can do to change a child's genes, temperament, or brain processing speed; but they *can* make a difference in their care-giving and social environment. Many of the traumatized children I have worked with and who have made progress report having had contact with at least one supportive adult, such as a teacher who took a special interest in them, a neighbor, an aunt, or even a school bus driver (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). The WIRE represents one alternative school of three that is under the regional safe school

programs of which have a vested interest in providing professional development for schools and school districts in the area of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). This represents a very important concept for addressing the needs of students labeled at risk and for educators in the school system pressured to meet state standards and requirements.

Cultural differences of both the public school students and staff have a great impact in this case study. While the teaching force is predominantly staffed by White culture, many students struggling in the traditional school setting are of the minority descent. The delayed and misdirected implementation of the *Brown v Board of Education* decision altered the face of education. Instead of providing students, schools, and communities with better learning environments, *Brown v Board of Education* created (and continues creating) environments where African Americans, other minority students, and White female teachers share dysfunctional relationships built on fear, ignorance, mistrust, and resentment (Hancock, 2006, p. 95). The one size fits all culture of many schools has become a springboard for seeking alternative placement for the outliers. Alternative school education may appear to be negative as opposed to a traditional school education; however, educators must view this as an opportunity to learn from every educational institution. Studying and researching the alternative school setting can enhance the traditional school experience by building on the strengths of each setting and collaborating to focus on the deficits in each. Conversations can be very powerful if participants are willing to share and collaborate in a nonthreatening manner.

If students, in either the traditional or alternative setting, are to be successful, trust must be modeled and students must feel safe. Students must feel the genuine concern of

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adults for one another, as well as the students, to foster a culture of trust. Human

relationships are imperative to a nurturing school environment designated to providing

education and academics for the future. These characteristics have usually not been a

focus in the college of education in most universities. Leaders of correctional education

and alternative schools, with their challenging student populations, require specific

targeted training and support that may be inherently different from what is currently

available in traditional higher educational programs (Price, Martin, & Robertson, 2010).

The novice teacher arriving in a classroom today may not be prepared for the social and

emotional needs of the students nor for the large population of most traditional schools.

He or she is not prepared for the relationships necessary to collaborate with veteran and

tenured staff. Therefore, educators must model trusting relationships and safety in the

school, as staff members, before expecting the same from students, parents, and the

community. When schools are led by people who understand their population and needs

and who have effective ways of supporting staff and community to improve learning for

students in correctional and alternative education settings, benefits accrue—most

importantly, to the students involved (Price, Martin, & Robertson, 2010).

I had the opportunity to watch a very interesting and critical interview between

Oprah Winfrey, one of America's globally famous talk show hosts and entertainment

mogul and Jay-Z, a popular hip hop artist and entrepreneur. The interview highlighted

some of the most critical concepts that impact the lives of many individuals both socially

and emotionally on a national and international platform. This particular interview

captured the essence of how society must pay closer attention to the needs of individuals

in our schools. Although these two individuals have been successful, they both share

stories that reflect growing up in some less than favorable conditions. The interview

resonated with so many inner city and underprivileged youth, as well as the affluent

students impacted by divorce and issues of abandonment.

The following represents a brief excerpt from *The Oprah Magazine*:

Oprah: *You know, I also grew up poor, but rural poor is different. Did you feel poor?*

Jay-Z: *Not at all. Probably the first time was in school when I couldn't get the newest sneakers. We didn't have elaborate meals, but we didn't go without. We ate a lot of chicken. You know, 'cause chicken's cheap. We had so much chicken—chicken backs, chicken everything. To this day, I can only eat small pieces or else I feel funny.*

Oprah: *That's too much chicken in a lifetime. So when you were 5, your family moved to the Marcy projects—and then your father left when you were 11. When you look back at that, what did your 11-year-old self feel?*

Jay-Z: *Anger. At the whole situation. Because when you're growing up, your dad is your superhero. Once you've let yourself fall that in love with someone, once you put him on such a high pedestal and he lets you down, you never want to experience that pain again. So I remember just being really quiet and really cold. Never wanting to let myself get close to someone like that again. I carried that feeling throughout my life, until my father and I met up before he died.*

Oprah: *Wow. I've never heard a man phrase it that way. You know, I've done many shows about divorce, and the real crime is when the kids aren't told. They just wake up one day and their dad is gone. Did that happen to you?*

Jay-Z: *We were told our parents would separate, but the reasons weren't explained. My mom prepared us more than he did. I don't think he was ready for that level of discussion and emotion. He was a guy who was pretty detached from his feelings.*

Oprah: *Did you wonder why he left?*

Jay-Z: *I summed it up that they weren't getting along. There was a lot of arguing. (The Oprah Magazine, 2009, p. 2)*

This interview contained impactful concepts regarding relationships and how critical they are to the social and emotional needs of children. The critical ideas reflected in this interview only scratch the surface of what many students carry into the school building

each day. Relationship building and trust for adults play huge roles in how well students will affectively participate in the learning process.

The smaller environment of an alternative school program has the potential to have the students' needs addressed via caring staff who connect with them. Staff in an alternative school setting is much smaller and has the potential to be trusted and connected in a way that can be very safe for students having some difficulties in the traditional school environment. The building that houses students and staff at WIRE also shares space with other small offices. In fact, from its outside, WIRE doesn't appear to be a school at all. The perception of WIRE being a school is usually lost within minutes, if you read the student and their parent or guardian's body language once arriving for the initial intake meeting and discussing a few things. This study examined student and staff perceptions—both of which are critical to this research and used as a measuring tool of how alternative school programs and various environments may or may not impact students labeled as at risk of dropping out of the traditional school setting. This qualitative research provides stories that may plant seeds to the larger society regarding the benefits of having alternative routes to earning a quality education to students struggling in a traditional school setting. With increased incidence of child neglect and abuse, homelessness, and kids raising kids, societal trends have been blamed for the dysfunction of families. In addition, these trends are blamed for the increased availability of drugs and guns; negative television and other media imagery; and social, political, and economic conditions (to include poverty, racism, and joblessness (Hellison, 2003).

The WIRE is located near the city limits just outside of Chicago's west side and represents an alternative high school. The upper class neighborhood is populated by a

diverse population of residents but dominated by Whites. It has been in operation since

1997 and has the capacity to service a maximum of 40 students during a school year. This

alternative school was started as a way of giving traditional schools a place to refer

students who were a distraction or at risk of failing in the home school environment. The

alternative setting began with an administrator, an administrative assistant, a social

worker, and two teachers who were responsible for teaching direct instruction in the core

courses. The students were provided a computer assisted program, Academic Learning

System, to earn credit for courses that were not teacher taught.

Rationale for the Study

Alternative school education gives individual and diverse student populations the

opportunity to gain knowledge and education within a smaller setting. Furthermore, it

provides support for the cultural differences prevalent in American society. Today's

adolescent learners are more diverse than ever in terms of their backgrounds, interests,

learning styles, and motivations (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). The traditional

classroom of the past has been bombarded with students from communities and from

around the world that are from an increasingly difficult nontraditional household.

Students in traditional classroom are challenged socially and emotionally before even

entering the academic setting each morning. For many reasons, parents are not as

available to participate fully in the lives of students arriving at our schools' doorsteps.

The alternative school setting represents a design that provides students

considered at risk of failing or dropping out of school a smaller setting. This offers more

attention from teachers and staff and also gives the students the support necessary to get

back on track. Many students referred to the alternative school setting have become

disruptions in the traditional school setting and for one reason or another, have fallen off

track. There may be many factors for a student's referral to this alternative setting; factors

representing a tremendous challenge for the alternative school staff. Administrators and

staff usually enter this setting without the proper intentions or training to meet the needs

of the students at risk of school failure or school drop-out. Frequently, alternative

education programs are used as *dumping grounds* and *warehouse*s for difficult students,

teachers, or administrators, creating "second class citizens" in the education community

(Geronimo, 2011, p. 433). Alternative education staff has the difficult task of addressing

the needs of multiple students in a setting with the potential to be very intense and

hostile. Many people have a general perception of the alternative school setting as being a

setting for both marginalized students and staff who are not good fits for the traditional

school setting. The misunderstanding insinuates that many traditional school districts are

becoming overpopulated with underachieving staff as well, and students are not having

success academically or are not feeling supported socially and emotionally. School

districts feel the pressures of meeting AYP (Annual Yearly Progress) and struggle to

adhere to the *No Child Left Behind Act* mandates. Across the board, schools struggle with

academically preparing students and meeting the expectations for college entry and the

workforce. Many traditional school teachers are, in fact, struggling with the social and

emotional needs of the students that have yet to be labeled at risk and in need of the

smaller alternative school environment.

Many factors contribute to the recent openings of many alternative school

programs. Geographic location, the socioeconomic class of local population, and the

current trends of the school culture are heavily considered when alternative schools

become an option. In many underserved communities, lower class minority students may require a large number of alternative school programs due the effects of crime, truancy, or disruptive behaviors in the traditional school setting. For example, Mississippi refers Black children to alternative education programs at more than double the rate of their White peers. In fact, in Madison County, Mississippi, Black students were more than seven times more likely than Whites to be sent to alternative school programs (Geronimo, 2011). In many upper class communities, a need exists for alternative school programs, but many believe this only protects traditional schools from unsafe students that may disrupt the school community in various ways. Unfortunately, many alternative school programs are not utilized in a way that fully supports addressing the true needs of students labeled at risk of race or socioeconomic class. In many scholarly discussions, educators believe that this marginalizing of lower class students and cultures support the growing incarceration rates that place these individuals into the justice system. Various institutions—including those that encourage residential segregation, punitive policies that encourage social control over marginalized populations, and school systems that perpetuate unequal access to resources—interact with each other across spatial and temporal domains to encourage the isolation of alternative school students. Policies that purposefully "disincentivize" marginalization must be adopted if all students are to have a real chance at a decent education (Geronimo, 2011, p. 435).

Many students referred to the alternative school setting have been involved in one or more traumatic social and emotional experiences. Studying the brain and brain development allows educators to understand students and their concepts of processing academics in the learning environment. Educators must have a better understanding of

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the brain and its development. Brain researchers state that the sentry of the emotional

brain, the amygdala, spots incoming stimuli as pleasurable or threatening, registering any

variation from normal as a potential danger or opportunity (Brendtro, Martin, & McCall,

2009). When students' behaviors become an issue in school, it is usually triggered when

the student is reminded of the experience that more times than not, embodies a sense of

neglect or abandonment from the home. The amygdala connects to the hippocampus,

which is in the memory switchboard. The hippocampus (Greek for seahorse, signifying

its shape) registers emotionally charged events, stores them for a time, and then files

permanent memories elsewhere in the brain for later retrieval (Brendtro et al., 2009).

When adults in a school setting are unaware of this phenomenon and are focused on the

curriculum, a positive culture in the classroom may be even more difficult to maintain.

The *No Child Left Behind* legislation challenges school principals to improve the

achievement gap between Black and White students. Still, Black students lag far behind

their White peers on the standardized tests used to measure academic achievement

(Garrison-Wade, & Lewis, 2006). Since the government has instituted the *No Child Left

Behind Act* mandate, staff members (including teachers and administrators), feel the

pressure to meet AYP standards each year. This pressure has caused many school staff to

perform in a manner that creates a high level of anxiety. This anxiety may indeed be too

much for staff to be fully effective to students that need the most attention. Stress on the

adults in this setting may negatively impact a student's growth in academics.

Many schools implement an advisory class within the school schedule in an

attempt to make connections with the students. Social and emotional learning has become

a popular topic in schools and many administrators have become aware of the positive

effects and outcomes that SEL has on students' academic successes. Students with very unique personalities and a sense of confidence can be a plus in this situation. Asking staff to be cognizant and aware of the social and emotional needs of the student becomes far more difficult than it may seem. In short, many teachers do not know how to think about their culturally diverse learners; they do not have a repertoire of knowledge necessary to effectively teach these culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse students; and they do not know how to make curricular and pedagogical decisions that are relevant to and responsive to their students (Milner, 2006).

Many teachers are overwhelmed with the curriculum and classroom management. While many traditional school teachers and administrators have not been trained to fully understand the social and emotional component of education during their certification process, many that end up in the alternative school setting are not prepared for the experience of an alternative school environment either. Students that struggle both socially and emotionally are in dire need of a culture that provides safety and trust. Through relationships, students can develop the necessary coping skills to combat the struggles faced outside of the school building. Optimizing the learning and well-being potential of young people implies an expanded orientation for education that moves beyond a focus on academic competencies and instead embraces human development and learning more holistically (Bird & Sultmann, 2010). Before addressing the academic struggles of many marginalized or in many cases, nonmarginalized students in the classroom, educators must take a harder look at the social and emotional well-being of students in a public and private school system that has its' flaws.

Purpose of Study and Guiding Questions

The topic of alternative education programs and its progression becomes more relevant in discussions regarding school success and the widening gap between the upper and lower social classes. Schools today face very diverse cultures that challenge the traditional school norms of the not so distant past. Alternative education programs may offer an opportunity for students that are at risk of failing or dropping out of school completely to meet graduation requirements in a different setting. While some believe that the alternative school setting is negative and breeds more negative behavior, with a better understanding of SEL and socioeconomic conditions, students may benefit from a smaller setting with staff who make connections with the relational needs of the students. These negative stigmas have a tacit assumption that a student's educational failure is caused largely by individual factors such as poverty, minority status, or family characteristics and ignore external factors such as school condition and societal factors (Kim & Taylor, 2008).

Alternative education programs are also becoming more popular to school teachers and staff because many traditional schools are overcrowded with students in great need of structure and the relationships missing in their household. Teachers now realize that the school day has become overwhelmed with behavioral issues related to the social and emotional needs of students that are not being met within the household. While some teachers were originally assigned to an alternative setting as a consequence for low performance in the traditional setting, many now seek a smaller environment to have more of an impact in the education profession.

The most underestimated factor that many staff outside of the alternative school environment face involves the intense and emotional drain that comes with the alternative school environment. This evidence alone may explain why students in both traditional and alternative school settings require SEL. Further evidence that shows students are in need of SEL can be found in the number of school districts now including the advisory class in their daily school schedule. Many administrators have realized that school staff are limited in the counseling and social worker departments and so attempt to provide these services by building relationships between students and staff by implementing an advisory class. Now, teachers and staff are being asked to do more than focus on the curriculum that drives the AYP numbers and effect school funding. To meet state standards and avoid the risk of school closings, many educators are under immense pressure to meet students where they are academically, socially, and emotionally for school success.

The purpose of this study involves taking a qualitative research approach to obtaining an understanding of the accountability required of staff members. In addition, it involves their willingness and capacity to provide a sufficient education in a diverse culture of students with unmet social and emotional needs outside the school community or within the household.

Research consisted of interviews with school administrators, staff, students, and guardians in the WIRE school setting. I sought the knowledge and wisdom of staff, considering the importance of modeling trust and safety amongst colleagues (teamwork), and developing relationships with students and their families, while encouraging students to take responsibility for themselves as members of the school community. The sample

provides experiences in both the larger traditional setting and the smaller alternative

environment to research common themes that may provide evidence of the need for

socially and emotionally safe school cultures that impact achievement and success in

academics.

Students in traditional and alternative school settings may also be marginalized

within communities underserved for systemic purposes. According to Cornell West

(2001), nihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no

rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is far more, the lived experience

of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness and (most important)

lovelessness (p. 14). Through interviewing and discussions with traditional and

alternative staff members, students, and guardians, we may realize the experiences that

lead school administrators through professional development that better prepares

educators for the social and emotional needs of students—upper, middle, and lower class.

Students referred to alternative school settings are in great need of educators who can

make connections on the basis of social and emotional needs. These students have trust

issues with adults because of the relationships they may or may not have outside of the

school. Staff must be aware of this phenomenon and have the capacity to understand the

needs presented. Results can be frightening and indicate a numbing detachment from

others as well as a self-destructive disposition toward the world. Life without meaning,

hope, and love breeds a coldhearted, mean spirited outlook that destroys both the

individual and others (West, 2001). This research recognizes a case study driven by the

following questions:

1. What are the alternative school staff's perceptions and understandings regarding the alternative school students' needs?

2. What are the educational and social-emotional experiences and needs of students in an alternative school?

3. What are the educators' responsibilities in an alternative school regarding establishing safe and trusting relationships?

4. What represents the educational systems' responsibilities for building relationships and providing safe and trusted environments conducive to equitable advancement for students, staff, and administrators?

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Alternative education programs have been around for many years providing opportunities for students in need of a setting different from that of the traditional school environment. The general purpose of the alternative setting involves providing a caring school environment where students can find success in academics and meet the requirements for a high school diploma. Morely (as cited in Aron, 2003 in Van Acker, 2007), identified alternative education as a perspective, not a procedure or a program. Alternate education represents a belief that many ways exist to becoming educated, as well as many types of environments and structures within which this may occur (Van Acker, 2007).

The literature review for this study analyzes a multitude of concepts and provides an in depth understanding of the need for an alternative education perspective that supports both the traditional and alternative student and school setting. The general public has a tendency to interpret alternative education as less favorable or negative. A goal of the literature review entails providing a holistic understanding of the components encompassing a traditional school and social class setting, as well as the alternative and marginalized class setting and how each influences the other. The literature review components shed light on the educational system and the humanistic relationships between races and social classes affecting human culture and the progression of all in academia.

The literature review begins with an in-depth view of the brain and its development, to include the effects of trauma. The traumatic experiences of students in

the home, social settings, and school are critical to their ability to progress in the academic environment. Next, social emotional learning and development in the academic environment is discussed, which is critical in both the traditional and alternative settings. The SEL concept and the ability to build safe and trusting relationships have become a priority in schools amongst all members and participants including, administration, teachers, students, parents, and businesses within the school community. The word trust comes from the German word *trost*, meaning comfort. We seek out people with whom we feel comfortable and avoid persons who make us feel uncomfortable (Brendtro & Du Toit, 2005). Then the literature review addresses the relational deficits and weaknesses of the school community to include the social classes and potential intended marginalization of the lower class citizens. It examines the history of race in the educational setting and the current trends of White teachers in relationship to minority students. The literature review will then speak to the history of alternative education and current perceptions of what an alternative school program seeks to provide.

The remainder of the literature review describes frameworks that may provide support and exposure for educators charged with educating students from all walks of life in the traditional and alternative education environments. The frameworks allow the opportunity to practice nontraditional standard operating procedures that support all participants in the learning environment. In addition, the frameworks provide safety and allow trust to be realized in a system that may or may not meet the needs of all participants including administration, staff, students, or parents in the school community.

The Brain

Exciting research in neuroscience has deepened our understanding of children and youth. Humans have specific brain programs to help cope with adversity, survive, and thrive (Brendtro, Mitchell & McCall, 2009). When working with students experiencing some trauma within their life, many turn to medicine, creating a dependency on pills dealing with what may only require a simple understanding of the brain and how it operates. Understanding how the brain works, in its simplest form, may assist in how educators respond to students who persistently struggle behaviorally, socially, and emotionally. Brendtro, Mitchell et al. (2009) explained the principles, calling it, *The Brain Rules*. The rules represent metaphors, since science uses hypotheses that are continually being questioned and not rules set in stone. The Brain Rules reflect two ideas:

1. The brain represents command central for all human behavior.
2. Knowing how the brain operates can guide work with children and youth.
    (Brendtro, Mitchell et al., 2009)

Student behavior in school and in the community is based upon each student's unique experiences. When students arrive in the school environment, some share similar experiences that have been influenced by the community or environment from which they share; however, many come from the walks of life within their individual households that can be very isolated and on a very personal level. When educator's welcome children into the school setting, rarely will teachers focus on the individuals' needs. Attempting to support all students on an individual basis can be an overwhelming consideration. Teachers usually earn a certification, trained to teach a specific subject or particular age range of children. The idea of educators understanding the brain capacity and level of

critical thinking for children has been left to testing that may or may not account for the various experiences of each individual tested. The reality of attempting to measure the academic ability levels of each student via standardized testing is questionable. One way of supporting all students' needs, when discussing academics and the progression of all students, involves providing research that assists educators in understanding the brain and its development.

Humans are motivated to try explaining the unknown, literally driven to finding pattern in the chaos of life. The brain itself engages in a lifelong pursuit to make meaning of the world (Brendtro, Mitchell et al., 2009). This clearly includes all students who arrive in a school building to learn. Why do some students have success in school while others have behavior problems or negative experiences? What are the common themes of the students that have good grades and are a pleasure to have in most classrooms? What are the similar character traits of the students often referred to the disciplinary office? The experiences that each student encounters throughout his or her life span can be the difference. These questions may be related to the achievement gaps that represent the differences in the socioeconomic classes within the United States. The experiences and representations of students and staff within an academic environment are impacted based upon culture. This is especially true in a time when the U.S.' homeland has quickly become populated by the Hispanic culture. Culture, as defined by anthropologists, represents the frame of reference for people interacting with and interpreting the world in which they live. Some essential components of a culture are its values, beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions. The misalignment between the Hispanic immigrants' culture and the U.S.' culture temporarily creates a barrier that impedes successful functioning in the new

culture. What the Hispanic American believes or values might not be consistent with those of the land (Ferrer, 2011, pp. 48-49). To establish a new framework, educators need to begin with a frank acknowledgement of the basic humanness and Americanness of each of us; and we must acknowledge that as a people, E Pluribus Unum—"we are on a slippery slope toward economic strife, social turmoil, and cultural chaos. If we go down, we go down together" (West, 2001, p. 4).

Students who are not progressing in the traditional school setting struggle for various reasons. Educators must consider the development of the brain and be willing to ask the questions that will cultivate a better understanding of *why* in order to support all students. In 1895, Sigmund Freud, who was trained in neurology, proposed that neurons link together to create learning. He described the synapse or space between neurons as a contact barrier. When two neurons fire together repeatedly, they form an association, the basis for all learning (Brendtro, Mitchell et al., 2009). All things considered, we are all created equal with a brain that consistently seeks opportunities to learn and make connections. Although students have different experiences, they all have the capacity to make these connections and learn. Educators have to understand the depth and breadth of educating students with needs that may be extremely diverse based upon experiences and brain development. One of the most useful ideas about how the brain works acknowledges the concept of the *triune brain* (put forth by Paul Maclean in Bendtro et al., 2009). We get three brains for the price of one; and each sub-brain has a unique task. To simplify, the primary tasks of the triune brain are: the lower survival brain reacts, the deep emotional brain values, and the higher logical brain reasons (Brendtro, Mitchell et al., 2009).

Are students in the higher logical brain yet? Many students who experienced trauma or grew up in less than favorable living conditions are in the survival stage of brain development. When students are in the survival brain, the first priority for the student regards seeking safety. Other more stable students in the emotional level of the brain development stage may also struggle in the world of academics within the school environment. Educators entering a classroom for learning, prepared with tools and lesson plans, are now being asked to consider the stage of brain development for students on an individual basis. Teachers that struggle to reach students academically blame the lack of skills taught by the elementary school teacher, just as the high school teacher claims the lack of skills on the teaching practice of the middle school. Or, there may be conversations in the English department regarding an incoming student in the 12th grade coming from a particular high school and reading at an elementary school level.

School districts that are under pressure and have mandates to meet annual yearly progress in correlation to funding may or may not provide the safety that many students in the survival brain seek. This may be why many students enter the discipline office more often than expected. This may be totally untrue for some students; however, studying the brain and its development becomes critical in measuring progress for students in academics, the progress of educators, and the ability of school staff to better serve students from diverse backgrounds. This concept is especially impactful when considering students that may have experienced trauma even at a minimum capacity.

Even in utero and after birth, for every moment of every day, the brain processes the nonstop set of incoming signals from the senses. Sight, sound, touch, smell, taste—all of the raw sensory data that result in these sensations enter the lower parts of the brain

and begin a multistage process of being categorized, compared, and previously stored patterns, and ultimately, if necessary, acted upon (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). Students that appear to be ready for the academic process set forth by teachers are far more complex than educators may want to realize or understand. Teacher colleges have good intentions for providing potential educators with coursework for certification in a specific area of pedagogy; however, there is no better reality than the day-to-day interactions between school staff and the students that may or may not arrive in classroom prepared for academics.

To service all students in the academic setting, educators must now consider each micro-interaction with students—considering that many students may be in a fight or flee thought process based upon the experiences of each student in the school or home setting. This concept brings to light the greater responsibility of educating children and how education has now become more than passing information from teacher to pupil as a single entity. This also brings to light the importance of learning the backgrounds and family structures of cultures beyond the dominant culture. Educators have to consider the brain development and the trauma involved in a student's past and present that may influence the educational setting. Educators also have to consider how school systems must implement more social emotional learning and development and understand the difficulty of providing safety for students and families within an institution held accountable for annual yearly progress via state legislation that provides funding to school districts based upon property taxes and numbers that do not consider the emotional well-being, brain development, and generational poverty of lower class citizens.

Social Emotional Learning and Development

The most apparent concept for many school staff members in the classroom today involves behavior and the wide range of student ability levels within grade levels in a particular class. When measuring student ability levels during assessments, most results can be (and are) skewed for many students and just as well, may be alarmingly accurate for others. What may be most interesting are the years of social promotion where many students unfortunately move on to the next grade without attaining the basic skills required for their current grade of attendance. This idea, along with various social and emotional deficits of many students experiencing life altering, and for many, traumatic occurrences during their adolescent years, may impact the student's ability to work in the logical brain capacity expected within the school environment. This is also accompanied by the relationships between students and teachers within the classroom and has compounded teacher and student interactions over the years in schools.

Studies in the United States found that 60% of "worst school experiences" reported by students involved peers but a surprising 40% involved adults (Brendtro & Du Toit, 2005, p. 22). This has now become the centerpiece for school districts becoming more aware of the need for social emotional learning and development. However, the process of transforming education from a focus and centering on academics only describes a process that will take time to develop. Teachers and school personnel are now being asked to slowly buy-in to the concept of building relationships and making connections with students that had previously been the responsibility of school counselors and social workers.

Social and emotional development begins with the simple thought of making connections and building trusting and safe relationships. To be sure, the problem of race in America runs deep and complicates interactions amongst all. Yet, friendships across ethnic and racial lines in America are more evident than ever before (Cosby & Poussaint, 2007).

One of the most impactful concepts surrounding education and the social class involves the trust and safety students feel in an academic setting. Many caring adults within the school environment are of the dominant culture; however, the risk involved in getting to know the real-life trauma of the students of the minority class bears a heavy burden on everyone when considering SEL. For the Black culture, slavery had and still has an impact on the relationships the minority culture has in conjunction with the dominant culture. Cultural differences and slavery are very difficult and until it is addressed for purposes of relationship building, accountability for achievement in academics will continue being skewed. Having courageous conversations regarding race and ethics are necessary to the future of the American economy and the future descendants of this country. If educators are comfortable with dialogue about issues and situations that are racially charged, educators can then be there to help students. Whites, Blacks, Latino and Native, Asian, and Chicanos comprehend the thicket of perception and language that surrounds them all the time (Landsman, 2006). Although, these conversations are often difficult, they can be critical to building community and providing safety within our American society. These interactions and relationships amongst different cultures filter into the classrooms in schools and account for the misunderstandings that often lead to student referrals and further trust issues amongst

members of the school community. De jure segregation reigned for nearly one hundred years and was not eliminated until the great struggle of the civil rights movement beginning in the mid-1950s (Cosby & Poussaint, 2007).

Teachers and students are learning to cope with cultural differences in the public school settings. When observing some of the trust issues within the learning environment in schools, students and adults often misunderstand one another or have a lack of connectedness. This has much to do with race and ethics and the reality of oversized classrooms in numbers not conducive for teachers that crave the idea of learning more about the possible reasons why students struggle academically and the literal trauma that has an effect on student achievement. Social emotional learning and development in the classroom depends on the abilities of teachers to have empathy for students and their development socially—regardless of race and the depth of any traumatic experience the student has endured. Many children are deeply hurt by mistreatment, racism, sexism, religious bigotry, and hostility based on sexual orientation. Educators working with children who are troubled and in pain often adopt a self-protective armor to avoid or attack the student's problem behavior. This reaction can only be overridden through belief in the potential strengths of every youth (Brendtro & Du Toit, 2005).

The idea of the school community providing academics without considering the social and emotional well-being of all students represents a tremendous concern. As an administrator and former teacher in the alternative school setting, I have a passion for students referred to a smaller setting because of behavior issues that cannot be shouldered by them alone. After experiencing working with students in this environment and observing the dynamics of the relationships of the student, school staff, family, and larger

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school community, there is no wonder students struggle academically. The social and emotional development of students in partnership with school staff is critical to providing an equitable education for all students. This phenomenon supports the efforts of having educators understanding the impact of brain development in relation to the traumatic experiences of students in the most minimal form.

Education settings have the potential to engage young people in ways that can help them define who they are, why they are important, how they should act, and who they can become. Optimizing the learning and well-being potential of young people implies an expanded orientation for education that moves beyond a focus on academic competencies to embrace human development and learning more holistically (Bird & Sultmann, 2010). The school as a whole can provide support for students and their social and emotional needs if the school district also provides professional development for school staff members. Educators must genuinely have concerns for the well-being of students and the experiences of his or her family's culture. This is critical in the diversified cultures of schools that have an imbalance between White and minority teachers. When we break down the walls of cultural differences and address the social and emotional well-being of all students, we can then provide proper safety for students to learn and make the necessary connections in academia. The principal of a youth prison in Australia gave the following account of one of her teachers:

> Most of our residents are aboriginal youth, but our teachers are nearly all White. A new teacher came to me concerned that a student had put his hand on her shoulder. This occurred when he thanked her for helping him with a difficult task. She said he seemed very respectful and this brief touching did not appear to be

sexual. However, she wondered what she should do if he did this again.

'Whatever you do, don't recoil from him,' I advised. 'In his culture, this

represents a sign that he wants to connect with you. If you are afraid of these

students, you will never reach them' (Brendtro & Du Toit, 2005, p. 58)

What has become evidently difficult in the process of developing a more fluid

understanding of social and emotional development involves the wide range of

interpretations of the behaviors of students within a diverse public school system.

Creating a climate of common social and emotional development in the public school

setting can be difficult. Student and teachers from multicultural backgrounds that share

both public and private school settings have a tremendous task of coexisting with a

common core standard for behavioral, social, and emotional development. Social and

emotional dispositions and skills are described and labeled differently because this area

of study emerged from a variety of, often competing, disciplines and academic

discourses—including neuroscience, child development, intelligence theory,

organizational learning, and pedagogical studies. These disciplines posit certain

worldviews and the result can be perspectives on social emotional developments ranging

from their being fixed innate characteristics to being flexible and content bound (Watson

& Emery, 2010).

This idea brings educators to the natural order of learning in the traditional school

setting today. With a tremendous focus on academics and high-stakes testing, educators

naturally follow the trends and pressures from a top-down approach that in the United

States, begins with government officials and the *No Child Left Behind Act* mandate that

filters into all communities—regardless of the socioeconomic status (SES) of its bearers.

When educators consider the behaviors and social and emotional developments of children and families that struggle to meet state standards in the academic realm, they cannot help but to consider a different approach. According to Steve Van Bockern (2006), educators must not only measure the intelligence quotient (IQ) of their students but they must also consider both the emotional quotient (EQ) and the spiritual quotient (SQ). Many students who experienced trauma—or even students that may have immigrated into a more traditional culture in the United States from a place with different norms—may benefit from an unfocused school experience, have a higher priority to academics and the IQ that drives test scores, and have an agenda that is not shared by all participants in the American school system. To fully recognize a youth's potential, the academic, as well as the needs of the heart and the soul, must be addressed. Recognizing that many traditional practices in schools "stomp on the souls" of students, Van Bockern (2006) provided a description of how soul-filled education might transform teaching and learning (p. 219).

One of the most difficult issues with teaching, as described earlier, represents the task of reaching all students through genuine and caring relationships that connect students to education. Often times, when the order of education and academics are interrupted because of a behavior not recognized as compliant or the norm, teachers and students meet a crossroads and experience further disconnect. When a student has experienced trauma in his or her life, the idea of having success with academics in school and high-stakes tests becomes more complicated and difficult to attain. Neuroscience clearly establishes that trauma is not primarily a cognitive (frontal cortex/top brain) experience but a sensory, implicit (mid-deep brain) experience that talk (cognitive)

interventions cannot alone change (Brendtro, Mitchell et al., 2009; Perry & Szalavitz, 2006; Steele & Raider, 2009, as cited in Steel & Kuban, 2010). Sensory explicit trauma-specific intervention strategies are necessary to bring about experiences in changing not only the stored experiences in the mid-brain but also the behaviors, which are driven by them (Steele & Kuban, 2010).

When looking at the referral process of students labeled at-risk, educators observe the reasons as mostly disruptive behavior. It becomes even more interesting when observing the dynamics of a school staff charged with providing a structured learning environment that produces standards of learning for all students, in spite of the trauma that may or may not be considered. This concept becomes magnified even more when considering neuroscience and the social aspect of social emotional development in the public school environment. Social neuroscience represents a young and thriving area of research in psychology that integrates diverse literatures and methodologies to address broad questions about the brain and behavior (Amodio, 2010). This is critical to the social environment of school and the relationship-building amongst all members and participants. Many judgments exist that include misinterpretations of both students and school staff when an initial introduction and experience triggers an unfavorable or even a pleasant memory of an individual. This has a great impact on whether or not a school culture will thrive with the intent of academic success in spite of school-wide needs to have success in the EQ and the SQ.

Consideration regarding social neuroscience's impact and the reverse effects of addressing students and families with a desire and need to have emotional and spiritual needs met first in order to have academic success should be explored. This task may be

difficult unless a greater understanding of the social and emotional impact relationships

have on one's ability to teach as educators and for young learners as students exists.

Perceptions of each other have a huge influence on how educators engage in learning and

it drive the test scores required by federal mandates such as the *No Child Left Behind Act*

statutes.

To illustrate this issue, research examines the control of the intergroup responses

toward Blacks by White Americans. Much previous behavioral research has shown that

stereotypes of Blacks (e.g., as dangerous) come to mind automatically, and that

controlled processing is needed to override the influence of stereotypes on one's behavior

(in Devine, 1989; Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995; Payne, 2001—all as cited

in Amodio, 2010). For example, in Payne's weapons identification task, a Black or White

face is presented briefly in a prime (the first picture prior to showing the second picture),

followed by a picture of either a handgun or a hand tool (as cited in Amodio, 2010).

Because Blacks are often stereotyped as dangerous, controlled processing is required to

respond correctly on certain trials, such as when a Black face appears before a tool, but is

not required to respond correctly on other trials, such as when a Black face appears

before a gun (Amodio, 2010).

Through professional development and the awareness of the misperception of the

potential of alternative education programs, educators may be able to reverse and address

the social and emotional aspect, as well as the spiritual development of students that may

not fit the one size fits all education trends in the United States. Having a better

understanding of how to address multicultural learning and the interconnectedness of

relationship building is necessary as schools struggle to provide a safe and trusted

educational setting for all students, regardless of the student's culture and background. The alternative school setting may be an easier setting to address many students and the needs that may not be met in the traditional school environment. If educators could possibly make connections with the students referred to the alternative setting and begin exploring the student's interests, it may spark the relationship that gives the student a voice in his or her school experience. *Schools with Spirit: Nurturing the Inner Lives of Children and Teachers* (in Lantieri, 2001, as cited in Van Bockern, 2006), gives perspectives on soul-filled education. Such schools honor the uniqueness of each child. Students and teachers search for their passions. Different ways of knowing, including intuition, imagination, and creativity, are honored (Van Bockern, 2006).

The human brain represents a magnificent learning organ that makes the quest of overall learning possible. But something tragic often happens to the minds of the many children eager to achieve—oftentimes in schools where the quest should be nourished and expanded. As practiced, schooling is a poor facilitator of learning. Schooling too often fragments learning into subject areas, substitutes control for the natural desire to learn, coops naturally active children for hours in assembly-line classroom structures, and ignores both individual and cultural differences. It destroys opportunities for learning from elders, from each other, and from new generations (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002). Often, school staff negatively perceive that the students referred to alternative placement are simply disruptive and have behavior and social and emotional issues. Educators may want to begin accepting the presented opportunities to transform and improve the educational system. In addition, they must tap into the souls and emotions of students disconnected from the traditional school setting. This presents a

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learning opportunity for teachers interested in helping students that have unmet needs both at home and within the communities with economic deficits.

With students born into lower economic status communities, the natural response to academics is not realized due to students' needs for social and emotional support. This also describes the case for students that migrate into a new and even dominant culture that does not cultivate a supportive effort to recognize the norms of a minority culture. The disconnections and misperceptions driven by the unknown (ignorance) further alienate students from teachers and relationships within a school environment that interrupts the learning process. This phenomenon interrupts the intentions of teachers and gets very complicated when considering the pressures to meet standards imposed upon school employees. When students struggling in the mainstream setting react abrasively to high-stakes testing and the top-down approach, educators must ask the right questions and figure out an alternative approach.

While a long history exists in education regarding attending to emotional learning, Goleman's research created renewed interest in something as subjective as human emotions (1997, as cited in Van Bockern, 2006). Feelings left the realm of "soft science" and became worthy of research (Van Bockern, 2006, p. 219). The education of the heart took on new meaning. Goleman (1997, as cited in Van Bockern, 2006) provided evidence that emotional intelligence specifies a stronger indicator of human success than IQ. He defined emotional intelligence in terms of emotional awareness of self and others, personal motivations, and the ability to be in healthy relationships (Van Bockern, 2006). When the school has mandates to meet academic standards and high-stakes testing that influence the relationships between students and the school staff, one cannot dismiss the

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social and emotional needs, and to a degree, the spiritual needs, that drive the student and his or her desire to explore subject matter and school curriculum. This can be especially true for the student that has a less than favorable ability to cope with experiences described as traumatic within the family or household and the student that may, in many cases, be considered at risk of dropping out or failing to meet the standard graduation requirements. In other words, if schools do not work toward meeting the needs of children, they are not working very well. If they do not pay attention to needs, schools will always come up short. While schools may increase math and reading scores, if they fail to help children grow in all ways—to flourish, as Martin Seligman (2011, as cited in Van Bockern & McDonald, 2012) says—they miss the mark.

Diversity in the Classroom

The integration of schools during the civil rights movement of the 1950s has had a huge impact on education. There have been positive outcomes as well as tremendous benefits to having multicultural classrooms and schools throughout the United States. However, struggles are evident across the lines of race and socioeconomic class of students in the public school system. The delayed and misdirected implementation of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision has altered the face of education. Instead of providing students, schools, and communities with better learning environments, *Brown v. Board of Education* created (and continues creating) environments where Blacks and other minority students and White female teachers share dysfunctional relationships built on fear, ignorance, mistrust, and resentment (Hancock, 2006). Student interactions between the minority students and White female teachers directly impact learning. The fear that both the minority culture and majority dominant culture have for one another

indirectly affects the school culture that must be safe in order to positively influence academics for students.

To move beyond these refutable and hotly debated explanations and arrive at a deeper and more useful understanding of the racial achievement gap, educators need to stop placing blame on the places and people beyond their control. By doing this, they avoid faulting children for who they are and their backgrounds. Educators advocate a new strategy because it encourages them to engage in difficult self-assessments and to take responsibility for what they can control—such as the quality of their relationships with colleagues, students, and their families, both in the classroom and throughout the school community (Singleton & Linton, 2006).

The efforts of *Brown v. Board of Education* integrating the schools can be viewed from an individual perspective and from the eyes of the interpreter. In a country of many immigrants, diversity, values, beliefs, and norms of the dominant culture exist that influence the ability to successfully coexist in not only schools but also many other public environments. One of the most impactful concepts about the desegregation of schools has more to do with the long-term effects of race and relationships between members of society that have different experiences based upon the dominant and minority culture. I compounded and combined the brain development of our students to include trauma, along with the need for social and emotional development with the impact of race, diversity, and the socioeconomic class of students, to seek common themes for students' at-risk behaviors in the classrooms.

To have a better understanding of the achievement gaps and how students in the minority subgroups are often marginalized, educators must have the uncomfortable

conversations between school staff, administrators, and the community members who have a vested interest in the overall success of the students within the school environment. In terms of race and socioeconomic status (SES), many minority students are at a deficit for school funding since some school funding is directly based on property taxes, which are typically lower in many minority school communities. Therefore, many minority students do not receive the necessary resources to compete with students from more affluent cultures.

According to the data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 70% of Black and 71% of Hispanic fourth graders are eligible for the free or reduced lunch program (a common indicator of a family's impoverished income status), while only 23% of White students are eligible (as cited in Walsh, 2011). This particular phenomenon may impact some students; however, the more resilient students in the poorer neighborhoods persevere in spite of the deficits in which they face. The students that make it out of the dire situations of poverty and crime ridden neighborhoods have usually been influenced by a positive and or passionate adult that was determined to make a difference in their lives. When a negative school culture located in the poorest neighborhood has caring adults and leadership, the odds become greater that the students experiencing difficulty in their home environments succeeds.

Observing schools with leaders who have a true passion about equity represents an incredible experience. These amazing and dynamic schools exude a great sense of community and enthusiasm. In these schools, continuous learning by all and high expectations for everyone—including the teachers—are everyday experiences (Singleton & Linton, 2006). Leadership that is willing to accept past issues of race and equity as an

opportunity for growth and development within diverse school environments have the greatest chance to support students from all cultures and backgrounds. Educators must have the courage to accept the past as a guide to the future. Although the past has created tension and discomfort amongst the dominant culture and the lower socioeconomic class, the future calls for there to be reconciliation and relational repair. In observing many of the natural interactions of students from multiple backgrounds and cultures with teachers from a higher percentage of the dominant culture, clear differences become evident in the expectations for academics and the process to be taken within the school environment. Indeed, the research of critical scholars in a number of academic fields consistently demonstrate how racial minorities are marginalized via racial or racist ideologies, imbued with notions of racial superiority and inferiority, which are fundamentally woven into the social, political, economic, and moral fibers of the nation. Further, critical scholars in the education field assert that in maintaining and transmitting those ideologies, perhaps no other arena has had a more profound and lasting impact than American public schools (Jay, 2009).

Since schools are the central most common environment that influences the prosocial approach to human interaction of all cultures, it will be critical to utilize all resources within the educational setting to address race and social class status. To fully address the needs of all students, society must come to terms with the illusion that race does not and has not had a profound impact on U.S. education. To exercise the passion, practice, and persistence necessary to address racial achievement gaps, all members of the school community need to be able to talk about race in a safe and honest way. Too many school environments have students and educators who have feelings of discomfort

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and mistrust because of a history of race issues that were in existence before they were born and created by individuals and groups of cultures opposed to integrations and celebrating the differences in another group's norms and belief system. The resistance to reverse the human interactions and relationships between the dominant and minority culture is driven by fear—the same feelings that influence the interactions within a classroom full of students that have been traumatized in some form within the home or surrounding community, to include the school. This compounded fear becomes very relevant to the development of the brain and the current state of many students within the survival and emotional stage of brain development during the elementary and adolescent school age years.

To exercise the passion, practice, and persistence necessary to address racial achievement gaps, all school community members need to talk about race in a safe and honest way. Having courageous conversations entail a strategy for school systems to close the racial achievement gap (Singleton & Linton, 2006). The research and implementation of having *Courageous Conversations About Race*, designed by Glenn E. Singleton and Curtis Linton (2006), provides an analytical process for addressing the racial achievement gaps between the dominant culture and the minority group by having dialogue amongst members of the school community; conversations that are uncomfortable but necessary. The process allows participants the chance to learn how race has influenced education and the history of social interactions critical to the coexistence of multicultures within the public school environment.

The idea of having courageous conversations represents a true beginning to closing the achievement gap between the dominant culture and the minority group.

Schools have the responsibility to address the differences that make schools safe for all members of the academic community. The current school system has been broken for many years and the changes regarding desegregation and the history of race relations in schools and the larger school community have been dysfunctional for the most part. When speaking of the achievement gaps and the potential to close these gaps, we must create a safe and trusting school culture for all parties, including students, staff, parents, and the wider school community. These conversations will be very uncomfortable but also enlightening for the most traditional school personnel. Individuals of a diverse race or ethnic background sharing any environment have the potential to be in disagreement about the current status of a program. Institution may benefit from having informal but courageous conversations that may bring social economic class and cultures together.

The elements of race, relationships, and trust amongst staff within an educational organization is also critical to closing the achievement gaps between socioeconomic classes. The overall impact of the majority and dominant culture has greatly damaged the moral fiber of a community of learners in public school buildings across the nation. This phenomenon also impacts the confidence and effectiveness of minorities in the education field. The safety and security of minority staff members in the academic settings have been influenced by the perceptions and the power of the dominant culture. As Michelle Jay (2009) stated, African American educators' experience with race and racism in schools creates major concerns, causing educators and students of the minority culture to continuously perceive the minority or non-White culture as less than or inferior. Perhaps most problematic is the way in which such assumptions often free Whites from any personal obligation to deal with matters of race (or those matters perceived to involve

race) that transpire in schools. Ultimately, the ways Whites tend to act on these assumptions, with little to no deliberation, has profound implications for the educators of color upon who the assumptions are subjected (Jay, 2009, p. 679).

Students in American schools are very perceptive and in great need of safety from an emotional and survival state. The very minimal interactions with and view of the adults in charge of the educational setting has a great impact on student's self-perception and the possibilities for acquiring the highest level of content knowledge provided within schools. This reality and experience in schools is also reinforced in many other public organizations that are often ignored. The problem resides in the men and women at the doors or those in the boardrooms, management offices, school districts, and other decision-making locations that are blocking the way, following customers in their stores, or denying places and classes entrance and access to men and women based solely on their *blackness* or *brownness*. As a result, the privilege resides in the fact that White people can move about, experience life and apply for college, loans, and jobs, without being denied entrance or freedom based on their skin color—and never for a moment do they even think about it (Landsmen, 2006).

The work needed to address the differences amongst cultures within any organization begins with having the courage to experience a discomfort that allows voices from all cultures to influence the progression of education and opportunity for all children. When viewing the alternative school setting as a perception, an opportunity exists for multicultural existence and interactions that may spearhead the ability to rebuild and repair relationships and cultural differences of the past.

The next section addresses the definition of alternative education and the positive possibilities to capture the needs of students struggling in the traditional settings, whether in school or society as a whole.

Alternative Education

As an administrator and former teacher in the alternative setting, there have been many conversations about the outcomes and results of a marginalized education for students that may need an academic setting different from the traditional school. The benefits of providing an opportunity for students struggling in the traditional school setting may outweigh the perceived deficits of students referred to the alternative setting to receive more attention academically while providing support socially and emotionally. Alternative education has taken many forms through the years.

The term alternative education has been used to describe charter schools designed to provide greater student-teacher interaction, schools designed for students with special needs, and programs designed to discipline students for misconduct or educational failure (Geronimo, 2011). Alternative schools in the mid-1970s were built to offer places where students would have greater freedom and opportunities for success than in traditional schools. They subscribe to the ideas of progressive education and were founded based upon the premises that one unified curriculum is not sufficient for all—there is no best way for all people to learn. Different students learn in different ways thus, need various kinds of learning environments (in Barr, 1973 and Conley, 2002, as cited in Kim, 2011).

To influence the ever-widening achievement gaps in U.S. school populations, educators must continue researching and investigating current trends that address the need for continuing alternative school programs in the academic environment. The first

step in developing effective alternative school programs involves changing the perception of this setting from a less than favorable or negative environment to an innovative and positive culture that can be very beneficial systemically for students who thrive in smaller environments. The *No Child Left Behind Act* mandate has value in creating a high value for academic success within the world of academics. The efforts to address the social and emotional needs of at-risk students may also contribute to the mission of attaining a high level in academics if students and their well-being are addressed. As educators continue striving for excellence in the traditional school setting, the question becomes *why* some students have success while others struggle and become disruptive, to the degree of consistent discipline referrals and removal from the traditional setting. The decision to place a child in alternative school comes with the gravity of understanding that this determination may have a profound effect on the student in question. Placement of a child in an alternative school setting can be an indicator that something in the systemic school relationship is not working (O'Brien & Curry, 2009).

As alternative school programs continue, educators must take in-depth looks at why many students have behavior issues and why the cookie-cutter traditional setting may not be the ideal setting for all students. The perception of the alternative school being negative and less than favorable for successful academic outcomes must be addressed. According to the first national study about public alternative schools and programs conducted by NCES (2002), 10,900 public alternative schools and programs served approximately 612,900 at-risk students in the nation during the 2000–2001 school year (as cited in Kim, 2011. The NCES reported that alternative schools are located mostly in urban districts; districts with high minority students and high-poverty

concentrations. Therefore, students in alternative schools disproportionately represent the poor, represent ethnic minorities, represent individuals who have limited English proficiency, or represent individuals from lower or working-class family backgrounds. This renders alternative schools subject to social, political, and educational inequalities (Kim, 2011). It is clear that students referred to alternative schools have a high need for social and emotional development within a program that provides care for students struggling in the survival stage of the brain development process. Students referred to alternative programs often struggle socially, emotionally, and academically and need trusting adults willing to meet students where they currently are academically while also providing care and concern for students beyond academics.

The urgency to address the needs of a growing population of at-risk students has become necessary to the general population and immediate urban communities that provide alternative school programs. The vast majority of educators, students, parents, and community members naturally believe that alternative school programs are filled with students who are criminal, gang affiliated, drug users, or unfit for the traditional school setting. The educator's perception is driven by his or her natural belief that all students can learn, and the thought process of how educators design traditional public schools and academic requirements for successful completion toward graduation. One of the most impactful concepts regarding educators and their motivation in the school settings involves trust and genuine relationship-building. The social and emotional development of students begins with the passion of the leadership to do what is right for all students, regardless of the student's individual needs.

Great leaders move people. They can ignite one's passion and inspire the best. When explaining why great leaders are so effective, many will state the leader's strategy, vision, or powerful ideas as reasons. The reality can be much more primal: Great leadership works through the emotions (Goleman, Boyatkis, & McKee, 2004). The idea of caring and being passionate about students in both traditional and alternative school settings begins with the leadership in either setting. This passion and concern may resonate in both settings; however, the task can be more difficult in the larger setting due to the larger setting's amount of students being served.

The alternative school setting may provide a better opportunity to meet the needs of those students who are missed or slide through the cracks in a larger school setting. This makes the alternative school setting more than a dumping ground for students labeled at risk of dropping out of school. The emotional and passionate leadership in the alternative setting may even be an example and possible sample group of what students need in the traditional setting. No matter what leaders set out to do—whether it involves creating strategy or mobilizing teams to action—their success depends on how they do it. Even if they get everything else just right, if leaders fail in the primal task of driving emotions in the right direction, nothing they do will work as well as it could or should (Goleman et al., 2004). This idea speaks to the trust and safety within the academic setting that needs balancing with the social and emotional development of students.

Students referred to alternative programs have often struggled within the traditional setting that has yet to address the social and emotional needs of these students due to larger classrooms and less relationship building between school staff and students. Teachers are employed to teach subject matter in a specific field of pedagogy of choice

structured by school district and school board administration. Concerning the issues of social emotional learning and development, the traditional setting has the challenge of teachers and union contracts that may not require teachers to adhere to all students' needs. In many instances, school counselors and social workers are overextended with the social and emotional needs of students who are not academically successful because of their social and emotional deficits and underdevelopment due to social status, poverty, and (for many) some form of trauma or crisis in the household.

The perception of the alternative school setting may be an answer to the needs and social and emotional development of students at-risk of dropping out of school. The stigma remains regarding alternative placement being a dumping ground for students with behavioral problems and in need of a smaller setting. When a young person commits an act that hurts others, the victims and many adults see that child as bad or broken. Currently, society seems to favor punishment and shaming as approaches to combating misbehavior. More likely than not, young people treated punitively will live out these prophecies. Young people do not need adults to inform them of their badness or brokenness; all too often, they already feel bad and broken as a result of low self-confidence. A system that holds youth accountable for harmful behaviors, seeks solutions, and strengthens troubled youth is needed (Tacker & Hoover, 2011).

Changing the perception may be a plus in developing alternative programs created to implement and support more balance for both academics and the social and emotional needs for students labeled at risk. As Brown and Beckett (2007, as cited in Kim, 2011) posit, research on alternative schools has the potential to transform society's understanding of students on the brink of educational failure and therefore, to contribute

to helping educators provide equal and equitable education for disenfranchised students. The opportunity exists for the novice teacher to learn from the alternative education experience as this individual may not truly understand the true essence of educating students holistically. The opportunity also exists to build a foundation of teachers and school staff within the smaller setting that may potentially model what the traditional school environment lacks in terms of collaboration. Finally, alternative school settings, if designed properly, may be able to reach students labeled at risk through trained teachers and social workers with professional development that supports the balance of social and emotional development with academics.

Changing the perception of alternative programs represents the first step to providing every student with the opportunity to a fair and equitable education. There have been many contradictions between rhetoric and reality throughout U.S. history regarding human rights. The American creed calls for all men (individuals) to be treated equally and given the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. One of the most obvious examples of many Americans' indifference to the American creed concerns public education (McCray & Beachum, 2010). The reality of the current state of education and its inequities lay in the multiculturalism concept and the diversity within the academic setting. As the nation becomes more racially diverse, students need a form of education where the concepts of caring, fairness, and equity are embedded into the schooling process (in Banks, 1995, as cited in McCray & Beachum, 2010). With the alarmingly large class sizes and multicultural needs within the traditional academic setting, educators may need to view alternative school programs as an opportunity to enhance the current public school environment. When seen as an opportunity instead of a dumping ground for

marginalized students and staff, educators may be able to better support underserved students and poverty-influenced communities.

The novice teacher who enters the alternative school environment may take advantage of the opportunity to experience some of the more challenging students in a smaller and more manageable setting. Relationship building and trust are critical for many students in the academic setting. Before at-risk students can truly appreciate the learning process in academics, they must have the capacity to build trusting relationships with the adults who deliver instruction. Every young person has a deep need to belong. Children with the greatest unmet needs for relationships are often those most alienated from adults and peers. School and youth work programs must make a concerted effort to nourish inviting relationships in a culture of belonging (Brendtro et al., 2002).

With the experience and challenge that comes with developing curriculum and providing structure in an academic setting through proper classroom management, a teacher in the alternative setting will have the ability to better serve students within the alternative school setting. Students labeled at risk have had some experience within the traditional setting of which they have a clear disconnect. This explains why they are or were referred for alternative placement. More than likely, what has not been working for these students entails many small issues that when put together, have eroded the integrity of the relationships. When the school, family, and student find themselves in an alternative school setting, an underlying knowledge exists that other roads for engaging the system to aid in the student's school success has been exhausted and opportunities to salvage the systemic school relationship will be few (O'Brien & Curry, 2009, p. 9).

Leadership, teachers, and school staff who are driven by genuine care and concern can thrive in the alternative school setting.

Embracing positive opportunities must be shared by all participants within the alternative school setting for it to effectively thrive for students at risk of dropping out of school. Alternative school staff must first adopt the spirit of welcoming students struggling in the traditional setting because of unaddressed deficits and weaknesses in the household or traditional school setting. This requires the alternative school staff reaching out to the students' families. This also requires the students' families feeling a sense of belonging to the school community. This becomes a huge issue when speaking of multicultural education and disconnection between the dominant and minority cultures. How do schools reach out to families like these? Perhaps they translate a flyer for a family meeting into another language? Possibly the school hosts an international dinner night? All too often, very little personal outreach exists that treats the families as individuals and connects them to school in a meaningful way (Kugler, 2011).

The positive influence that may be more accessible in an alternative school program consists of the ability for teachers to reach families without it being a huge burden due to numbers. The smaller setting will allow staff to assist school counselors and social workers with family issues that may influence student behavior, as well as allow family needs to be addressed in a safe and trusted manner within the smaller alternative setting. Many parents that may have had little to no real success within school as students themselves need to be partners with school staff members who support current student needs. Research suggests that successful programs involve parents as partners with professionals. But unequal partnerships are seldom effective; this means

that staff must approach parents with some goal other than controlling them or treating them as patients in need of treatment (Brendtro et al., 2002).

When educators meet with parents and have conversations offering them a voice, educators will be better able to serve students referred to the alternative setting. Many times, parents are called into the school to discuss behavior that may reflect some of the deficits the family may be experiencing in the home. Having the opportunity to share stories with other adults in a small and safe environment, such as an alternative school, may also spearhead change for students struggling in the traditional setting. Still, churches, schools, settlement houses, and other agencies have a lot to offer, but will need to be more proactive in reaching out to parents—including fathers. Young parents have lost touch with these institutions and are often shy about reaching out on their own (Cosby & Poussaint, 2007).

The alternative setting has the potential to provide parents struggling with their at-risk student a platform to build community and support from other families that may struggle with their own children. Raising children remains a tough job. It not only takes a village but it takes a village that actually cares. That means a lot of hands-on work from us all (Cosby & Poussaint, 2007).

With caring adults onboard, the alternative school setting has the potential to provide what may be more difficult to implement within the larger traditional school setting—especially when observing students at risk of dropping out of school due to traumatic life experiences within their household or community. However, because children who are most vulnerable to trauma are the least likely to have a healthy, supportive family and community, it becomes exceedingly difficult to provide effective

help with the current systems in place. Because healthy communities themselves often prevent interpersonal traumatic events (such as domestic and other violent crimes) from occurring in the first place, the breakdown of social connections that are common in a highly mobile society increases everyone's vulnerability (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006).

Supporting the at-risk student and the families of these students can be a very positive experience within the alternative school setting. The concept of providing a safe and trusting environment can lead to building relationships with the family of students labeled at risk in the traditional school setting. The family members of the students referred to alternative placement may be valuable partners who can provide support and knowledge of the crisis or trauma that may have driven the at-risk student to need more support academically, socially, and emotionally. This represents an important component of changing the perception of the alternative school setting. When a positive perception is evident of any organization or institution driven by passion and emotion, it presents a greater opportunity to have successful outcomes for all active participants.

Students entering the alternative setting are usually just as capable of having school successes as students who quietly and passively earn average grades within the traditional setting. The biggest difference for the student labeled at risk involves his or her ability to cope with both academics and social and emotional development within an institution that does not provide a balance in supporting both areas. In addition, addressing the social and emotional needs in a larger environment involves more difficulty due to the overwhelming number of students within the larger traditional school setting. The alternative setting has the capacity to provide balance in the academics and social and emotional development of students that have greater needs due to the students'

inabilities to self-monitor and regulate their personal needs. This reality also escalates when students have had poor relationships with adults in the home and in the school community.

One of the most important observations and experiences that I have had as a teacher and director of an alternative school program encompasses the ability to make connections with students and build relationships that support academics that are accomplished successfully with social and emotional development. Students that have trusting relationships with adults have a greater opportunity of succeeding with academics.

Relationship Building and Trust

To bring about change in today's schools, school leaders need to make connections with many entities in- and outside of the schoolhouse. The bridges that make these connections will need to be built through relationships because success in school organizations can only become a reality when relationships are built between and among stakeholders. Whereas individuals standing alone might seem capable of making a contribution to achievement, it is only when individuals establish productive relationships with other individuals that the gap between current school conditions and state and national standards can be eliminated (Green & Cypress, 2009). When interpreting the effects of relationships and trust within the school system, educators have often failed to discuss the importance of the school community and the ability to work collaboratively as a group of stakeholders in relation to its influence on student outcomes and achievement. Students in schools usually behave and respond to a school culture according to the

expectations delivered and modeled by the adult stakeholders within the school community.

Many students arrive in the school building with many deficits as a result of the obstacles that they may face or have faced on a personal level. However, in the case of many students who need social and emotional support, one of the most crucial responsibilities of the school setting involves providing a safe and trusted environment where at least one adult staff member can connect with students on a personal level. Many students that have unmet needs seek the possibility and potential to be supported from adults in a place that feels safe and trustworthy. Schools seem to be the logical place for most students, but the school culture must model the trust and safety that the student needs. The interactions between the adults and stakeholders within the school environment greatly influence whether or not students will thrive socially and emotionally in school settings tasked with the responsibility of educating children.

As Christie and Lingard (2001) report, tensions can occur between the principal, teachers, and the school community if educational expectations are not met (as cited in Lester, 2011). Additionally, present findings indicate that the principal and teacher should work alongside the community to meet the educational needs of the community and offer the best possible educational experience to the student. The findings appeared to indicate that through the process of working together for improved educational outcomes, mutual trust and respect develop between the principal, teachers, and community members (Lester, 2011).

Large public school settings overpopulated with students of diverse backgrounds have a difficult task of providing the trusted and safe modeling of adult relationships. In

many of the large school settings, students that may otherwise seek the support of caring adults find it difficult to have their needs met in an environment that is under pressure to close achievement gaps in efforts of providing a quality education for all students. The relationship that connects school based leaders with central office administrators will be of critical importance. Through these relationships, school leaders position themselves to obtain the necessary approvals, support, and resources to move the school or the school district forward (Green & Cypress, 2009).

It is often overlooked, but the school culture and the relationships that the student develops with the school staff is predicated on the relationships and trust established by school leadership. In many cases, students behave in a way based on how they feel and what they observe, which may not be the case for all students. However, student behavior and the desire to have needs met within the school setting will often drive behavior. The first overarching goal entails adults working at being emotionally intelligent. Peter Salovey (in Goleman, 1995, as cited in Van Bockern & McDonald, 2012) suggested that emotionally intelligent people are aware of and able to manage their own as well as others' emotions. Furthermore, they can self-motivate and contribute to healthy relationships (Van Bockern & McDonald, 2012). Schools that model healthy relationships and self-awareness as individuals have the greatest opportunity to support the students with unmet social and emotional needs.

The concept of relationship building and providing a safe and trusted system of support remains critical in any school setting, but becomes even more important in the alternative school setting. Many students in alternative settings have been isolated from the mainstream population for good reasons; but all things considered, for reasons of

being disconnected from the expectations of the traditional school setting. Many of the students also feel disconnected from the traditional school setting that should instead be engaging and embracing so as to nurture the students and their families' needs. Teacher education programs have the unique challenge of training students interested in becoming teachers (preservice teachers) to build partnerships with all families including those from diverse structures. Many who teach preservice teachers struggle with ways of going beyond the textbook with the goal of providing quality, memorable learning experiences for their students (Norris, 2010). Unfortunately, the large numbers of students in the public school setting have an overwhelmingly high number of students and families with needs that far outweigh the school staff's ability to address. The Chicago researchers (Brendtro & Mitchell, 2011) found that a single factor—trust—clearly separated failing from successful schools. They studied *teacher-parent* trust, *teacher-principal* trust, and *teacher-teacher* trust. However, their study was silent both on *teacher-student* trust and *student-student* trust. The alternative school's design specifically addresses the educator's needs in a smaller setting that may be more capable of building trusting relationships to support the development of a student and his or her social and emotional needs. The smaller setting has the opportunity to meet students where they are academically but more importantly, allow a smaller staff and student population to bond and cultivate an environment similar to a family where everyone feels a sense of belonging. What educators want to achieve in working with young people involves finding and strengthening positive and healthy elements, no matter how deeply they hide. Educators enthusiastically believe in the existence of those elements even in the seemingly worst of our adolescents (Brendtro & Du Toit, 2005).

There exists a tremendous need to understand that the behavior of many of the students referred to alternative placement gets driven by emotions that the student cannot control. By pulling back their layers of pain and hurt, and building relationships, educators can begin influencing students struggling in school. Children are caught in a tension between the desire for mastery and the fear of failure. Experience teaches a person to expect success or failure in particular situations. Some exert considerable effort, even on boring or difficult tasks, to gain the pleasure and pride of accomplishments. But for others, the fear of failure becomes stronger than the motivation to achieve (Brendtro et al., 2002). Many students that have had traumatic experiences or experienced poor relationships with adults need a culture of trust that is shared amongst all active members of the school community. Most of the students in the adolescence stage carry the hurt and pain of their experiences alone and have minimal coping skills to maintain themselves within a social setting. While many of the students in mainstream settings with the most need for support are resilient and have the ability to maintain good behavior, others have their behaviors mistaken as purposeful and intended. Adults who build resiliency know the power of social connection. When educators connect with a child, they have the power to change that child's life (Brokenleg, 2012).

As a member of the alternative school experience for the last 8 years, it has often been challenging working with students that have an apathetic attitude toward school work and who struggle with poor choices and behavior. However, there has always been a desire to know (and after finding this work extremely interesting, there has been a growing need to be familiar with) why students behave the way they do. After exploring student behavior and realizing that there was more to a student and his or her behavior

than what the educators could actually observe, it became apparent that there was even more to explore regarding a student's behavior and motivation in the academic setting.

The efforts necessary to acquire caring and trusting relationships with students labeled at risk will be difficult for a number of reasons. For starters, the awareness and motivation of many teachers does not always center on developing relationships with students. For trusting relationships to form and develop, a level of genuine care for the student will be necessary, not only with the student but also the student's family members. Changing school demographics present challenges to teachers and administrators. In addition to working to improve grades, schools are faced with the challenge of building relationships with families to ensure that all the needs of students are met (Norris, 2010).

When teachers enter the education field, rarely is there a warning of how students will respond to relational elements of a school or classroom culture. On a small scale, many students struggling in the traditional classroom do so because of poor relationships they have experienced outside of the school setting. Students that have poor relationships with adults outside the school bring the past experiences with adults into the classroom setting. A control-oriented methodology is often unsuccessful in the classroom because it focuses on obedience rather than change. The ultimate goal involves compliance with a predetermined external standard imposed by authority. The ultimate goal of a relationship driven methodology involves change. Obedience, while preferable to misbehavior, offers limited value in the long term because it is externally governed. If the external authority is not present, oftentimes the desired behavior is no longer present either. The only way to ensure a desired behavior transfers beyond the controlled classroom environment

involves if change has genuinely occurred within the individual (Marlowe, 2011). The efforts to teach students to genuinely make better choices and to change their behavior takes the skills and awareness of the adults committed to teaching more than just subject matter and academics. These relationships often take a tremendous amount of patience and self-awareness on the part of the adult before the dynamics of the student enters the equation. The teacher-student relationship entails a series of interactions among human beings characterized by feelings, subjective perceptions, and a whole host of factors. In short, it involves a complex human process that is difficult to grasp let alone do effectively. Furthermore, these relationships are full of soft truths that can be difficult to measure (Hellison, 2003).

When attempting to model trusting relationships to students who experienced poor relationships with adults, school staff must present a culture of supportive and collaborative adult relationships. Students in the adolescent stages who experienced poor adult relationships revert to the survival brain and immediately seek trust and safety within a school culture or classroom. This can be especially true for students referred to alternative placement. However, to teach preadolescent students who are academically and behaviorally challenged, teachers must first reach them. Often, this requires stepping out of one's comfort zone and actually getting to know students, getting to know what they deal with outside the schoolhouse walls, and finding out what is important to them and what motivates them intrinsically (Green & Cypress, 2009). When adults are isolated and not viewed as someone that works well with others, the student may view the classroom as not a place of community. Students naturally seek social acceptance. Many individuals struggling with social development seek opportunities for positive social

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interactions. In a relationship-driven methodology, functional behavior is taught actively via the teacher-child relationship and provides the child with learning the more appropriate behaviors that they are expected to learn. Some things taught through teacher modeling include fairness, honesty, rightness, dependability, reasonableness, and caring (Marlowe, 2011). This culture of trust and safety must be shared by all stakeholders within the school community. School administration has the responsibility of developing and modeling it for students to follow.

Collaborative leadership represents learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collaboratively. It involves opportunities that bring to the surface and mediate perceptions, values, beliefs, information, and assumptions through continuing conversations; to inquire about and generate ideas together; and to reflect upon and make sense of work in light of shared beliefs and new knowledge (Lester, 2011). When adults share and collaborate in the school setting, it cultivates a culture of safety and trust and students with unmet social and emotional needs have the opportunity to participate in a community that is open to learning and growing together.

When educators in an educational environment willingly engage in meaningful conversations while seeking opportunities to learn and grow, even when different perceptions and views are evident despite the titles that separate the elite and authoritative from employees, families, and community members, then opportunities to close the achievement gaps and provide quality education for all students will exist. Human conversation represents the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for personal, community, and organizational change. Schools who engage in open and honest dialogue about achievement disparities can effectively address the

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obstacles preventing success for all students. According to Singleton and Linton (2006), this dialogue is an educational necessity. With all of the elements involved in educating students, both in the traditional and alternative settings, educators must begin communicating and addressing the growing achievement gaps by building relationships and learning to engage with students and families from diverse cultures.

One of the most significant elements of the 21st century that impacts the ability to have students and school staff engaged collaboratively within the educational setting involves technology use. Technology use today greatly influences the academic setting for students born into a computer and media driven society that basically has decreased the need for face-to-face interactions with others. Upon watching typical teens or preteens at home, you will find constant switching between their laptops, cell phones, tablets, MP3 players, and video game consoles with apparent ease. In school, educators require students to "unitask" by listening to the teacher, completing worksheets, writing with a pen and paper, or engaging in other solitary activities (Rosen, 2011, p. 14). In a world of cellular phones, text messages, emails, and blogging, it has become increasingly difficult for the teacher to have genuine relationships with the student in the classroom. The traditional way of teaching and learning has been transformed, becoming more indirect and less personal than ever before. How does this affect students needing extra help or one-on-one time? Technology can be great for students and teachers engaged in and comfortable with using the available tools in the academic setting. Technology is all about engagement. Watching the intense looks on children's and teens' faces as they play video games, text, Skype, Facebook, watch YouTube, and juggle websites simultaneously clearly shows this engagement (Rosen, 2011, p. 14).

Students struggling with an academic subject or with social and emotional needs can be assisted by the teacher who has the capacity and knowledge to utilize technology within the classroom. In addition, struggling students can be assisted by teachers who are passionate enough to assist them when they need support. But more importantly, adult stakeholders within the educational setting have the task of engaging in safe and trusting relationships that influence the view and perceptions of the direction required for success in academics for all students. While a need exists of having school staff capable of using technology, it also limits the amount of actual face time that influences genuine interactions and the opportunities to build positive relationships that foster safety and support for students who may struggle academically, socially, and emotionally.

Technology is important and has its place in education. However, technology use lessens the opportunity to build trusting, genuine, and safe relationships for adults and students who feel isolated or disconnected from human interactions. In some cases, economic hardships push parents to spend more time working and crunching schedules as they cope with the necessities of life. This requires time taken away from family life and family time. Moreover, society as a whole has increased its technological gadget usage. Computer time has increased and the smart phone has dramatically influenced the concentration and energy spent on technology (Brokenleg, 2012).

The efforts required for building safe and trusting relationships in the traditional school setting requires a tremendously gifted and talented cohort of school staff members. The time and patience required to develop staff presents a huge task for school leaders and administration. While the task may seem difficult, it is required in order to deliver proper instructions and curriculum supporting the success of all students,

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regardless of their background and culture. Changing the perception of the alternative school as a dumping ground with the view of this school setting being strength based, which models safety and trust through positive relationship building between staff, parents, students, and the school community, will greatly influence the growing deficits effecting student success.

<div align="center">**Restorative Justice**</div>

One of the greatest possibilities for students referred to alternative placement involves the opportunity for them to learn about themselves and the experiences that may have led them to a smaller environment. A strong and positive correlation exists between students labeled at-risk of dropping out of school and the penal system. Children and adolescents who are disconnected from adults and experienced trauma are more susceptible to a system in schools and prisons that often times, fails to teach the individual an alternative to the behavior that causes the negative results. The punishments and consequences usually rendered for behavior deemed negative provides learning opportunities for many. The instigator, witnesses, and the victims can all be privy to learning when a violation to an individual or community happens. Restorative justice fits perfectly with the rehabilitative ideal because it concentrates on the harms of the crime rather than the broken rules and seeks reparation and balance by involving victims and offenders in the process of justice. Victims are involved in negotiating balance and offenders are encouraged to understand, accept, and carry out their obligations. They get to learn their lesson (Halstead, 1999).

When students behave poorly and make mistakes, educators often forget that the only way to assist students in becoming better decision makers is through practice. When

students make mistakes, it will be important to have considerate and respectful conversations to the individual and the community. Based upon the perception and diversity within any organization or institution, the concept of providing structure in a school presents a difficult requirement for school staff members. The ability of stakeholders to share in a trusted and safe relationship and have a willingness to courageously engage in dialogue regarding student expectations and behavior describes a great place to begin. Managing student behavior can be a complex task. A delicate balance exists between meeting the needs of the group by maintaining social order and meeting the unique needs of each student. Few choices work for all teachers and all students. Educators believe that the best decisions for managing student behaviors are based on a value system that maintains the dignity of each student in all situations. Behaving *responsibly* is more valued than behaving *obediently*. Encouraging responsible behavior requires valuing what students think, seeking their input, and teaching them how to make good decisions (Curwin, Mendler, & Mendler, 2008).

When thinking of the responsibilities of students who have been traumatized from a bad experience or who are living through a difficult circumstance at home or in their community, classroom teaching becomes something more sophisticated than the norm. Teaching requires knowledge of the subject matter and pedagogy through a curriculum often driven by school administration. What has now become the priority in most classroom settings involves the responsibilities that students have personally and the social contributions and commitments needed for the community. When dealing with students who have underdeveloped needs in social and emotional areas, classroom

teachers struggle with classroom management and the stressor of meeting the standards and requirements driven by state and federal governments.

While the social and emotional standards driven by state officials are still very new to many school districts across the United States, they are becoming more popular and practiced in many smaller alternative placement programs designated as providing services to students at risk of dropping out or of being expelled from school. Many mainstream school district administrators have adopted frameworks, such as Response to Intervention (RtI), in the special education areas. However, frameworks are being piloted in the smaller school setting to address student behavior and the social and emotional needs that require student responsibility. In this section, a couple of the implemented and practiced frameworks that I have experienced as a teacher and administrator of at-risk students in an alternative school setting are described.

Many students struggling in the traditional setting need opportunities to re-establish a positive image. When students start a path and pattern of poor behavior choices normally due to experiences that they may not have control over, educators must seek opportunities to restore these students and their image. To address students in need of restorative justice, educators should consider the *Circle of Courage* framework, developed by Native Americans. These traditional Native American child-rearing philosophies provide a powerful alternative in education and youth development. These approaches challenge both the European cultural heritage and child pedagogy and the narrow perspectives of many current psychological theories. Refined over 15,000 years of civilization and preserved in oral traditions, this knowledge is little known outside the 200 tribal languages that cradles the Native Indian cultures of North America (Brendtro

et al., 2002). The idea behind Circle of Courage involves four domains pertaining to the fact that every student has the opportunity to thrive. The spirit of *Belonging*, the *Mastery* of knowledge and experiences, the ability to think and act of *Independence*, and the desire to give to others through *Generosity*, represent qualities that each individual possesses. The domains encompass characteristics either cultivated within each of us or underdeveloped and compressed within each of us. The core of youth development needs are met whenever a liminal experience is run well; it creates belonging, allows participants to master skills, gives opportunities for participants to exercise independent choices, and grants the fulfilling experience of acting generously (Larson & Martin, 2012).

In most cases, students experiencing trauma in their life and behaving poorly in the school setting need caring adults to acknowledge their strengths. When a student enters a school building welcomed by a caring adult, he or she has the immediate opportunity to belong. The student may behave either positively or negatively but educators must remember that the student seeks to belong to a safe place. According to Brendtro and Du Toit (2005), an array of evidence showed that humans possess a fundamental need to belong, which is fulfilled by frequent positive interactions with at least a few persons who share mutual concerns. Belonging creates positive emotions, particularly pride. Rejection produces shame, among the most painful social emotion humans can experience (Brendtro & Du Toit, 2005). Students also show up in school for peer interaction and the bonds that students have with one another, which drive collaboration and trusting bonds within the learning environment. Students naturally seek to learn in the school setting. Although many students struggle with behavior and may

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have limited strengths socially and emotionally, most have an innate desire to make sense of the world and seek to explore it.

The human brain creates order out of chaos and solves problems necessary for social and personal survival. The talents of young persons can only crystallize with the support of adult mentors and more skillful peers (Brendtro & Du Toit, 2005). Teachers have the daunting task of meeting students where they are and providing educational activities that interest and challenge them. The brain operates best with tasks that challenge but are not boring or overwhelming; this is referred to as JMD: Just Manageable Difficulty. By mastering new skills, children are better equipped to face future challenges (Brendtro & Du Toit, 2005).

Once students feel a sense of belonging, have the opportunity to master new skills, and feel challenged with academics that peeks their interest, they will also develop a sense of independence. This character trait must also be developed and cultivated through adult guidance and participation. Many behaviors that irritate adults represent landmarks on the road to independence. Children test their strength with loudness and physical horseplay. Teens show bravado and risk-taking and push the limits of adult control. Rule breaking becomes a practice run at independence. In the ensuing power struggles, youth seek autonomy while adults seek control. Youth need prosocial outlets for their growing need for independence (Brendtro, & Du Toit, 2005). The difficulty that arises when teens seek independence involves the misperception of adults within the home and school setting. When the student or teen seeks independence, he or she is also asking for limits from a caring adult. The interactions get really gray and confusing for both the adult and student. When the adult gets pulled into a tit-for-tat response with a

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teen, trust can be lost and control distorted. When a student seeks independence, he or she may not have the tools to ask for it properly. The behavior becomes risky and a caring adult must understand the importance of responding with balance. It may seem contradictory, but close attachments to caregivers actually foster independence. Those who learn to trust others are better able to trust themselves. Still, some youth who have not benefitted from close adult guidance can actually become very self-reliant because of having to learn to depend on themselves (Brendtro & Du Toit, 2005).

When students participate in communities that provide opportunities to help others, they also fulfill a desire that is shared in all people. The act of providing a service to someone else is critical to a student's confidence. When a school or home culture initiates service to others, it developmentally creates a sense of strength. The ability to help resides in each student, no matter his or her current situation. Kurt Hahn, founder of Outward Bound, noted that many modern youths suffer from the "misery of unimportance" and long to be used in some demanding cause (as cited in Brendtro & Du Toit, 2005, pp. 49-50). A culture consisting of an *I'll get mine* type of attitude leaves students self-absorbed and devoid of purpose. Generosity can be an antidote for narcissism. Giving to others develops higher levels of moral development and provides youth a sense of purpose. Through helping others, young people discover that they have the power to influence their world in a positive manner. Those who themselves come from troubled backgrounds are often the most responsive to others in need (Brendtro & Du Toit, 2005).

In my personal experience as an educator and school administrator, I strongly believe in the Circle of Courage framework and the opportunities to provide restorative

justice and opportunities for students that have been through a trauma and labeled at risk that may adversely affect the process of academics for these particular students. In my professional experience, I have participated with only a few colleagues that truly understand and value this framework, which has the potential to satisfy educators' desires to provide safe and equitable education for all students regardless of their culture or background. Ultimately, the idea of restorative justice allows stakeholders to grow and learn from each other and share in the academic process that may become more successful than in the past.

Another framework that I have experienced as a teacher shares some of the same values as the Circle of Courage. Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) through PE represents a practice that provides students struggling with behavior, both personally and socially, the opportunity to practice setting personal goals while learning to be a positive influence in a group setting. The themes surrounding the TPSR model encourage students to take responsibility for their personal successes and contributions to a group or community. Through these themes, students have the opportunity to restore past issues with behavior that may be due to social and emotional underdevelopment. As stated earlier, many students who experienced trauma in some form have struggled to maintain positive behavior in the mainstream school setting and have needs that may not be appropriate to address in the larger school setting. To have students self-reflect and practice preferable behavior, the alternative school setting may be safer in the sense of a smaller setting where students may take more risk in social and emotional development areas. According to Don Hellison (2003), the four goals of the TPSR model revolve around the following:

- students respecting the rights and feelings of others,

- participation and effort,

- self-direction, and

- helping others and leadership. (p. 17)

The first two goals, respect and effort, can be viewed as the beginning stage of responsibility development; both are essential to establishing a positive learning environment. The final two goals, self-direction and helping, extend the learning environment by encouraging independent work, helping others, and leadership roles, thereby freeing teachers to work with kids who need more help and at the same time, contribute to a more positive experience for all students (Hellison, 2003, p. 16).

I had the honor of working closely with Don Hellison (2003), author of *Teaching Responsibility Through Physical Activity*, during my early experience in the alternative school setting. During this mentorship, I gained an understanding of what works best for students struggling with being at risk, being underserved, and having low self-esteem. I captured the essence and power of building relationships and the shared responsibility in a class setting that can empower students. Furthermore, I learned that *physical* education was more than just watching kids participate in activities in which they were not very good. During my first few years of teaching in this setting, I experienced feelings of awkwardness in many school interactions. Even after reading parts of the book and understanding the concepts, I still struggled to get students to fully participate in my PE classes. This particular model involved:

- counseling time,

- an awareness talk at the beginning of the class,

- the actual lesson,

- a group meeting, and

- reflection time.

The TPSR goals stress the importance of counseling time. This represents a basic

acknowledgement of students in the school setting. Speaking to students upon their

arrival or finding out a student's particular interest and acknowledging this interest

occasionally allows the student to know that someone is paying attention. Before or after

class, a quick sentence or exchange can begin to communicate these things. Raths and his

associates (1996; as cited in Hellison, 2003) called this a *one-legged conference*, meaning

a quick exchange as you're walking by (p. 42). I have learned that these micro-

interactions are critical to building relationships with students. In the alternative setting,

disconnections exist between students and adults in the home and school. This makes

these micro-interactions extremely important when building relationships with students.

The next part of the TPSR model, *Awareness Talk*, involves going over the actual

responsibilities that will drive the activities during class. I would take about three to five

minutes per class period to mention the responsibilities: respecting the rights and feelings

of others, participation and effort, self-direction and helping others, and leadership. This

is called the Awareness Talk. A few quality minutes of talk are worth far more than

blabbering on and on. Long-winded teachers, a common characteristic among rookies,

often obscure their message in a torrent of words (Hellison, 2003, pp. 43-44). Sooner

than later, the student will take over this portion of the process and become responsible

for the Awareness Talk. I experienced this as a PE teacher, but I was also able to use the same format in my math courses in the same alternative school setting. Students became accustomed to the routine and knew what to expect in the classroom environment. This created a sense of trust and safety for most of my students before we began focusing on the actual learning through physical activity and the academics.

The next part involves examining the actual lesson or activity. I would usually scan the class to evaluate and assess who would be a positive leader with a strong ability to accomplish the chosen activity successfully but also (and most importantly) assist a struggling student. This was important for the trust and safety of the group. Furthermore, it allowed the opportunity for the student who was not confident in a particular sporting activity the opportunity to take a risk with the support of positive peers. To integrate teaching responsibility with teaching physical activities, during the lesson, I would use instructional strategies. This often meant changing long-standing patterns of teaching. When I began the implementation of integrating the levels into my PE lessons, the students challenged the changes and there was an initial delay in the process. Hellison (2003) stated, "Be aware that integrating the levels into the lesson will probably make your teaching more difficult at first, but if you persist, your teaching will become easier" (p. 46). This is also true for the academic setting. I incorporated the levels of responsibility in my math courses. Students who were able to work independently allowed me time to work closely with students who needed extra help. The more advanced students also had a feeling of confidence and were willing to help by tutoring peer to peer.

The next component of the TPSR consists of performing a group meeting. The group meeting provides students with the opportunity to express their views about the day's lesson, how their peers as a whole did, and perhaps, how effective the educator's instruction and leadership were (Hellison, 2003, p. 47). A teacher's confidence in showing at-risk students their vulnerable side represents a great characteristic for students seeking to make connections to caring adults. The group meeting also provides students with a voice that is not the norm in the traditional school or home setting. This can be very empowering for children, including mainstream and alternative school students.

The final and most critical component of the TPSR involves reflection time. Both the student and teacher benefit from allowing reflection time at the end of class. During the last few minutes of class, the teacher allows the students to look at and assess their responsibility level in each of the domains or just one of the domains and begin taking responsibility for their success in school. Whereas the group meeting empowers students to evaluate the program, reflection time is designed so that students can reflect on and evaluate themselves—that is, determine how well they respected others' rights and feelings, the extent of their self-motivation in class activities, their self-direction (if given the opportunity), their contribution to others and to making the class a positive experience for everyone, and whether they put some of these things into practice outside of the program (Hellison, 2003, p. 49).

In one's professional adult life, problems can arise when dealing with the values, beliefs, and norms of others in any organization. Students that come into schools from different cultures often struggle in the same areas and it shows that many need support, socially and emotionally. It has now become the responsibility of school administrators

and staff to provide services for students who make poor behavior choices. It has also become the responsibility of school administrators to educate school staff in the area of relationship building and for many, the models involved in the restorative models that will give students struggling with behavior opportunities to grow and learn from their mistakes. Many students struggle because they have not been properly educated by a caring adult who models a positive form of building relationships. The future of education greatly depends on how well adults work collaboratively with other adults and model to children a framework of sharing through trust and safe relationships that support health and well-being for everyone—no matter one's culture or background.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter explains the research study by describing the research questions, chosen methodology, study participants, interview questions and panel discussions, data collection process, data analysis, and researcher's role.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the alternative school staff's perceptions and understanding of the needs of alternative school students?

2. What are the educational and social-emotional experiences and needs of students in an alternative school?

3. What are the responsibilities of educators in an alternative school regarding establishing safety and trusting relationships?

4. What is the educational systems responsibility for building relationships and providing a safe and trusted environment conducive for equitable advancement for students, staff, and administrators?

Case Study

Finding a common definition regarding case study research is elusive. Definitions vary in their focus on defining the unit of case study (the case), the process (the case study), and the product of the investigation (the study report; Walshe, 2011). The rationale for choosing a case study for this research involves the potential of interviewing diverse stakeholders within an alternative setting that have the unique experience of participating in both the traditional and alternative school environments. An abundance

and array of cultural and background differences exists that focuses on the academics as well as the SEL component that influences school culture. This case study examines the power and influence of relationships that could influence academic outcomes. The students and staff who participated in this school setting had many stories and experiences that provided insight into how students thrive in educational systems and settings according to their specific needs. Case study is most commonly defined by choice of case rather than the choice methods or approach. The case should describe a bounded phenomenon (i.e., person, programme, service, group, policy or instance of something), where what will or will not be studied can be defined with reference to time, place, event, or activity (Walshe, 2011, p. 775).

Philosophically, both Stake (1995) and Yin (2003) based their approach to case study on a constructivist paradigm (Baxter & Jack, 2008, as cited in Butvilas & Zygmantas, 2011). Constructivist claim that truth is relative and dependent on one's perspective (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010). Constructivism is built upon the premise of a social construction of reality (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010). One advantage to this approach is a close collaboration between the researcher and the participant while enabling participants to tell their stories; consequently, participants are able to tell their views of reality, enabling the researcher to better understand the participants' actions (Baxter & Jack, 2008, as cited in Butvilas & Zygmantas, 2011). The smaller alternative setting may offer strategies through relationship building that may benefit failing schools and provide a snapshot of the bigger picture that magnifies the struggles within school systems that often struggle to connect with students due to size. Students recommended to attend alternative school settings have a voice and have experienced the traditional school

setting. It is important to hear their reasons for disconnect and determine the *why* in many

cases that deal with relationships and connections socially and emotionally in both the

traditional and alternative school setting. A case research in education, according to

Postlethwaite (2005), generally refers to two distinct research approaches (as cited in

Butvilas & Zygmantas, 2011). The first consists of an in-depth study of a particular

student, classroom, or school with the aim of producing a nuanced description of the

pervading cultural setting that affects education, and an account of interactions that take

place between students and other relevant persons, e.g., an in-depth exploration of the

patterns of students in a single class. The second approach to case study research involves

the application of quantitative research methods to nonprobability samples, which

provide results that are not necessarily designed to be generalizable to wider

populations—e.g., a survey of reading achievements of the students in a rural region of a

particular country (Butvilas & Zygmantas, 2011).

The case study was performed in the form of a qualitative research design. The

idea captured common themes through interviews that were more difficult to identify due

to the damaged relationships that presently affect diverse cultures and educators,

students, and stakeholders' abilities to coexist in most public settings. Writing about

scientific research, including qualitative research from the vantage point of the colonized

(a position that she chooses to privilege), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) stated that "the

term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism" (as cited

in Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 1). She continued, "The word itself is probably one of the

dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary . . . It is implicated in the worst

excesses of colonialism," within ways in which "knowledge about indigenous peoples

was collected, classified, and then represented back to the West" (in Smith, p. 1, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). This dirty word stirs up anger, silence, and distrust (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). This phenomenon of research and the origin of the purpose of study influenced the process of seeking the most genuine results based upon the qualitative research approach.

Case studies in education are more likely to be qualitative than quantitative. A reason for this is because the outcome is expected to foster change in policies, pedagogical practice, and research. Noted by Merriam (1998; as cited in Butvilas and Zygmantas, 2011):

> A case study is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice, and future research. (p. 19)

The uniqueness of the alternative school setting used in this study was the opportunity to hear the stories and opinions of individuals who have not had success in the traditional school setting. Even more interesting was the concept of studying these individuals through research that has already been described as untrustworthy. In many cases of research in public schools, diversity and cultural differences play a role in the student's and school staff's success within these institutions. The approach of having uncomfortable conversations had the potential of being less informative from the perspective of the quantitative researcher. One of the advantages of this particular case study and qualitative approach was my personal experience of working both as a teacher

and as an administrator in the alternative school setting. My experience as the adult listener that had driven my desire to explore this research began with me discovering what motivated students most within the school setting—the positive student-adult relationships. The experiences of carefully listening to students within the classroom setting and the parents struggling to have relationships with school staff members and administration influenced the data that was analyzed with this research. Conversely, influences could be found in the internal relationships of school staff, which played a role in the academic environment.

Yin (1984) argued that a case study places higher demands on the researcher's intelligence, personality, and emotions than other research strategies. In the first instance, the researcher must have a certain tolerance for ambiguity because there are no prescribed steps that can be considered as the correct ones. During the study, the researcher must continuously make decisions and react to unforeseen circumstances (Guesquiere, Maes, & Vandenberghe, 2004). During the case study research, I investigated the relationships of current teachers and their collaborative and desired trust for colleagues that influenced student achievement in the past as well as the present. Although it may seem irrelevant to student achievement, many students struggling with social and emotional development seek out the stability and positive relationships between school staff members within the school environment as a setting of safety. According to Brendtro, Mitchell et al. (2009):

Relationships in the child's ecology either provide support or produce strain. The

most powerful approaches to prevention and intervention seek to mobilize the

entire system of relationships to foster positive growth. Given the power of

relationships, it is puzzling why these have not been the focal point for evaluating

education and treatment. (p. 51)

Context and Participants

Studying an alternative school setting offered an ideal and unique opportunity to

allow the voices of marginalized and underserved student and family members with

stories describe some of their concerns, which may influence the necessary change in the

traditional school setting. The case study was conducted at WIRE. The small school

located in the western suburbs of Chicago has the capacity to serve up to 40 at-risk

students from multiple districts located in West Cook County in the state of Illinois.

What's unique about this setting is its location—in a building that does not have the

external appearance of a traditional school but internally, has classrooms, computers, and

academic resources necessary for educating students. The school is designed to provide a

safe environment for students not connected to the larger school setting for various

reasons. Some students have social and emotional needs that could not be met in the

traditional setting and so most of the students are at-risk of dropping out of school or are

not having any success with behavior expectations in the larger environment.

The WIRE is purposely designed with a one teacher per 10 student ratio to

provide extra support academically and to focus on building relationships with students in

order to better assist with decision making. Furthermore, the academy provides a full

time social worker and art therapist who conduct individual and group counseling once a

week. The goal involves students developing coping skills for the personal experiences that drive decisions not conducive or safe for the traditional school setting. There are also three academic teachers who are qualified in their subject area and focused on building trusting relationships with students through advisory classes during the beginning of the school day. The overall focus of the program involves providing a safe and trusting school environment where students can thrive both academically, socially, and emotionally. This alternative school was worth doing a case study on in order to examine student's and school staff needs relative to positive relationships that influence the academic culture. The smaller setting was examined to research the opportunity to build a culture of learning that is safe and genuinely trusted by the participants.

Case study participants consisted of at-risk students from families with low incomes, their parent or guardian, and school personnel.

Students

I interviewed and had panel discussions with three students from different backgrounds and school districts that had all been referred to WIRE. The students had not had success academically and had multiple suspensions from school. I chose students referred to the alternative school for gang involvement, fighting, attendance issues, and drug use or drug activity. Due to the student's multiple suspensions and violations that influenced alternative placement, each student interviewed were behind in credit requirements and had a low grade point average. Student participants consisted of males and females from diverse backgrounds. Students were asked questions pertaining to their experiences at WIRE (see Appendix C).

Parent or Guardian

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I interviewed three parent/guardians of students currently attending WIRE. Parents and guardians were asked to describe their expectations regarding their child and WIRE and their level of participation in school events, among other questions (see Appendix A). I wanted the highly-involved parent that had developed a positive and active relationship with the school. I attempted to choose individuals based on interactions from our initial intake process and their level of participation in school events. I also wanted to interview the moderately involved parent/guardian that had a student in the program for a minimum of one semester. In addition, I planned to interview the parent/guardian who was fairly new to the academy and had been in the program for less than a semester. These purposefully selected family members of these at-risk students were selected to provide a strong foundation of the experiences in the household as well as previous traditional school experiences of the at-risk student.

School Personnel

Three WIRE staff were interviewed (see Appendix B) to provide contrast of the larger traditional school and smaller alternative school setting with respect to relationships and trust. I interviewed and had panel discussions with two teachers and a therapist who worked full time in the alternative setting. The teachers had experience in alternative school and traditional settings. The therapist has only worked in the alternative setting. To get the most genuine and natural responses, participants were asked to provide honest assessments and not be influenced by the hierarchy and titles in most organizations. The school personnel were all female and each were between their mid-20s to mid-30s.

Research Procedures

The study was conducted during the 2012-2013 school year, during the second and third quarters to allow students to fully absorb the structure and intent of the alternative school setting. Students and staff were interviewed in the comfort of this researcher's office only after there was an agreement from the student, the guardians, and the staff. Each participant's character was protected and pseudonyms were used to provide a safe and trusted interview session. Interviews of students and staff took place over a 4-week period with panel discussions. Questions were semistructured to allow as much elaboration as necessary to reach into the depths of the stories and experiences of each participant. The interviews and panel discussions were transcribed to capture the reality and most genuine experiences of each participant. Participants were asked to volunteer their time and thoughts to this study. A safe atmosphere was provided that protected each individual but also allowed for the most in-depth and valuable information. Relationship building, trust, and emotional safety are imperative to this research and case study. "In recent years we have become increasingly aware that research using people may inadvertently harm them—not just physically but by embarrassing them, violating their privacy and so on" (Boothe, Colomb, & Williams, 2008, p. 83).

In an attempt to support the value of the relationships, I sought parents and guardians of students within the alternative school program to hear their perceptions regarding trust and connectedness between the school and the home. This phenomenon had the possibility of shedding light on the value of relationships between the school and home—especially in this case study. The attempt was to discover the impact of parent,

guardian, and student relationships that influence student achievement. According to Ferrer (2011),

> The educational gap may manifest itself in another way. Some parents, who
> struggled in school when they were young, may have the tendency to justify their
> children's lack of success in school. Parents who have not experienced academic
> success might also feel very satisfied if their kids just graduate from high school.
> (p. 68)

The students all have stories that we, as school staff, may have knowledge of but may not necessarily get the truth about because of trust. Humans are naturally motivated to talk about emotionally charged events. Persons who tell their story reduce their stress and are able to bond with others. We must consider the strength necessary for individuals to discuss their experiences and embrace those moments as support systems in society.

> We cannot change past events, but we can learn from them. But youth should not
> be forced to disclose painful material they may not wish to reveal for the intent is
> not to re-open past wounds and re-traumatise a youth. (Brendtro & Du Toit, 2005,
> p. 73)

As I interviewed students and listened to their experiences, I attempted to find common themes that were relevant to the trust and safety required for students to be academically successful in this alternative school setting. It was my hope to also discover when a student has disengaged with the learning and academic experience because of poor social and emotional development or a traumatic experience unrelated to the academic experience. Brofenbrenner's most basic belief was trusting bonds with children are the most powerful force in building healthy brains and behavior. He translated this principle

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in simple but powerful terms: Every child needs at least one adult that is irrationally crazy about him or her. Young people thrive in ecologies with caring families, concerned teachers, positive peers, and a supportive community. But children reared in unhealthy ecologies experience a host of emotional, behavioral, and learning problems (Brendtro, Mitchell, & McCall, 2009).

In addition, I was interested in the relationships that students had with their most admired family members and those individuals' relationships to school and academics. I planned to interview with students and parents or guardians to discuss their relationships with school as a student and their experiences as a parent or guardian of a student. Unfortunately, family members were not formally interviews as planned.

When families of different cultures have beliefs and norms that are dissimilar to that of the dominant culture, the potential of having a conflict of interest when attempting to educate students in a public setting exists. As Ferrer (2011) noted:

> I also know that Hispanic parents are more inspired to assume the responsibilities of their role if they embrace the idea that a quality education leads to a quality life. We must realize that many Latino parents come from countries where this is not necessarily true. Where they are from, education does not necessarily open doors to an improved life style. Who their parents are, or what their families' financial resources are plays a larger role in determining what doors are open for them. (pp. 89-90)

In terms of school administration and the pressures individuals experience from a top-down approach, I attempted to gauge the relationships that school administrators had with stakeholders within the educational system. Administrators have an indistinguishing role

in the educational system and have a major influence on how school staff operate and showcase talent and creativity. On many occasions, school administrators are charged with being change agents and hold a greater burden for the performance of an entire school district. Many factors affect an administrators' positive influence on a school district; however, many are asked to accomplish huge tasks in a limited amount of time. I interviewed school district administrators to gauge their level of trust for a system that requires time and patience with a greater number of current failing schools and students at risk of dropping out of school without an adequate education.

While most people recognize that a leader's mood—and how he or she impacts the moods of others—plays a significant role in any organization, emotions are often seen as too personal or unquantifiable to talk about in a meaningful way. But research in the field of emotion has yielded keen insights into not only how to measure the impact of a leader's emotions but also how the best leaders find effective ways to understand and improve the way they handle their own and other people's emotions. Goleman et al. (2004) stated:

> Understanding the powerful role of emotions in the workplace sets the best leaders apart from the rest—not just in tangibles such as better business results and the retention of talent, but also in the all-important intangibles, such as higher morale, motivation and commitment. (pp. 4-5)

I explored the experiences of students, parents, staff, and their relationships with past and present administrators. As a current administrator and former teacher, I had a personal interest in how these relationships build morale and provide a support system for all stakeholders in terms of academics and well-being. Furthermore, my awareness and

powers of perception must be acute. The nature of qualitative case study research is intensive, making the researcher's field work mentally and physically tiring (Griffin, 1985, as cited in Guesquiere, Maes, & Vandenberghe, 2004). Finally, case study research must invoke strong built-in self-reflection that ensures that a researcher sees him or herself as part of the research project (Ball, 1990 and Lincoln & Guba, 1990, as cited in Guesquiere, Maes, & Vandenberghe, 2004). However, this self-reflection must not interfere with necessary spontaneity.

The traditional method of interview and panel discussions are usually formulated with questions that drive or seek answers that tend to be influenced by the researcher. For this qualitative research case study, I had participants discuss the influence of relationships in both the traditional and alternative school experience. The idea behind this particular research began with my personality and character trait as a listener. One of the most important and powerful concepts of the communication process is an individuals' ability to listen during group or one to one dialogue. One of the most misconceived and often disregarded concepts regarding communication involves the power of hearing the in-depth stories of each individual without interruption and judgment. To enhance communication and develop better understandings about the values and beliefs of others, the researcher and participants must have the ability to communicate with a positive perspective, which requires an abundance of patience.

According to Spradley (1979, as cited in Butvilas & Zygmantas, 2011), ethnographic questions can be grouped into the following:

1. Descriptive questions,

2. Structural or explanatory questions, and

3. Contrast questions.

Descriptive questions are the basis of ethnographic interviewing as they often require participants to describe an event, person, or circumstance. Structural or explanatory questions are used to obtain further clarification on a specific aspect of a descriptive question—expanding and asking for elaboration on what was said before. Finally, contrast questions provide the researcher with a greater possibility to discover the meaning behind the words used by means of semantic relationship (the meaning of the words), the principle of the use (as opposed to its definition), the similarity principle (providing synonym), and the contrast principle (finding out what things are not or how they can be different or opposites; Butvilas & Zygmantas, 2011). Sample questions for all interviews can be found in Appendix A.

Sample questions were not etched in stone but were created to start a conversation that could reveal common themes and an understanding of relational issues that may influence student and school success. Boothe et al. (2008) stated, "We can't explain the complexities of interviewing (there are many guidelines to that process), but remember that the more you plan by determining exactly what you want to know, the more efficiently you will get what you need" (p. 82). In the sense of social and emotional development—which has become a topic of discussion in many schools—I recorded the interviews and panel discussions and considered the common themes that assisted in the support of both traditional and alternative school outcomes with respect to the impact of relationship in school settings.

Data Analysis

After collecting the data, I isolated the common themes and the differences that were recorded through interviews and panel discussions. The goal involved understanding the social, emotional, and relational issues relevant to student school experiences. In intrinsic case study, researchers do not avoid generalizations; they cannot. Certainly, they generalize to happenings of their case at times still to come and in other situations. They expect their readers to comprehend their interpretations but to arrive, as well, at their own. Thus, the methods for case work actually used involves learning enough about the case to encapsulate complex meanings into a finite report and to describe the case in a sufficient descriptive narrative so that readers experience these happenings vicariously and draw their own conclusions (Stake, 2008).

Although the administrators and teachers are not specifically responsible for the social and emotional development of the student, I pointed out the particular points that require school systems to consider providing more support to students that require adult attention socially and emotionally in order to successfully navigate the academic realm. What I also hoped to find were statements of all participants that required positive relationships and collaboration in lieu of the traumatic experiences of students and families that influence academic outcomes. This was also true for school staff and administrators that had less than positive relationships with stakeholders within the educational environment.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

The listening ear was my metaphor in describing my purpose in education; it has a very profound impact on this qualitative research method that drives this study regarding trust, safety, and relationship building in the alternative school setting. The importance of social and emotional development is critical to academic success for not only the students that are successful in the traditional school setting but also has an even greater influence on the success of students that are at risk of dropping out of school and referred to the smaller, alternative school setting. The alternative school setting studied through interviews of both staff and students provide knowledge of the trust and safety needed for staff to provide positive relationships that allow students to learn, as well as professional growth for all of the adult staff members. Research requires the researcher to listen to the field of explorers who have come before. The enjoyment of growing and learning throughout a research project represents a great and fascinating model of education at its highest form.

Biological sciences are bringing exciting new perspectives, which are transforming practice. Long-standing debates about nature versus nurture are rendered mute by the new science of *epigenetics*. Researchers mapping the human genome hoped to find genes for mental disorders. Instead, it became clear that genes and environment are in constant interplay. *Epi*, in the word *Epigenetics,* means *on top of*. Epigenetics shows why genes are not destiny; events in the environment actually turns genes on or off (Brendtro & Martin, 2014). The concept of epigenetics speaks loudly to the environment of school community and how cultures of safety, trust, and relationship building for

academic success must be cultivated. More specifically, the modeling of trust, safety, and relationship building in our school systems are profoundly dependent on the norms of the top level administration. An organization's ability to provide nurturing along with challenging learning environments allows all stakeholders in a school community to grow. While this task can be extremely difficult, it is necessary if we as a society want to grow academically and compete globally in the world of academia.

The purpose of this study involved taking a qualitative research approach to obtaining an understanding of the accountability required of school staff and their willingness and capacity to provide a sufficient education in a diverse culture of students with social and emotional needs that are unmet outside the school community or within the household. This approach was taken by interviewing WIRE stakeholders—a small alternative local school in the west suburbs of Chicago Illinois. Why study a small alternative school? The students referred to an alternative setting have experienced the traditional AND the alternative setting so will have unique stories and experiences that support the need for trust, safety, and relationship building in the school culture as a whole. There also exists the capacity to listening to the needs of teachers and school staff members that may share in the quest of providing a culture of learning that is conducive for all students and includes those considered at risk. The concentrated, magnified, and hypervigilant emotions of children in a small alternative school setting requires a high skilled, knowledgeable, and experienced team of adults in order to provide a safe, trusted, and relational experience for students and adults. I find myself thinking that traditional school environments are quite unnatural for children. Where else do we gather hundreds sometimes thousands of kids and then relegate them to confined spaces, often sitting in

rows until the obligatory bell rings to tell them to move on? On top of that, we ask them

to perform well everyday in everything. Schools ask teachers to do what most adults

would find impossible: keep 30 kids safe and learning each hour of the school day while

earning sub-professional wages (Van Bockern, 2014).

This chapter uses the voices and stories of students referred to WIRE from

different school districts of the west suburban county of Cook. In this same environment,

the voices of staff will be used to parallel the safety, trust, and relationship building

required for all participants to grow professionally, academically, and personally in the

school community. The chapter is structured around the following common themes:

1. The social and emotional safety that the school environment provides for both

   students and staff.

2. The genuine trust that students and staff have for the school environment and

   administration.

3. The relationships that are developed in the school culture that supports

   academic growth for students and professional growth for school staff.

Findings

The WIRE is located just west of the city of Chicago, in Illinois. The alternative

high school services students from school districts in west Cook County and provides a

smaller setting for students considered at risk of dropping out of school or failing to meet

requirements for graduation. Currently, WIRE has students from Riverdale, Calumet

Park, Calumet City, and Hazel Crest school districts. Because of how WIRE is structured,

it can serve a maximum of 40 students with a staff of four classroom teachers, a school

social worker, an administrator, and an administrative assistant. In addition, it has a 1–10

teacher to student ratio. Students are provided with an internet based program for credit White, and 3% Asian. Students are referred to WIRE for various school policy infractions including fighting, drugs, gang activity, disorderly conduct, weapons possession, theft, insubordination, and other offenses. Most students have fallen behind academically and have attendance issues and a lack of support in the household. Decision making, peer pressure, and self-esteem represent immediate needs for the students referred to WIRE.

WIRE Student Participants

Students of WIRE participated in interviews and shared their stories and experiences relevant to this case study:

- Isis is a Hispanic female student from Calumet Park school district. She is a junior in her second year at WIRE and was referred to this alternative school for gang activity.

- Syleena is a Hispanic female student from Calumet Park school district. She is a junior in her second year at WIRE and was referred to the alternative school for fighting.

- Jakub is a Polish male student from Calumet City school district. He is a sophomore in his third year at WIRE and was referred to the alternative school for possession of drugs.

- Erica is a Black female student from Hazel Crest school district. She is a junior in her second year at WIRE and was referred to the alternative school for disorderly conduct.

- Alisha is a Black female student from Hazel Crest school district. She is a junior in her third year at WIRE and was referred to the alternative school for fighting.

- Colleen is a White female student from Hazel Crest school district. She is a junior in her first year at WIRE and was referred to the alternative school for disorderly conduct.

- Carlos is a Hispanic male student from Calumet Park school district. He is a sophomore in his first year at WIRE and was referred to the alternative school for weapons possession.

- Humberto is a Hispanic male student from Calumet Park school district. He is a junior in his second year at WIRE and was referred to the alternative school for nonattendance and truancy in the traditional school setting.

- Antonio is a Hispanic male student from Calumet Park school district. He is a junior in his first year at WIRE and was referred to the alternative school for fighting.

- Ana is a Hispanic female student from Riverdale school district. She is a freshman in her first year at the WIRE Academy and was referred to the alternative school for gang activity and weapons possession.

- Bruno is a Hispanic male student from Calumet Park school district. He is a sophomore in his second year at WIRE and was referred to the alternative school for assaulting a teacher.

- Kiara is a Hispanic female student from Calumet Park school district. She is a junior in her second year at WIRE and was referred to the alternative school for insubordination.

- Julio is a Hispanic male student from Calumet Park school district. He is a junior in his first year at WIRE and was referred to the alternative setting for weapons possession.

- Huan is an Asian male student from Calumet Park school district. He is a junior in his first year at WIRE and was referred to the alternative school for drugs and gang activity.

Teachers employed in this environment are usually novice in their experiences as classroom managers and paid less than a traditional school teacher. Staff members are charged with providing social and emotional support to students who have been in crisis and trauma, as well as reaching students in underdeveloped and lower academic skill levels. The biggest challenge these staff members face involves a lack of resources and the emotional safety necessary to learn and grow professionally in a very hostile and hypervigilant classroom environment. As a 10-year veteran in this setting, I have experienced high turnover each school year during my first 4 years as a teacher. The previous 6 years have been more stable with teachers lasting two or three years before leaving the program and seeking new opportunities. Therefore, a great need exists for paraprofessionals and a balance of counseling and social work for students referred into the program.

Currently, WIRE employs an art therapist, a social worker, and an intern who support student and family counseling needs. The art therapist also teaches an art class

and shares the case load with the social worker with individual and group counseling. The intern has the responsibility of providing individual counseling and family counseling resources for students targeted with family crisis and needs for immediate interventions. The full time social worker is charged with overseeing the counseling department and providing one-on-one and group counseling. In addition, as WIRE provides students with SEL, the social worker takes the lead on providing support to teachers regarding resources for the advisory and life skills courses in the classroom.

WIRE Staff Participants

Staff members of WIRE participated in interviews and shared their stories and experiences relevant to this case study. When reading their comments, keep in mind that their words are derived from an emotional place with high anxiety. In many instances, the language may sound incomplete or skewed due to the level of passion involved. Pseudonyms have been provided to protect the privacy of the participants. Participants include:

- Ms. Y works as an art therapist, teaches art classes, and has been an employee in the program for 3 years. This represents her first job in a school as a therapist or teacher.

- Ms. K teaches language arts and life skills and has been with the program for 3 years. Ms. K had experience teaching in one other alternative placement program before joining WIRE.

- Ms. T teaches math and life skills and has been in the program for 3 years. Ms. T had experience teaching in a traditional school setting before joining WIRE.

- Ms. A is a social worker and responsible for the SEL component of WIRE programs. She has been in the program for 6 years working in the field for 17.

- Ms. P is an intern working in the program for the first year. She has been a Spanish translator and an administrator in the middle school that is a partner to WIRE. She has worked in the middle school alternative setting for 3 years while taking courses to become a licensed social worker.

These individuals were all very willing to share their thoughts and feelings regarding the Wire alternative school program.

The Social and Emotional Safety that the School Environment

Provides for Students and Staff

In most instances, the school culture of any academic building can be felt as soon as entering the building. How individuals speak and greet one another represent the first sign of a safe and caring culture for learning. A very basic concept often overlooked in the school community today involves the ability, skills, and experience required of administration to support students and staff, both socially and emotionally. When thinking of the social and emotional needs of teachers that stand before students in a classroom, I conclude that there often is not enough support for teachers to grow professionally in safe and fluid areas for at-risk students from underserved communities. The interviews of staff members and students from WIRE support some of these needs, as well as the experiences that speak to the necessary supports for teacher sustainability and student needs from a social and emotional context. As a school community, the culture and micro-interactions that occur every 30 seconds impacts all stakeholders

within the school community. Teachers may feel isolated and alone in many traditional school settings, and the requirements and pressures to perform at a high level may influence their performance in the classroom. While the smaller alternative school setting may offer far less people than a traditional setting, an opportunity still exists for teachers to feel the spotlight on them when classroom management and uncertainty arise once performance is exposed. Students mirror the social and emotional behaviors and actions of teachers and school staff members. As an experienced teacher and current administrator at WIRE, I can attest to students responding to a culture of safety, trust, and relationship building that supports academics.

As a teacher during my first 6 years in the program, I learned very quickly the need to have a very stable staff, the importance of understanding my emotions, and how the energy of each individual in the community influenced the learning environment. Having the natural gift of listening to students and being open to learning the needs of other adults greatly impacted my day-to-day interactions with all members of the community, as well as the school culture. Participating staff members were asked to share their experiences and thoughts regarding trust and safety with administration. I learned that my perception and truths were shared regarding the safety and trust that impacts relationships between staff in any school environment.

Ms. T shared her experiences in the traditional setting, the impact of relationships, and the supports considered necessary in the learning environment for adults:

. . . I had one close friend, like the girl across the hall from me, at my old school, where like we bounce ideas off of each other, but definitely at the bigger place is, you feel more isolated, you're really in your classroom. They do have, we had

academies there, so I was in the business academy. We had meetings once a

week, but it was very, the relationships were somewhat superficial. So you had

friendly relationships with people, but a lot of it was like, our meetings were

talking about, we didn't really talk about kids, we talked about planning, like I

don't know, Academy Days and stuff like that. And that was the first year they

were doing that anyway, so it was still figuring it out. And then we had our

department, our math meetings, where there were some good, close relationships

there. But it's really like a school of a hundred teachers. Unless you are

interacting with them in like a structured way, it's rare for you to make those

friendships. And so that was a lot, the girl across the hall, it was her first year

also, so we would show up in each other's room in tears at the end of the day and

like had that; it was so helpful to have that. And then here, I think I've showed up

in tears in everybody's room and felt safe to do that, and felt supported. We, you

know, had our ups and downs with it, but I've always known that we have a good

team here, and everybody is on the same page, as far as wanting what's best for

the kids. Maybe our little differences have been about how to make that happen,

but it is, we're all here to help the kids.

Ms. Y. shared her experiences and the importance of feeling genuine support from

coworkers, which she feels impacts how educators model safety and efficacy and

influences student success. These two staff members, Ms. T and Ms. Y, shared their

experiences from different settings; common themes that support trust, safety, and

relationship building in the school community that drives school culture. Ms. Y shared:

Well, basically, I fell in love with this job because it's very rare that you can work

somewhere and be yourself in both work and home. I feel like my coworkers, the

students, and I didn't have to, and that's not like saying I wasn't professional. It's

saying that I was still very myself. I felt very comfortable, it felt very natural to be

a part of this environment, and I think a lot of people can't, in schools or even for

me in counseling settings, there's sometimes, you don't self-disclose as much.

And that doesn't necessarily mean sharing your life story. It means modeling and

setting examples and being a human sometimes. In a lot of places, you don't get

to do that, where I felt like here, you really did. And I think that skyrocketed my

relationships developing way faster than they would have at another setting,

because I was very candid in myself, a human being that is late twenties, flawed,

and still figuring it out myself, and I feel like being genuine and being honest is

something what makes you very humane to these kids, because they don't really

see that in adults. So to just see an adult that was still very genuine and honest but

also growing, changing, evolving, I think it's great.

When addressing the social and emotional needs of students, the adult staff in any school

setting must feel supported and have a good sense of their own emotions when entering

the school building. When addressing the social and emotional needs of students, the

adult staff in any school setting must feel supported and have a good sense of their own

emotions when entering the school building. Energy is paramount to the students served.

Students are very aware of the safety and trust necessary to focus on academics and how

their past experiences influence how they receive other adults. When students are

provided a safe and trusted experience in the school community, they have the platform

and foundation to thrive, as well as the potential to have success academically, socially, and emotionally.

When Ms. K was asked about school climate that is influenced by the trust, safety, and relationships of staff and students, she directed the conversation to the self-reflection that adults must model for students on a constant basis. Students that have been through trauma or have experienced discord in their lives are hypervigilant to the emotions of the adults that they are facing in the school. Ms. K shared:

> You have to model the behavior that you want the kids to take away when they leave this building and while they're in here. So if they know, I mean, they notice everything. They pick up on things that I don't even pick up on, and so if they see that, you know, there's tension between the staff, clearly that's going to have a big impact on their development here. Because if they know everybody's unhappy and arguing or whatever, not even. Yeah, the tensions in the air and that's going to affect them and their behavior when they, as soon as they walk into this building. Because like I said, I mean, if some, one of them had something terrible happen the night before and then they walk in here and they see that no one else, you know, the adults are unhappy, then that's clearly going to affect them even more. Change the dynamic of their day.

Educators must be aware and present in their emotions and how they impact interactions with students. These interactions can have long-term influences in the educational and academic experiences of students. Just as the adults have shared some of the feelings and emotions that are profound in their professional experiences as teachers, students were

asked to share some of their interactions with adults that impacted their view of school and the academic environment.

When I asked students to share some of their most remembered experiences that impacted their outlook on school, they shared very detailed and specific stories from their recent past and some that dated back to elementary school. One student, Isis, shared the following:

> My gym teacher in middle school, like we used to basically have these Fruity Fridays, and they used to give us fruit to taste, like any kind of fruit, and then like he doesn't care about your opinions, he's just like . . . if you say nasty, he'll be like oh, go change. You can't play anything. I was like, what the hell. Yeah, I was like, if I don't like the fruit I don't like it. He was like, oh, well you can't say the n-word, that's the nasty word. You say oh, this is nasty, you can't get your points for that day. Yeah. Like what the hell? That's why I used to always get Fs in gym. 'Cause of him especially. Like I'd be like arguing with him all the time. Like why you so mean to us? Bogus. Why you can't talk to us like that? I'm like, well, I'm saying what I want to say, I got opinions too. Mr. G, that's his name.

Syleena shared:

> I think my first grade teacher. She was such a bitch, and her name was Miss Gall. She used to put you in the corner like all the time for no reason. I used to cry 'cause I would never want to go to her class, and then she would have been so red, like if a student was doing something, she'll like grab them harder or aggressively. I dunno, she was a bitch to me. She was old, so. I dunno if that's

why she was, but she was my nightmare. I would not want to go to school because

of her.

From these interviews and responses, I noticed that most of the experiences shared

reminded me of tactual learners that were interested in the relationships that influenced

the learning environment. The students not only remembered the negative experiences

but also the safer trusted interactions that impacted them in the school culture. Erica

commented:

My favorite teacher was Miss Howl. She was the . . . 'Cause like, she was just

really understandable about everything. She would work hard to make sure you're

doing the best you can, like she would never settle for less than what she knows

you could do. She would always make sure you give your best. She's

understandable, but she's not a pushover either. She was just really cool.

As an administrator in the alternative school environment, I have a great deal of expertise

in the concepts regarding social and emotional development. During the first 6 years in

this setting, I learned the importance of providing an emotionally safe and challenging

academic environment through a framework of teaching personal and social

responsibility. Teaching students to be responsible and constant reflection became

supplemental to the standards and objectives required in daily lesson plans. Having a

framework to provide structure was very necessary in providing students with the skills

required to have a healthy classroom culture that was safe and academically challenging.

There were also the experiences I had as a young Black male growing up in an urban

community—similar to many at-risk students. A certain level of understanding can be

ascertained from experiences that influence the relationships and trust students have for the adults encountered in academic settings.

When interviewing Ms. Y, she was able to speak to the needs of at-risk students from a perception of being once at risk herself. She has a limited amount of experience as a staff member in this setting; however, her perception and strength as a former at-risk youth was very valuable to this research—in regards to support for students and their needs socially and emotionally. Ms. Y commented:

> Absolutely. I was an at-risk youth myself. I had many struggles. I have experienced many of the struggles that our kids have and really did not have the support system. Really didn't have somebody that can help guide me to make better decisions or to be there for me, that I can trust in, that would help me through the process. I didn't have anybody. And because of that, it kind of gave me, being a teen mom, being homeless, just being everything you can think of, the street life. Because I've experienced it and I was able to overcome that, I think it's very important that our at-risk youth, especially our teenagers, have somebody that can relate to them and also be there for them through their journey and their path. They have to have that support system. It's hard for these kids to go to their families, to their parents, you know, to somebody they can trust that's going to guide them and not trick on them or not, you know, just make things harder for them, who can understand them and say, I understand what you're going through, and walk with them, the journey. Walking with them, it's very important to walk with them, not in front of them, not behind them.

If educators have not experienced some of the cultures from which their students are accustomed to or have lived, then they must take a deeper look and study ways of addressing the needs of all students. In many cases, students that struggle in the cultures and communities that they live often bring those emotions and needs into the classroom setting. In these moments, teachers and school staff would benefit from training and professional development that supports the school community and these disconnections. When a young person *crashes*, our systems of care do not have an established protocol for purposeful inquiry. Instead, typical reactions to these human disasters involve attributing blame, building a thicker case file documenting more deficit and failure, and calling for the young person to be held accountable. The Developmental Audit is designed specifically to acknowledge the challenges these young people present. This entails objective assessment of their developmental pathways, problems, strengths, and needs to formulate restorative interventions (Bath & Freado, 2014, p. 21).

Ms. Y was adamant about her experiences and unmet needs in the school setting in which she attended. She advocates for WIRE's alternative setting as a definite plus for students struggling in the traditional school setting. Ms. Y shared:

Walking with them through this journey, because if I would have had this, I would have made better decisions, and it's important that we try to get them now, before they go down a path of destruction.

What I found very interesting while probing for relationship building through safe and trusted interactions were the overlapping responses from adults and students with similar experiences. Students better relate to adults that have a better understanding of the

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students' experiences. Humberto and Antonio, both students, sought the guidance that Ms. Y was missing in her experience as an adolescent. Humberto explained:

Well, like I'm here because Calumet Park didn't accept me because of my credits. Because I barely transferred into that school and it didn't allow me, because I was too behind, so they sent me here, but the reason I . . . is because of my attendance, that I barely even went to school. I say it's a lot of factors, it's not just a person not going to class. It's also the school admin and the people that are around, because not just one individual will have the train of thought about, this school is not for me. And when that happens, they get together and get out of the school.

Antonio shared:

Yeah. They don't listen to me, what can I do, you know? 'Cause we'll go over there and talk, you know, like oh. He didn't do this, he didn't do that, he's trying to learn, and they'll be like, oh, just his past. That's all they say, his past. His past. Then I go home to my mom and she'll talk to me, the past comes back and haunts you.

One goal of the alternative school setting involves teaching students to make better decisions and choices in order to transition back into the traditional school setting or to prepare the young adults for life immediately after high school. This challenge also resides inside the walls of the traditional school setting in lower income and urban communities. Amidst strong calls to *hold kids accountable*, the often unspoken issue involves how adults and systems can be made accountable to meet the child's growth

needs. How children are physically and emotionally nourished and protected has a direct

bearing on how they think, feel, and behave in their social world. The quality of care a

child receives echoes in subsequent relationships, learning actions, and values (Bath &

Freado, 2014).

The Genuine Trust that Students and Staff have for the

School Environment and Administration

In an environment such as WIRE, the genuine and tactual feelings required for

students to trust adults profoundly impact the trust and safety the organization must

provide for the teachers and staff. In other words, trusting relationships are critical from

staff to students but also from administration to staff. When administration is restructured

by personnel changes—impacted by budget cuts and initiatives that are driven by state

officials to drive test scores—schools are directly influenced. These constant changes,

which have some positive intent, have a direct impact on the school culture as staff

members' quality of work is dependent on their perception and feelings of authentic trust.

WIRE has been impacted by the move of the school building from a very private and

secluded office building located in a very affluent, suburban city of Calumet, directly

west of the city of Chicago. Due to budget cuts and a lease amount that grew each year,

the organization was forced to seek a new home that would provide a safe and trusted

school culture for its program and its at-risk students.

Budget cuts were constant for at least three years prior to the need to seek a lease

that would make sense for the organization. These cuts were not always made public to

school staff. The extra work required by administration slowly pulled the organization

apart and impacted the day-to-day operations of the school. For example, the

administrator was repeatedly pulled away from the school day to search for a new school site, which directly impacted the culture of the school day. The energy required in providing a safe and trusted school culture is greatly dependent on leadership. Teachers are required to absorb the traumas, crisis, and emotional safety of students in this setting; however, they need to be protected emotionally by the administration and organization.

Ms. K and Ms. T had similar responses in terms of how much trust and relationship building impacted their experience at WIRE. Ms. K commented:

I think once again, being in a smaller setting, you do need to know what's happening above you. At least to some degree. Especially when it comes down to the support and resources you need, you know? Especially finances. If you don't know financially how things are going, how are you supposed to get the resources you need or ask for what you need? Am I asking for something? Should I even ask for specific things? Am I not going to get it because there's not enough money or resources or what have you? But once again, it boils down to the fact that when you work in this environment, it's so small that everybody needs to work together, you know? Yes, everybody has their own different roles. I'm a teacher, I'm not an administrator, I don't know what it's like to be, I've learned through you some things, you know. But it's all about, you know, how can we work together to make the program run effectively? 'Cause everybody affects each other, like the domino effect. If one person falls, somebody else is going to fall. And it's hard if no one can pick each other up.

Ms. T commented:

> Well, I think we've kind of run into that a little bit with like, seeing like above us as a school. Like for instance, the stuff that we've talked about where like, you have different pressures on you that kind of pulls you away from like, the day-to-day with the kids. And there's also the whole aspect of like, who's this . . . (Chuckles) And I know it affected me personally. Sorry, I'm trying to figure out how much detail to include here, but like.

Ms. T was unsure of how much to share and how detailed to be because she did not want to speak to specific situations that could shed an unkind light on the relationships that impacted the school culture. The undertone was very clear to me because of what I understood about the organizational culture.

When teachers have their attention pulled away from the students and the daily classroom activities, the school day becomes more difficult; and the creativity, cohesiveness, and stability of a program are fractured. This is especially true at WIRE because of not only one but two moves in 2 years. Staff were emotionally exhausted and the interrupted flow of the school day that was established in the original setting had to be adjusted not once but twice. The most unfortunate piece to these processes was how distracting it became to serving students. Students were impacted directly and teachers were misperceived by students, which verbalized their thoughts about the commitment of staff.

Alisha has been in the WIRE program long enough to understand how the teachers and staff have a lot of responsibilities. In addition, they have expectations for the adults serve in the community. Alisha shared:

And like, I don't necessarily think they have to take the time out their day just

like, 'cause students, every student in the room could be mad. They don't have to

literally like try their hardest, be careful what they say. They could still go on and

teach, they just have to be open-minded about things, and even if they don't show

a bad attitude, like people have a smile on their faces and still have a horrible day,

just be open-minded about everybody's feelings.

Jakub was also very interested in teachers and staff members providing both academic

and social and emotional supports. He seeks to be very relational with staff. He wants to

feel the excitement of teaching and learning in the classroom. A lot of the excitement he

sought was absorbed by the teachers' lack of trust for administration. Jakub commented:

I can, like it depends on the teacher. Like if the teacher doesn't get you, doesn't

put in effort to try and you've got to make people excited to come to your class.

Like how are they going to do something if you're like, you don't want to do it?

Like they have to make you want to do it. They have to be like, they got to start

acting like your friends more, not like, like they just act like they just want the

paycheck, that's it.

When I was a teacher and moved into administration and when changes to the

organization occurred, the school culture was affected—but there was continuity of staff

that remained current in the learning environment. There were staff who were very

supportive of the change, but an awkwardness existed that became very apparent when I

became the school director. All the changes occurring all of a sudden to the students

affected the levels of trust within the program. Many WIRE students referred to our

program have experienced some form of abandonment—even if it is the mere impact of

not attending the traditional setting of which they are accustomed. Therefore, WIRE must consider the effects of change and instability that impacts a program or organization. The students and staff at WIRE are hypervigilant to social and emotional safety.

Both Ms. Y and Ms. A speak to the levels of trust and safety that greatly impact the enthusiasm and willingness to give their all in a very difficult environment of adults and students that have social and emotional needs that need supporting Ms. Y commented:

I think it's key. I think if you don't feel, as an adult, if you don't feel like you have safety in your position or that you trust the people that are signing your paychecks, and if you don't even know those people, it's like, even if it's on the forefront of your head, it's a back-end worry of like, oh gosh, what am I, I feel like it could easily lead to self-doubt sometimes actually, if the trust and safety isn't there. Because then, there's lack of resources, lack of me needing to maybe ask or connect with a person that's higher up in the regional office or whatever, 'cause there's so much disconnect that I don't feel like they're accessible. So on that level, I don't think I have felt trust and safety. And I think part of it too is like, when you're in those positions, I think it's great to inform your employees maybe of things going on or problems or issues, but there's a difference of making us aware and like instilling worry. Does that make sense? (Laughs) I believe everyone should be informed, but I also don't, you know, I remember when we had to move for the first time thinking like, oh my gosh, we might not have a place to go, I might not have a job, like nothing's being communicated to

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me. But I'm just going to go with it 'cause I love this job and whatever they tell

me, I'll show up, but that almost takes advantage of people.

Ms. A is just as compassionate and committed to WIRE's programs and added:

I think for you to have a good staff you have to have good leadership. And a part

of having good leadership is being flexible, being available. When I say being

available, being available to your staff members, to sit down and talk about what

is working and what's not working, and not be so critical or closed or feel like

you have to monitor or micromanage your staff; trusting that your staff is doing

their job, makes everyone perform even better. I think when you have, when the

administration shows that they are flexible and available to their staff, the staff

tends to do more because they enjoy who they work for and that comes with

building relationships with your staff, knowing your staff. You have to have that

balance, which also establishes trust in a staff person. Okay, well he trusts me

enough to do my job so I'm going to do my job and I'm going to do my job, not

because it's just my job, I want to do my job because I enjoy and I trust the person

I work for. You have to allow people to grow and be okay when they make

mistakes and not be so, they make a mistake, not be so critical to judge, but to

give them ways like, you know, show them, okay, you made this mistake. But

how could you have handled this or done this differently? And not always being

judgmental or let them know this was wrong, this was wrong, this is wrong, but

also acknowledge them more what they did right before you just say, you know,

this is what you did wrong. Let them know this is what I see that you're great in,

this is what I see that you're strong in. How can we help you become good in the

areas that you're struggling with?

These social and emotional supports can be identified in the program through the actions

and experiences within the school building on a daily basis. I recall a very calm and quiet

school day before all the conversations began about changing location and the knowledge

of retirements for the more stable administration that were in charge of hiring recent staff

at WIRE. When new parents and students would come into the building for an intake,

there was always a question of, *Where are the students*? There was an assumption that an

alternative school was totally out of control with fights and student behavior that was a

constant image of disrespect.

The constant thoughts and conversations of moving the school building, budget

cuts, and retirements caused anxiety and nervous energy to become the culture of the

learning environment. The lack of funding and resources, as well as the management of

the budget, spilled over into the school culture and impacted the students. As I

interviewed students for this research study, I could feel and hear the frustrations

indirectly influenced by the instability of the administration and the organization. For

instance, students such as Julio, who started the program with high anxiety and fear that

the alternative setting could be a very hostile environment. Students such as Julio are

usually unaware of the emotions and moods of the adults. Julio shared the following:

Yeah, like I used to have like anxiety problems, so, and not like here. Everything

basically went away. Like yeah, at first I was nervous 'cause I didn't know

anyone, so I didn't know how it was going to turn out. I thought it was going to be

like, something like Race (Alternative School), like I have to fight or something.

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Carlos shared how he felt about the emotions and moods of the adults at WIRE. He seemed to want more support and some of the basic opportunities to address diverse learning styles. After Carlos', Isis added her thoughts regarding the teachers' excitement and enthusiasm for teaching and learning. Carlos shared:

Well, the regular day-to-day in classes, I do all my work, but sometimes teachers hold grudges, you know, they'll get mad and stuff and just say, just get out of class. Just doing my work. Maybe say comments or something, or something about, I don't like something. Some stuff. If I think it's not right, I say something, and they'll get mad. Like if I don't like the kind of project we're doing and I say maybe I want a different project or like another type of project they'll say oh no, you only got that. So if you don't want to do it, then don't do it, you get an F or something. I respond, aw well, I tried, but I probably won't do good anyway, 'cause I don't want to do it or I don't like it. Or I wanted a different subject. Yeah. They'll say, oh, you don't want to do your work, so you just go outside and stay there, just stay in the hallway. It made me sad and mad, just 'cause something I believe in or something, they got to say like compromise or like meet me halfway, you know? That way or this way. It's that way or it's no way. No. I feel like I shouldn't be kicked out of class, 'cause I didn't even get a reason, I didn't get a chance to tell him why I was late. He's just like, get out of here. He didn't even ask like, oh, why were you late? He just said, oh you're late, just try again tomorrow. It makes me feel mad 'cause he didn't give me a chance to explain myself or nothing. Whatever it is, you can't do it. If that happens, you just got to be kicked out. My explanation, maybe, that he could accept it or something.

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Isis shared:

> Yeah, like I'd be telling him to have like, the maps, 'cause he has room. I
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> remember telling him to decorate it, like for somebody, so you could feel
>
> welcome. But it's plain. I told him too, you got a plain-ass room, put some maps
>
> up. That's a whole, maps, you know. All that. He's like, why would I do that?
>
> Are you a little kid? I'm like, well, I was just helping you. I was just telling you
>
> shit. He's just, well, it's a help if you give out maps to do and everything.

Ms. A summarized the impact that staff and administration relationships may have on

students and the impact it has on students' academic success and social and emotional

growth. In this particular case, some teachers and staff struggle with the emotional safety

or lack thereof provided by the organizations administration. Teachers and staff have less

patience with students and may not have the motivation to provide students with the best

academic or social and emotional support to have success in school. In a small setting, it

becomes very apparent when discord exists. Ms. A provides an explanation of what

happens with adult staff and students in these cases:

> If administration and staff do not get along, kids can see that. Kids can see when
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> there's conflict between adults. They can sense that, which makes it
>
> uncomfortable for them. Sometimes kids feel that they may like a particular staff
>
> a little bit better. Administration may not like them, so they feel like they're kind
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> of stuck in the middle, so when you have administration and staff not on the same
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> page and not communicating and not trusting each other, not respecting each
>
> other on a professional level, it can make the administration's job difficult but can
>
> also make the teacher's job difficult, which ends up hurting the kids. Because now

you have the teacher not wanting to be at work, not wanting to, you know, put

forth their best effort into teaching, because they are so concerned or so consumed

with what's going on with administration that they can't see past that situation

and focus on what's really important, that's educating students.

As a teacher or staff member in this environment, it is very important to take into account

the effects of uncertainty—and the unknown—when a lack of resources and funding

exists, as well as changes with personnel changes that may occur. In the case of WIRE,

there were anticipated changes occurring parallel to funding cuts and a lack of resources

and support for teachers. This represents a very delicate and critical situation for teachers

who were once very passionate about the possibilities and potential to serve students

labeled at risk. What educators must also consider is the impact this may also have in the

traditional setting. Students that walk into a school building each day feeling unsure

about the stability and emotional safety that they seek may be impacted academically.

When students question or speak about the inconsistencies and the lack of commitment

that they may feel from teachers or school staff, educators must consider the source of

these emotions. Most teachers and staff who attempt to work with at-risk students have a

desire to help and assist in a program such as WIRE because they genuinely care about

making a difference. The environment is very challenging and the work of the adults can

be described as the *World Series of Teaching*. Teachers and staff in this environment are

required to not only teach but in many cases are asked to be more supportive in the area

of social and emotional development. Many students have a need to have teachers and

staff act as parents more than they need a content area teacher. This can be very difficult

and very confusing for adults that merely want to teach and participate as agents for change in the lives of students considered at risk.

Relationships that are Developed in the School Culture That Supports Academic Growth for Students and Professional Growth for School Staff

When there are positive relationships with all stakeholders in the school community, and constant communication of the agreed upon goals and commitments to the organizational mission as well, outcomes of success are increased enormously. When a disconnect or misunderstanding exists regarding the mission and communication becomes broken, the most important stakeholder in this process is negatively impacted—in this case, the student. Being relational and understanding the differences of the personalities that enter a school building each day is imperative to how a school functions in the best interest of all stakeholders. Titles, responsibilities, and pay grades may, at times, prohibit a group of individuals once very passionate about educating students arriving at their doorsteps each morning. As a school staff, it is integral that educators model positive relational skills that are genuine. Students desire a stable and safe environment in the school community, even if they may not necessarily know how to verbalize it.

Both Syleena and Erica speak to their desire of having a positive and strength based school culture that is supportive of positive outcomes—academically, socially, and emotionally. Students seek structure and adult recognition of their strengths more so than their need to improve. Syleena shared the following:

Do this, or. I mean, I think that's how all teachers should be. Not like that, but

they should have like, control. Or else the students are going to think they could

do whatever they want. But look at Miss K. Yeah. She's nice, I don't take

advantage. I mean, Miss K is still on it, like okay, you got to bring your, but in a

nice way.

Erica had the following to say:

When I got kicked out literally like a week before, I just got a 95 on my English

exam, one of the highest scores in the whole school, and they didn't even

recognize that at all. They just recognized the fact that I cursed out a police

officer.

Ms. P shared her thoughts and support for students from a unified school culture

standpoint. Her comments compliment the student's desire to be strength based as well as

a need for staff to understand that the students are learning and will therefore make

mistakes:

Absolutely. If the kids do not see that you measure up, that the staff members are

a team player, are working together as one unit, they will not, it's harder for them

to do what they're supposed to do, it's harder for them to follow the rules. They'll

pick which teachers they respect, and the others respect the other teachers. So that

just creates a community of conflict rather than unity, so that's very, very, very

important that the staff members stick together, are together in one accord,

helping each other out, making sure that, you know, they get the learning and

experience that they need in order to maintain a classroom that is functional rather

than dysfunctional, and making sure that no matter what, they treat the kids with

respect and understand that they are kids and they're going to do silly stuff and they're going to make mistakes, and as a community, you know, we have to make sure that we're all together, working as a team. 'Cause once the kids see that the staff members are together, working together as unity, the kids are going to follow the rules, the kids are going to do what they're supposed to do. If the staff members are doing their part, the kids are learning.

Often, a tactual feeling comes with any organization and most public environments. The culture and spirit of these environments are usually positive when the energy from all members of the community is positive. When I think about my 10 years' experience at WIRE, I can specifically recall examples of both positive and negative interactions that impacted the school culture on a daily basis. When staff were in a positive and happy space, the students were usually at peace with being in the school building. Students would allow trusted adults to support them even if a crisis existed outside the school building or at home.

One constant is evident in the alternative school setting—the possibility that students may have an issue from home that influences their behavior in school. For this constant, staff and teachers at WIRE have always been required to be aware of student behavior and possess an understanding when encountering these often difficult moments. A great need exists to understand how delicate and sensitive these moments are because they definitely impact the relationships that are critical to the learning environment.

As a former teacher in this environment, I recall many mistakes that were made when, as a staff, we interacted with students arriving at school with issues, traumas, and crisis in which we were not aware. After experiencing and observing many instances of

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staffs' inappropriate reactions to student behavior, I became very intentional in how I greeted each student in the morning and throughout the school day.

The following three responses from Erica, Alisha, and Kiara truly identify what teachers and staff at WIRE are expected to support. Not only are teachers expected to provide challenging and supportive curriculum, they are also required to build these relationships with students who have different needs (based upon the unknown) for teachers on a daily basis. First, Erica commented:

> I'm stubborn, so I mean, if something happened in the morning at home, I'm going to come to school with that same attitude that I had brought from home, even though the teachers here didn't do it. I mean, they don't, I might have not as bad an attitude that I had when I let them, but it's going to be one teacher that's going to be . . . Yeah. I mean, you should know by the actions. Like, if I come in here upset or I'm like kind of putting my stuff down with attitude, you should know all age has the attitude . . . well, I don't care about your attitude, you still have to do my work or study, ask the same question over and over again. I mean, if you see I got attitude, why trigger it to make it even worse?

Erica's comment shows an important example of social and emotional development in this small environment, which requires teachers and staff to recognize and identify the individual needs of students. The WIRE must be capable of providing individual support to each student without creating unsafe social and emotional situations for the group; this can be very complicated for adults that may not have these skills. Alisha backs up this concept as she speaks to a similar personal experience:

Of course. I think it always is, no matter who you are, no matter what school you

go to, like what happens at home has a big effect on you. A majority of the time,

let's say you get into it with your mom or dad or whoever you're staying with.

You're not going to take that out on your mom or dad, but when you go to school

and then when those deans are saying stuff like that to you, or then when the

students are, that's who you take it out on. They provoke you.

It also depends on the student and his or her personal experiences in either the home,

school district, or WIRE. Kiara shares her experiences in both settings and how she has

had success with relationships in the smaller setting. It is difficult when teachers are not

as skilled with the social and emotional concepts in school settings. Most teachers are not

expecting to build relationships with students as a part of their school responsibilities.

Kiara commented:

Over there, I wouldn't like, over here, let me explain here first. Here is like, I

don't know. They actually like, they show they care. Over there, it was just like, I

don't know. You just go to class and then you start class. In here it's like, they

actually pay attention to what the students are doing. Yeah, they actually get to

know you, and over there it was just like, you get to class and right away they

started teaching. I have teachers over there that they like, I was cool with, but then

I don't know. Like there was one teacher, she'll tell everything, and she'll give

me advice, but it was like. . . (Mumbling) Like when I was at Calumet, I would

like, just to go to class, and how I study, I wouldn't want to go. And here's like, I

get to like talk to people. I feel so comfortable.

The support in a smaller school is important to how students are able to become comfortable and build relationships with the adults there to teach and deliver services as an extension of the home and community. When I think of my own personal experiences in school as a student, I remember how we were looped in middle school with the same teacher for 3 years. My teacher, Ms. Childs, was like a mother to me during those years. They were my best years academically for several reasons. I was very comfortable with her after the first year because she reminded me of my own mother. She was a Black woman that worked hard and was caring and loving. She greeted us every morning with a smile while directing us into the building from the outside all the way to the classroom. She made us feel safe in her classroom by correcting our child-like behaviors. When we did well, she acknowledged it; when we did not, she let us know. There were times when some of the more active or disruptive students would need reprimanding for their poor behavior. Ms. Childs would take the necessary steps—removing these students from the classroom and rendering consequences for those behaviors. But she would do so with dignity. Once returning to class, these students were able to move forward.

This concept is what I consider processing with students and is often more difficult in a larger school, especially in the traditional high school setting. I remember the difference from my student teaching in a large high school environment and my experience as a teacher in the smaller alternative setting. In the traditional setting, I would see students once during the day and would not have those interactions again until the next day. For students that have social and emotional needs unmet at home or in their community, there exists a profound need to have those relationships developed within the walls of the school and to an extent, with our teachers and school staff. In my experience

as a teacher in the smaller alternative setting, I learned that most of the at-risk students referred to our program thrived or improved academically and behaviorally when they had a strong relationship with an adult in the program.

In describing the strong relationships that I had with students, I must duly note that these relationships are built during times of conflicts or disagreements shared between two individuals. In processing these situations, strong relationships are built—especially for students that have experienced trauma, crisis, and personal abandonment before or during their adolescence. When asking teachers and school staff to adhere to state and government mandates and initiatives, educators must consider the task at hand. Most educator programs are not preparing individuals for what they truly are charged with in the classroom on a daily basis. School administration must have an understanding of this and seek ways to better support these relationships. In addition, they must model strong relationships with all stakeholders in the organization. For my experience (and for what it is worth), my relationship with Ms. Childs allowed our class, for 3 years, to build relationships as a support system that was parallel to a family. We had moments and days that were good; and had days that were not so good. For over three years, we learned academically but more importantly, we had a level of comfort and safety with our instructor that allowed our academic skill levels to grow.

While there exists the intention to be relational and provide social and emotional support for students at WIRE, many students shared different experiences in both the traditional and the alternative setting. The struggle regarding trust and safety between WIRE staff and administration influences students' successes; however, students are still positive about the alternative program's intent, which involves building relationships

through safety and trust. Bruno and Ann shared the following regarding the relationships, trust, and safety of the alternative and traditional school settings. Bruno stated:

> Like the regular school, you walk in, just feel like. . . (Background noise) Like, yeah, you feel small, like a little ant. Yeah, they get so big, there's a bunch of halls and everything, and the students. Yeah, you're so small.

Ana said:

> Yeah. Like, sometimes you get lost. It's like a small town. Everybody knows each other. Like the city, there's people you don't know.

Both Bruno and Ana illustrate and speak to the physical set up of the traditional school setting that may be unsettling for students that need to feel safer. They appear to need a smaller physical setting that is similar to an alternative school such as WIRE. For these students, the larger setting may translate into a lack of possibilities to build relationships. Antonio, Huan, and Julio compare the alternative school setting's ability to provide relationships that support academics and social and emotional development for students; Antonio commented:

> Yeah, in most schools, they don't. Here they do. You have like a little relationship with them. Like you could tell them anything, like oh I need help with this, and they'll help you. Where like a regular school, you'll tell them and they'll kind of ignore you 'cause they have a bunch of other kids to attend.

Huan shared:

> Some of the teachers there are kind of busy 'cause they have like, say like I said,
> it's like a big community. So they're too busy helping other people to help you.
> Here, they have time for you. They pull you out one by one, group by group.
> That's what I like about it.

Julio commented:

> Over there, basically, the relationships, most teachers, I wasn't close with them
> because I'd have like ten different teachers every different period. So like, I
> wasn't close with them. But like here with the teachers, I guess, I made like a
> bond. I got close to them, I guess.

Antonio, Huan, and Julio all seek and enjoy the opportunities to have safe and trusted relationships. Humberto summarized how these large setting environments impact student decision making, as well as the lack of relationship building, which is impacted by school administration. This appears to be relational and how organizations provide safe and trusted school settings for students. Humberto said:

> I say it's a lot of factors, it's not just a person not going to class. It's also the
> school admin and the people that are around because not just one individual will
> have the train of thought about this school is not for me. And when that happens,
> they get together and get out of the school. I was just not into the classroom. The
> ambiance is not for me. You walk into a classroom, the teacher says sit down, and
> that's it. Do your work. They just sit at their own desk and that's it.

School staff and teachers have become more responsible than simply being content specialists; they now face the daunting task of supporting students' social and emotional

needs. I learned a valuable lesson very quickly as a novice teacher—I learned that there exists a need to build relationships in the school community for better academic outcomes. I learned this lesson after daily reflections of the school day during my first 2 years of teaching at WIRE. Furthermore, I learned that the relationships had to happen *before* the teaching and learning. Teaching had become more than just math and required me to utilize relational skills and cooperative learning activities within the classroom. I also realized the importance of modeling cooperative and collaborative learning skills as a school community. Students and their families are in desperate need of support from adults that are working together. The biggest obstacle for cooperative and collaborative learning entails the understanding that working together does not always mean agreeing and getting along.

Each adult that addressed the need to have positive relationships with staff, students, and even families, summarized the impact this had on student achievement. Ms. K commented:

> Well, first of all, I think that for the programs to run, you need structure. That goes for not only students, but also the staff too. In order to have the program in school run properly and effectively, you need a good team. And just having those positive relationships between both the staff and the students is a huge element of working in alternative education. It's all about relationship building, and I've learned that a lot being here too. You know, obviously academics are important, your main courses, but in order, I think, to be an effective teacher, you need to be able to build relationships with your students in order for them to learn.

Ms. Y commented:

> I think a lot of times, the sort of kids that we serve have never built a healthy,
> stable consistent relationship with an adult. Outside of their family, but maybe
> even in their family. Like their parents aren't necessarily a good relationship. So
> in the smaller setting, and the one benefit I think of teaching this semester is
> seeing those kids every single day, like the same group. Not having one-on-one
> time, I think, shifted, because the kids then felt like I didn't have time for them, or
> saw it that way because I met with them once a week and then all of a sudden it
> was like class, grading, which comes with the whole new territory. But I think in a
> smaller setting, I think it's a family, and I think that's what drew me to this too,
> for myself even. I want to work somewhere where I'm part of a community. I
> don't want to work somewhere that's just like everyone's here, do their job, leave.
> If they're having a bad day, I want to be able to help them, and I think a good
> example of how it benefits being in this small environment is the kids. Not that
> they're all born with the abilities to care, have empathy, and all these wonderful
> things, but they actually get to start to show it to adults and each other, you know.
> When Ms. K and I got in a car accident on the way to work, the response from the
> kids was like overconsuming of worry and love as soon as we stepped in the door.

Ms. K commented:

> It's incredibly important. It's difficult in our setting only because we've seen all
> different types of parents walk in here, from parent nights and conferences, but,
> and a lot, it's hard. And the reason why I say it's difficult is because a lot of
> times, you know, the parents want us to parent and they put that pressure on us to

do. And as somebody who's not a parent, it's hard for me to hear that. We need to work together to help your child. But I think it's essential to have, whether our beliefs are that they're a good parent or not, we still need to have open lines of communication so at least they know what's going on with their child, and whether they do something with that or not, at least we're doing our part by saying, hey, so-and-so isn't doing well academically or they got into this fight with this student or this staff member. So essentially my point is, it's all about communicating. Whether the parent accepts it or not, you still need to communicate with them and have some type of relationship so they know what's going on with them inside of school.

Ms. T commented:

For sure. I think because here, I've heard the kids like, oh, well you guys just sit around and gossip about us or talk about us. But it's really like provided some opportunities to be like, no, this is our job. We're talking about, this is going well for me and this is not in my class, so like Humberto, I think is a kid that, he's been like, you guys just sit around and talk shit about us. I think it was helpful to him to realize that like, no. We, all of us, want you to do well or do better or you know, be happy, be productive. And so in our meetings, we're talking about what ideas to make that happen. Like, you're not really doing anything in my class, so are you not doing anything at all? Or, oh no, I can find out you're doing great in English, so that can lead me to think, okay. Well maybe it's just something about my class or maybe it's math or maybe he doesn't understand. I think it helped the kids really feel like, man, everybody is really on my team here.

Schools have to provide more than just the academics that drive data and superficial test scores. Children as well as adults feel the support from administration in order to have successful outcomes in the classroom. I often describe the students in our schools as clients with emergencies that need to be addressed in our educational settings. Staff and teachers are also clients of the organization and the leadership and administration is responsible for providing a safe and trusted opportunity for these community members to be successful and to grow professionally. When the administration does not provide a stable and trusted system of support, students' needs go unmet and the learning environment is not as productive as it should be.

In the case of WIRE, the students have been victims of a program that has not fully provided the support system for teachers and staff charged with providing SEL, as well as academic structure in the learning environment for students. There existed some fundamental breakdowns financially. Due to the state funding and budget cuts, WIRE's programs had to move its school building for two consecutive years in a row. During these moves, the executive director and the regional safe schools director of WIRE were at the end of their careers and would soon be retiring. The administration's goal involved completing the process of moving WIRE (and another school of at-risk students) into one building and to adhere to the budget cuts from the state. The moves and retirements that happened all of a sudden greatly impacted the programs that shared the same building with one program on the first floor and the other on the second.

An important aspect that WIRE takes seriously is protecting the privacy of its students. For students and their families to trust the program, protecting privacy was

required. An element impacted by the change involved the fear of job security and the privacy of staff in the relationships that each possessed for their respective program.

In summary, both Ms. T and Ms. K speak in-depth about the impact of safety, trust, and relationship building with how it influences school culture, professional growth for staff, and academic and social and emotional development for students. Ms. T commented:

Well, I think we've kind of run into that a little bit with like, seeing like above us as a school. Like for instance, the stuff that we've talked about where like, you have different pressures on you that kind of pulls you away from like, the day-to-day with the kids. And there's also the whole aspect of like, who's this. . . (Chuckles) And I know it affected me personally. Sorry, I'm trying to figure out how much detail to include here, but like yeah. But like, how we talked about, last week, how I kind of shared that. It was coming in with the intention to help, and feeling more of like a judgment in it. What are the kids supposed to be doing? And not only does that affect me, but the kids see it and it affects now how they feel about her, how they feel about me running a class. Yeah. They see that I'm not in a place where I'm feeling trusting and if I can't trust the person above me, or I mean, not that that was a very untrustworthy thing, but just an unsafe thing. They see, if she's not feeling safe with her boss-boss, then how are we supposed to feel safe here at this school?

Right. But that's part of like, to have those pop-ins be maybe a little bit more structured, I think would have been helpful. Yeah. That's definitely like, one of the things that really drew me to this program, and (former director of RSSP

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[Regional Safe Schools Program] and I just talk about it was like, that very first interview, I felt like meeting you and (former director), I found people that have the same ideas that I have and the same feelings that I have about teaching and education and at-risk kids and just all of it. And I think that really was able to start everything with a shot of like, these are, I found now people that are like-mind *[sic]*, and I think just that helped accelerate kind of that relationship-building right off the bat, like talking about the very first day that I think I met the staff, we went out to lunch and had some drinks and talked about what this program is, and I was just blown away and so excited and I think at that time, I don't know how long it was before I met (new director of RSSP), but then again it's like, another person I like, these people are amazing, doing amazing things. I want to live up to their expectations and I want to be like all of them when I grow up in 5 years, getting further into my career. I still feel that way about (former director), and it has definitely, I feel that way about (new director), but I just think that we have different philosophies, and I think we're coming from two different directions on like how to make that happen, how to impact the kids, how they can learn. I think as a teacher, I'm more in the thick of the learning, where she's more in the thick of the social, emotional. So we, I haven't ever butted heads, we just have different ideas on how it should look on a day-to-day basis.

Ms. K commented:

I think once again, being in a smaller setting, you do need to know what's happening above you. At least to some degree. Especially when it comes down to the support and resources you need, you know? Especially finances. If you don't

know financially how things are going, how are you supposed to get the resources you need or ask for what you need? Am I asking for something, should I even ask for specific things? Am I not going to get it because there's not enough money or resources or what have you? But once again, it boils down to the fact that when you work in this environment, it's so small that everybody needs to work together, you know? Yes, everybody has their own different roles. I'm a teacher, I'm not an administrator, I don't know what it's like to be, I've learned through you some things, you know. But it's all about, you know, how can we work together to make the program run effectively? 'Cause everybody affects each other, like the domino effect. If one person falls, somebody else is going to fall. And it's hard if no one can pick each other up. Well, I just feel like everything happened so quickly, you know? It's hard to explain. I mean everything, all these changes happen so quickly in the dynamics and with different administration and people coming in and out, that there wasn't much time to reflect on that or to talk about it. I really think there's been, it's all about the communication aspect, you know? People are communicating about changes happening. After awhile, you just start making these assumptions and you don't know what's really happening and what's the truth and what's going on.

As much as educators would like to address the academic rigor and state standards for student achievement in the classroom environment, we must consider the relational elements of school administration, school staff, students, and parents. The interconnectedness of this diverse group of individuals is paramount to the success or failure of a school environment. As I interviewed the students and staff, it was alarming

and heartbreaking to listen to the concerns not captured in the data. Test scores and teacher evaluations fail to capture the true relational experiences that influence teacher and student progresses in the classroom.

I have really enjoyed addressing the common themes that were significant in my qualitative research of WIRE. The social and emotional safety that the school environment provides for both students and staff is critical to the success of all participants. As an administrator and former teacher, I personally understand the importance of an emotionally safe classroom. It takes a very emotionally confident teacher with the necessary support from administration that trickles down with relationships that are very delicate. Teachers in any school environment must be equipped to provide social and emotional safety for students—even when they may not be their best self, emotionally. The key to providing this element of safety must be recognized by school administration to best support teachers who are on the front lines with students. It is the entire schools' responsibility to provide social and emotional safety. The research findings/case study captured how important the genuine trust that students and staff have for the school environment (as well as administration) is to the emotional safety and trust needed for the school setting to be successful. The student and staff interviews captured stories from both staff and students that greatly impacted their emotional safety and trust for the learning environment. When considering teaching styles that must parallel and support students' diverse learning styles, we cannot dismiss tactual teaching and learning that is not driven by data. The interviews captured the true essence of how both teachers and students are influenced by relationships of trust and emotional safety.

Finally, the relationships developed in the school culture that supports academic growth for students and professional growth for school staff was also heard (through interviews) as a profound element of school success. The interviewed teachers and staff all sought a shared responsibility of moving WIRE forward as a group. In addition, interviewed staff sought the professional relationships that would greatly influence professional growth for staff and the trust from administration to provide the best support for students with academically, socially, and emotionally unsatisfied needs in the traditional school and in the home.

The most profound finding from a qualitative research approach and the experience of both a former teacher and current administrator is the importance of relationships, trust, and safety in a school environment. It provides the most potential for professional growth and student success from an academic, social, and emotional standpoint.

CHAPTER FIVE: SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study involved taking a qualitative research approach to understanding the accountability required of school staff members and their willingness and capacity to provide a sufficient education in a diverse culture of students that have social and emotional needs unmet outside the school community or within the household.

As I transitioned from a teacher to an administrator at WIRE, I learned quickly that not only were we charged with providing a safe and trusted learning environment for students, but there also existed a great responsibility of the administrative team to create a social and emotional support system for adults within the program. My research began in the spring of 2010. I have experienced and lived through this study on a full-time basis for the past 4 years. Research was influenced by a personal narration of the experiences and interactions of the students and adults within WIRE's educational community. This study set out to address the following questions:

1. What are the alternative school staff's perceptions and understandings regarding the alternative school students' needs?

2. What are the educational and social-emotional experiences and needs of students in an alternative school?

3. What are the educators' responsibilities in an alternative school regarding establishing safe and trusting relationships?

4. What represents the educational systems' responsibilities for building relationships and providing safe and trusted environments conducive to equitable advancement for students, staff, and administrators?

For this study, 14 students and five staff members were interviewed at the alternative school program (WIRE) where I am the director. It serves students from school districts west of the Chicago, Illinois border but within Cook County.

This chapter acknowledges the most relevant aspects of the school culture regarding how academics are affected by brain development, cultural diversity, restorative justice, and the social and emotional safety required to build relationships in a setting that serves students and also supports staff charged with educating at-risk students. Also shared is the infrastructure of WIRE's program changes from the lens of its influence and impact to the administrative factors that shaped the study. Findings and recommendations for the research questions are discussed along with the limitations. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further research in support for staff and students' social and emotional well-being for the best student outcomes academically. Well-being means more than getting *As* on report cards, meeting national test standards, or being named *student of the month*. Doing well results when the universal longing for human attachment (belonging) is met through relationships of trust and respect so the child can say, "I am loved" (Van Bockern, 2014).

Safe and Trusted School Culture

As I began studying WIRE and its mission of serving at-risk students, I looked at the school's culture from the perspective of a first-year teacher, such as when I first began working in the program in the fall of 2004. One of the first things that came to mind was the students' responses to me as a new teacher and staff member. I recall returning students meeting me for the first time being very shy and observant of my demeanor; verbally, they didn't say much. Many of the daily interactions that I had with

new students during that first quarter of the school year allowed them to become comfortable with our teacher-student relationship. During these initial interactions, many days we would take walks to the park for PE classes. During these walks, I indirectly became part of a very calm and relaxed school culture. Because WIRE is located in a very quiet neighborhood of a west suburban town, these walks showcased fresh manicured lawns and large homes that were much different from what the students WIRE served were accustomed to seeing. Morely (as cited in Aron, 2003 in Van Acker, 2007), identified alternative education as a perspective, not a procedure or a program. It is a belief that there are many ways to become educated, as well as many types of environments and structures within which this may occur (Van Acker, 2007). For many of WIRE's students labeled as at risk, this type of setting provided a sense of safety and trust. Students are far enough away from the crowded hallways and 30-plus student classrooms of the traditional setting to having the opportunity to have their individual needs met academically, socially, and emotionally.

An element that allows WIRE to provide a safe and trusted school culture to its students involves its small classroom size (a maximum of 10 students to one teacher). This ratio allows students the opportunity to have one-on-one time with teachers and to ask questions in class. This environment also provides opportunities for students to learn how to take responsibility for their actions. Students are taught to be self-aware and self-reflective during the advisory period provided by each teacher and in some cases, the school social worker. Although students are referred to the program for various infractions considered unsafe in the traditional school setting, many of the students attending WIRE are more pleasant than most would realize. In most cases, with the

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students' background, the smaller setting may be the only opportunity to reach these students and provide academic, social, and emotional support.

Another important element of WIRE is its therapy and counseling that is provided by the school social worker. During my first few years as a teacher in this environment, I discovered that the culture of the school has a profound impact on students' successes. As described throughout the research, there exists a great impact that trust, safety, and relationship-building has in the WIRE learning environment. Its location, interactions between staff and students, and the SEL provided by the program impacts the culture of the school environment. What I learned early in my career as a teacher at WIRE has influenced my current vision for how a safe and trusted school culture can impact students and school staff. Through this research, I have shared my 10-years of experience as both a teacher and an administrator and the impact of a stable staff, school location, and school culture relevant to the safety, trust, and relationship building necessary for student success in an alternative school setting.

Privacy can be a literal necessity in the lives of students not only in the alternative school setting but also the traditional school setting. What I have experienced at WIRE and its small setting is the ability to have the most delicate relationships with students and staff—relationships that are safe and trusted. Relevant to the environment, the privacy of a smaller environment allows staff to take risks in the classroom while offering opportunities for students to share some of their life stories that they may not be so open to sharing in more public school setting. The culture of a safe and trusted school culture is provided through relationships developed from more private opportunities cultivated from those micro-interactions throughout the school day. I often share this experience

and provide current staff with tactics and strategies that have been most effective for me. Nonverbal communication can be powerful in how students respond to the requests often made by school staff to provide classroom and school-wide management. For instance, understanding and acknowledging the strengths of students as opposed to the constant attention paid to the behaviors not favorable to the students' success.

After 6 years of teaching at WIRE, I noticed teacher and staff turnover at a rapid pace. The interruption of a stable and tenured staff in both traditional and nontraditional settings has a greater impact when seeking to provide a safe and trusted learning environment for students. One of the most transparent concepts detected during this research was the inability of the administration, school staff, students, and families to practice safe and trusted micro-interactions that impact relationships that influence SEL and academics in school settings. These relationships are impeded in most cases due to the cultural differences and misperceptions of the behaviors practiced by different cultures. Everyone has cultural norms, values, and beliefs; however, we must learn to accept our differences in the American culture if we are going to coexist and grow academically and holistically. The basic humanistic relationship between races and social classes can be identified throughout this research study. We also hear the judgment and the lack of a view from a strength-based lens for others within the educator's micro-interactions between diverse cultures in public and private institutions. Throughout the conclusions and findings, there often exists a redundancy stating the need for courageous conversations regarding the concerns for relationship building, trust, and safety amongst members of diverse cultures in an educational system that evolves constantly.

The best way to establish a positive school culture for students most in need of relationships and safety is provided through a culture of familiar faces and a staff of experienced staff in a very hypervigilant school setting. Over the course of 6 years, it happened where at least one new staff member replaced another teacher each school year. The turnover for the traditional and alternative school settings are both impacted when turnover happens. Providing a safe and trusted school culture is greatly impacted by the modeling of relationships of trust and safety by those in charge of students. When students have trauma and crises in their childhood, they naturally seek safety due to the brain development. When students are in the emotional brain developmental stage and have not had those relationships in the home, the school becomes the place that they naturally seek to have this need met.

Trust and Courageous Conversations

The word *trust* comes from the German word *trost*, meaning comfort. People seek out people with whom they feel comfortable and avoid people who make them feel uncomfortable (Brendtro & Du Toit, 2005). American culture, throughout history, has been challenged with cultural differences and circumstances that disconnect subgroups and races. But there exist experiences that challenge individual trust. Trust issues may be created publicly in schools, communities, and societies as a whole; however, these trust issues may also begin in the home and within those communities that exist before students enter school buildings. Teachers and staff that struggle with cultural differences and experiences unlike those of at-risk students from underserved communities must build trusting relationships that precede academics and effective teaching in the alternative school setting. For this to occur, administration must be able to model genuine

trust from the top down. As Michelle Jay (2009) states, African American educators'

experiences with race and racism in schools represent major concerns that cause

educators and students of the minority culture to continuously perceive the minority or

non-White culture as less than or inferior. Perhaps most problematic entails the way in

which such assumptions often free Whites from any personal obligation to deal with

matters of race (or those that are perceived to involve race) that transpire in schools.

Ultimately, the way Whites tend to act on these assumptions, with little to no

deliberation, has profound implications for the educators of color upon whom the

assumptions are subjected (Jay, 2009). What makes this qualitative research study more

interesting is how the trust that most of the staff and students were naturally seeking went

unmet—in some cases purposely—while in others, unintentionally. When the need for a

trusting school culture for students goes unmet in the most fractured setting of an

alternative school, educators quickly identify what is missing by taking a closer look at

what is beyond student behavior. Another great identifier for a trusted school culture

involves the ability to partner with parents of at-risk students that may have less than

favorable experiences in school as former students themselves.

The overarching concepts for this study revolved around what has been broken,

trust for students that need adults to lead and guide them in making better decisions, and

providing coping skills due to unwarranted circumstances. In many cases, the trust has

been broken in the home as well as within the underserved community that the student

has been exposed. Educators further perpetuate a lack of trust when the behavior of

students referred out of the traditional setting is behavior alone. Educators must seek to

peel back the layers of the behavior to identify the genuine student as well as the

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student's family needs that are not being met. Stakeholders in education advocate a new strategy because it encourages educators to engage in difficult self-assessments and to take responsibility for what they can control: the quality of their relationships with colleagues, students and their families—both in the classroom and throughout the school community (Singleton & Linton, 2006).

For this research study, school staff expressed their concerns regarding changes and turnover with school administration that impacted their level of trust and comfort as employees that have the profound task of providing a safe and trusted environment for at-risk students. When changes occur with administration, the relationships that have developed over time are compromised and trust must be redeveloped with the organization. These levels of trust are also impacted in regards to funding and resources for staff that may already feel underpaid. Compensation for staff in an alternative school setting is critical due to the commitment required in providing both academic, social, and emotional support in such a difficult environment. What drives the relationships between staffs' trust for the administration are the levels of understanding of the programs challenges and intent for ways to find success as an organization or school. When staff find a lack of trust for the organization or change happens that requires the efforts and energy to be shifted from students to the efforts necessary to strengthen cultural growth and trust, academic and social and emotional development is impeded. The best practice for providing the trust needed to address and support the needs of students in alternative and traditional school settings involves magnifying and creating a genuine level of trust and comfort from the top down. Great leaders move us. They ignite our passion and inspire the best in us. When trying to explain why they are so effective, we speak of

strategy, vision, or powerful ideas. The reality is much more primal: Great leadership works the emotions (Goleman et al., 2004).

The administration has the responsibility of providing the trusted school community for all stakeholders; however, the legislators and decision makers have the power to influence funding and resources for alternative and traditional school settings. During interviews with staff members, the concept of having open dialogue about the stability and goals of the organization would be very helpful in support of the necessary trust for all stakeholders. In most cases, staff were concerned about things that were not part of the communication from the top down. When the stability of the program was of question, many staff members became concerned and could not provide the trust and comfort for the hypervigilant students in great need of trust, safety, and relationships. When conversations happen that inform all stakeholders, opportunities exist to make connections and build relationships. Modeling these genuine character traits have a great influence on students in most need of trust, safety, and relationship building. What may appear to be conflict in interactions where the behaviors of students are magnified and a lack of understanding of SEL exists, trust is often broken. Processing and having courageous conversations that may include emotional pain and hurt feelings are necessary for growth. Currently, society seems to favor punishment and shaming as approaches to misbehavior. More likely than not, young people treated punitively will live out these prophecies. Young people do not need adults to inform them that they are bad or broken; all too often, they already feel this way. A system is needed wherein youth are held accountable for harmful behaviors, but also where solutions are sought and troubled youth are strengthened (Tacker & Hoover, 2011).

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Throughout the research, there were often comments and concerns that were discussed with adults and students that would not normally be discussed or stated without the privacy and safety provided from the relationship that the individuals had with me or other students in the interview session. Having courageous conversations in the privacy of an office or school library begins the process of building relationships that are more conducive to learning and social and emotional development. These represent the first stages of providing a safe and trusted environment for learning. This is especially true for an alternative school setting. In many interviews with students, there were statements regarding their interactions with adults in the school setting that impacted the students comfort levels and trust for the school environment. When students have unmet social and emotional needs and school staff are not able to connect with the oftentimes poor behavior of the students, it can lead to consequences that perpetuate the lack of social and emotional support the student needs. In many cases students were able to recall their interactions with family members in the home that paralleled those negative interactions with adults in the school setting. Brendtro and Mitchell (2011) found that a single factor—trust—clearly separated failing schools from successful schools; however, their study was silent both on teacher-student trust and student-student trust (Brendtro & Mitchell, 2011). Courageous conversations are necessary and are meant to allow each individual to share their feelings regarding an interaction or misunderstanding between peers but more importantly, between students and adults to share in a conversation that has the potential for the development of a trusted relationship. Courageous conversations are difficult to have because each individual has to be committed to listening to the

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feelings and emotions of someone else and also become more self-aware of his or her own actions that may not always be positive.

These courageous conversations build trust, although it may be difficult to begin. Sharing shortcomings and vulnerabilities with others is very difficult, but to provide the safety and trust necessary to building a community of cultural diversity, these relationships must be developed. WIRE staff interviewed for this study shared their desires of having more communication from the administrative office. Staff sought relationships because they did not trust administration nor the stability of the school and its program. Staff members initially observed and experienced financial support from the administration relevant to student and staff needs, which soon declined and decreased (with limited communication) when things changed drastically. The school had to move from an environment conducive to student learning and safety into a warehouse with makeshift classrooms. Unfortunately, staff who were interviewed all resigned due to a lack of courageous conversations and safety and trust within the organization. In the interviews for the research, many were seeking the same social and emotional safety that the students lacked. Of critical importance is the relationship that connects school based leaders with central office administrators. It is through these relationships that school leaders position themselves to obtain necessary approvals, support, and resources to move the district or school forward (Green & Cypress, 2009). Regarding the students being impacted from a lack of safe and trusted relationships with those in charge, in this small environment, evidence exists that staff members were impacted as well.

Relationship Building and Cultural Differences Findings

The most difficult task in providing an adequate education and a safe and trusted school setting is the ability of community members (who may not share cultural norms and values) to coexist. The struggle for cultural diversity surfaced in the research at WIRE. In addition, the experiences and culture of the adult staff had an impact on the climate of the academic setting. Whereas individuals standing alone might seem capable of making a contribution to achievement, it is only when individuals establish productive relationships with others that the gap between current school conditions and state and national standards can be eliminated (Green & Cypress, 2009).

Throughout the research, via its interviews and discussions with adults and students, the underlining stories involved a lack of trust and safety within the relationships that impact cross-cultural growth and success. As WIRE staff learned more about the social and emotional needs of students in the alternative school setting, they also learned the need to support the social and emotional needs of the adults charged with providing not only a quality education for students at-risk of dropping out of school but also with building positive relationships with students, their families, and not to mention one another. The WIRE staff discovered the holistic need to also trust the school community and to include all stakeholders (students, families, staff, and administration) beyond the school building. Understanding the development of the brain and the knowledge that school staff must encompass has an even more profound impact on how relationships develop in school settings to support students. Providing a safe and trusted setting for academic learning is profoundly impacted when unrest between members from diverse cultures sharing the academia space exist.

What does all of this mean? When students are removed from the traditional school setting, it generally means that the student was not having success in the traditional setting and that the alternative school setting would better serve the needs of this student.

Important factors that can impact the relationships necessary to build a safe culture and climate trusted by students and staff in alternative and traditional school settings include:

- Does the alternative school setting better serve the at-risk student academically, socially, and emotionally?

- Is the alternative setting provided adequate resources from the state or government to satisfy the needs of students with unmet needs in their home or school community?

- Are staff compensated properly or equally to traditional school staff?

- Does alternative school administration have knowledge and awareness of the needs and experiences of students referred into the alternative school setting?

- Does the administration provide proper professional development for staff that work in the SEL needs environment?

- Are there courageous conversations regarding race and the history of discord amongst the dominant and minority cultures to support relationship building in school settings?

The most profound approach to providing an environment that ultimately impacts the students with social and emotional needs includes the support of those staff members that are on the front lines with teaching and learning in schools. For teaching and learning to

be successful, it is imperative that the needs of all stakeholders not be disregarded and the cultural differences that exist courageously and authentically be addressed. Only then can one truly close the achievement gap.

Staff members interviewed for this study pointed out the need to have transparency with the administration regarding resources and the ability of the program to support staff who have the tough job of working with students currently experiencing or who have experienced trauma. Working in this environment may appear to be less difficult than working in the traditional setting; however, because of the intensity involved with dealing with students currently experiencing or who have experienced trauma, experienced and committed teachers and staff are required. When administration cannot support staff with proper resources and compensation, trust begins to break down. Many novice teachers and staff hired to work in the alternative school environment struggle to connect with at-risk students; some are even afraid of these students.

Another issue that impacts the alternative school culture and climate involves neuroscience and the brain. Brendtro, Mitchell et al. (2009) explain what they call, The Brain Rules. Rules are metaphors since science uses hypotheses that are continually questioned, not rules set in stone. The Brain Rules reflect two ideas:

1. The brain is the command central for all human behavior; and

2. Knowing how the brain operates can guide individuals who work with children and youth.

It is important that all educators be coherent of the brain and how the brain development stages impacts teaching and learning. This phenomenon has the potential to impact outcomes in the classroom from pure awareness. The experiences that minority cultures

have endured in the United States culture greatly influences the experiences in the school culture when attempting to build safe and trusted relationships.

In many alternative school settings, including WIRE, the students referred into the program are Black and Hispanic and have experienced difficult pathways to practicing the cultural norms and values of the dominant culture. With the staff's feelings of unrest about the support and resources provided by administration, coupled with the cultural differences between students experiencing or who have experienced trauma or are in a lower social class, it is very difficult to support the academic mission or the social and emotional well-being of students at risk of dropping out of school. The barriers and disconnect of multiculturalism in public and private school settings are relevant to the lack of trust and social and emotional support for students. When the relationships of adults are not safely modeled for students in school settings, the climate is impacted in ways that influence not only academic achievement for students but also perpetuates the disconnect of races. Lower class schools are being led by the White dominant culture that may not truly understand the culture and therefore, impairs the social growth and development of adults.

Many Black and Hispanic students referred to alternative school settings have experienced the negative generational interactions with members of the dominant culture that have the responsibility of providing SEL and academic supports. The negative influences come full circle when staff members of the dominant culture charged with fully supporting at-risk students are not provided adequate resources and compensation in this environment. Ultimately, the lack of equality for underserved youth is perpetuated through the placement of students that need more adequate resources in a setting that

clearly defines classism. The placement of minority students into a program staffed by members of the dominant culture invites the opportunity to have courageous conversations about relationships between diverse cultures that may support growth and equality.

Throughout the interviews, many participants, including students and staff, were in favor of small alternative schools that provide supports for the most difficult students. This research begins the conversations that may allow the opportunities for diverse cultural growth in the public and private school settings. The relationships cultivated in a small setting allow adults of the dominant culture and students and families of the minority culture to become more aware and respectful to the pathways of each. If educators are to continue to have integrated school systems that have predominantly White women leading the classroom, we must also educate the leadership in regards to brain development and the SEL professional development that best support student success.

Understanding the Needs of At-Risk Students

Staff that were part of the culture during this study had the knowledge and gained the experience of what is required for students to have their needs met socially, emotionally and academically in a small environment. As I interviewed staff, each spoke to the need of having a stable and committed group of adults present in the process of teaching at-risk students. There were many suggestions about the stability of the organizations administrative team and the long-term affects it has on the students' trust, safety, and relationship building for the program. The interviews shared staff feelings about the need for teamwork and relationship building with staff and students; but more

importantly, the relationships staff has with administration. There are beliefs that the organization's ability to model positive and collaborative relationships with administration had an impact on student success and commitment to the program. The changes that often occur with turnover at the administrative level hinders the opportunity to model positive relationships. Students that were identified as connected to the program (because of their relationships with adults) requested to stay in WIRE's program even after their required referral date of re-entry to their traditional setting. This can be attributed to the adult stability and collaborative efforts from the top down.

As the interviews took place, staff spoke to the relationships that were important in establishing the trust that is required to support student growth. Building those safe and trusted relationships began with staff setting boundaries and providing a balance of firm but fair classroom management strategies that were genuine and consistent. Often, this required stepping out of one's comfort zone and actually getting to know students, getting to know what they deal with outside the schoolhouse, and finding out what is important to them and what motivates them intrinsically (Green & Cypress, 2009). Those norms were being established in the original setting of WIRE before the changes in administration, moves, and mergers. Although each staff member had their own styles and personalities, everyone had the time and experience of having the interactions with students that had potential development. The common thread was the opportunity to develop relationships with students and allow them to share their most suppressed emotions that block or hinder them from academic and overall school success.

Most of the students referred to WIRE needed the smaller setting to receive the attention that could not be provided in the traditional setting. The staff also expressed the

need to have a safe and trusted relationship with administration. Throughout the interviews, many staff members spoke to the changes that happened all of a sudden, which created a sense of unsettledness with resources from administration. When the financial needs and budgets forced moves and mergers, staff became distracted from the needs of students and became more concerned with the stability of the program. The balance of emotions had an effect on the ability of some staff to provide positive relationships with students. Studies in the United States found that 60% of worst school experiences reported by students involved peers, but a surprising 40% involved adults (Brendtro, & Du Toit, 2005). This work is very difficult when providing academically-challenging course work and teachers and staff who can provide social and emotional support to individual students that may be experiencing or who have experienced trauma, crises, or abandonment.

It was also clear that staff felt the need to work as a team. Teamwork was experienced immediately, once the staff began the program. During the first year, after-school conversations among staff were very common. Staff would stay around and meet just to have supportive conversations about the school day. If someone had a rough day, others would build his or her morale. They would also plan ways to address both positive and negative needs. Support was constant. Each member would speak to the classroom interactions and activities that created or impacted relationships between students and staff each day.

One of the most imperative concepts derived from the experience of teamwork was the support, which was equivalent to that of a family. Many WIRE students have experiences in the home that have not satisfied the social and emotional development

required to be successful in school. This understanding of teamwork and the support for students in WIRE's small setting became the shared norms of staff members. Social and emotional development begins with the simple thought of making connections and building trusting and safe relationships.

Certainly, the problem of race in America runs deep and complicates interactions among us all. Yet, there are more friendships across ethnic and racial lines in America than ever before (Cosby & Poussaint, 2007). Some of the challenges that the WIRE team encountered involved the students' attempts to separate the adults as a test to observe the strength and authenticity necessary for trust, safety, and relationship building. Consistency and boundaries would always be an issue; however, WIRE staff understood that it was imperative to support each other with student social and emotional needs. Staff also believed that administration needed to support and understand the social and emotional needs of students and staff. When there was any question regarding the authenticity of the administration, the foundational relationships between staff were unsettled. The safety of the program (from a financial standpoint) became reality as the various moves and mergers became the priority. The lack of resources became questionable and had an adverse effect on the students. Some staff began to think about their career safety and so sought new employment opportunities. The overall consensus from staff was an understanding that students needed a safe and trusted school environment that provided an opportunity to build relationships but there were organizational factors that impacted the program.

Understanding the Alternative School Setting

Wire students were all referred to the smaller setting due to unsuccessful participation in the traditional school setting and behavioral issues that stem from a lack of adult attention in the home or in the school. The adults that students have experienced within the home and school have impacted the student success academically. The student interviews provided examples of interactions in the school setting that influenced student participation in the learning environment. Students that make it to WIRE have family experiences that may be negative and impact the home, but those same issues arrive at the school doors each morning. Students seek relationships with the adults in the school on the level of a parent, which is communicated to teachers when they seek to become educators. As a teacher, this can be very difficult. The reality is that students are seeking adult relationships that provide safety and trust in order to focus on academics. This practice and influence happens daily in the classroom, in the hallways, and as the students enters and exits the school building.

Providing a safe learning environment allows students to ask questions and be empowered to make decisions about the learning that takes place in the classroom. In the interviews for this study, some students recalled interactions in the classroom that greatly impacted their desires to come to school or to attend certain classes. This is a very delicate idea when observing school as a whole. Educators have to be reflective of each interaction had with students and be mindful of the effects these interactions have on student learning. Students that trust adults and trust the classroom setting will ask questions and probe academic growth within the safety of this classroom environment. Teachers and school staff must take the time to get to know the students' interests and

provide academic opportunities in which students can be engaged. The ability to provide these opportunities is cultivated through an organization that understands and promotes SEL. The WIRE's goal involved providing relationship-building opportunities to staff who have students through an advisory period at the very beginning of the day.

Advisory is led by the teachers. At WIRE, it is understood that teachers are content area specialists; however, teachers are asked to provide students with curriculum based upon decision making and choices that may impact their lives currently as well as in the future. The school social worker is very involved in these activities and also provides the teachers with a bridge to many of the students' personal issues without breaking confidentiality. Overall, WIRE attempts to provide opportunities for the social and emotional issues that may hinder students from academic success. The responsibility of the social worker becomes the foundation of the program due the confidential information that is shared by the student during counseling sessions. The social worker may provide the principal and teachers with the proper guidance considering how he or she interacts and disciplines students based upon their behaviors. Addressing the social and emotional needs of students in the alternative setting provides a foundation of what makes them successful in school.

<center>**Establishing Safe and Trusting Relationships**</center>

School staff and educators in an alternative school have a profound responsibility for establishing safety and trusting relationships in school. Self-care and management of one's own emotions greatly influences the ability to build safe and trusted relationships with students who are socially and emotionally in need of school staff. While there is a long history in education of attending to emotional learning, Goleman's (1997, as cited in

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Van Bockern, 2006) research created renewed interest in something as subjective as human emotions. The education of the heart took on a new meaning. Goleman (1997, as cited in Van Bockern, 2006) provides evidence that emotional intelligence is a stronger indicator of human success than is IQ. He defines emotional intelligence in terms of emotional awareness of self and others, personal motivations, and the ability to be in healthy relationships (Van Bockern, 2006).

In the small setting at WIRE, staff must genuinely support colleagues to better serve the whole school culture. Every day will not be every staff members' day. A staff member in this environment must self-manage his or her own emotions while supporting the social and emotional needs and desires of students. Staff's support for one another is immediately noticed by students in this environment. Modeling of shared visions and goals of the organization tells students that the environment is socially and emotionally safe. The example of administration and school staff modeling a shared vision of the school mission allows two things to occur. The modeling of a shared vision allows staff to feel the safety required to trust the administration when taking risks with teaching and learning, but also provides the students a culture that provides safety and trust for the school staff.

Students that have experienced let downs and disappointments by adults have an ability to seek safety in the emotional stability of the adults they encounter. In the interviews, student shared examples of experiences with teachers who did not recognize the need for the social and emotional support needed for students (based upon the adults' inability to control their own emotions). When adults are not aware of their own emotions, there can be nonintentional negative interactions based upon the perceptions of

each individual. These interactions can be misunderstood and long lasting and may influence the relationships of not only adults with other adults but also adults with students. Through the interviews, students and staff also shared an understanding of when there are differences amongst adults. The importance to having a shared vision may not always be easy due to personality differences and beliefs that may be similar in some areas but slightly different in others. It is keenly important to communicate the vision and have daily reflections for all to remain on the same page. Students seeking safe and trusted relationships are seeking the most stable setting that they know to allow them to share their most delicate social and emotional experiences. When there is safety and trust within the school culture, the staff may be able to provide opportunities for students to build relationships with adults in the setting and peel back the layers of the experience that may have led the students to be referred to an alternative setting. In other words, if schools are not working to meet the needs of children, they are not working very well. If they do not pay attention to needs, schools will always come up short. While they may increase reading and math scores, if they fail to help children grow in all ways—to *flourish* as Martin Seligman (2011) says—they are missing the mark (as cited in Van Bockern & McDonald, 2012).

A safe and trusted school environment allows students and staff to have micro-interactions that will lead to professional growth for the adults and social and emotional growth for the students. When students' social and emotional needs are met, students make strides academically. In a safe and trusted school environment, staff can learn more about the interest of a student by looking at his or her strengths instead of deficits or poor behavior. By doing so, staff can learn how to provide a challenging academic opportunity

for all students. In many cases, negative student behavior is derived from a students' lack of social and emotional development and the school's inability to address those needs in the classroom—large or small. In the case of WIRE, staff's emotional safety was compromised when the administration suddenly moved and merged two programs into the same building. Limited resources for an extended period created a sense of instability and began to impact the foundational social and emotional aspect of the program.

Trust, Safety, and Relationship Building in School

One of the most important findings of the study involved finances. Resources for staff and students impacted the social and emotional safety in the school setting. At times, when students needed courses and the program did not provide enough teachers, current teachers would take on extra responsibilities without compensation. For example, the social worker ended up teaching PE classes and the art therapist was asked to be an art teacher and offered no pay increase. Overall, administration is responsible for providing the social and emotional support to school staff in a form of proper resources and fair compensation. How programs are funded may also be impacted by the perception of the dominant culture. The other support system that an administration is responsible for is the knowledge and experience of a classroom teacher in an alternative setting. In order to fully support and understand the needs of both the teacher and student in the alternative school setting, as an administrator, it would be very helpful to have had a similar experience.

Most of WIRE staff interviewed for this study had less than 5 years of experience as teachers. This limited experience calls for a support system from each other as colleagues and an even better support system from administration. In the case of WIRE,

the support system was not there. Due to the constant moving for over two years, along

with some of the conditions of the facilities, five of the seven staff members from the

prior 3 years decided to move on—resigning from the program at the end of school year

2013-2014. As the school year became overwhelming for the new administration (due to

change and the unknown), the resigned staff decided the program and organization had

not supported the people charged with providing safe and trusted relationships with the

students. Overall, the administration was not able to pay an equitable salary, even to a

young teaching core, to support the changes and uncertainty with retirements and

mergers.

During the interviews, staff agreed that administration and school staff needed to

be on the same accord and have open lines of communication. When those things were

not provided, staff became emotionally unsafe and could not continue providing the

support that students needed to be successful in the smaller school environment.

Unfortunately, the lack of social, emotional, and financial support impacted the WIRE

school setting tasked with fulfilling the academic, social, and emotional needs of at-risk

students. The students in this environment are imperatively in need of the safety, trust,

and relationship building that is WIRE's intent to provide.

Recommendations for Further Research and Practice

The opportunity to study WIRE as an administrator with experience as a teacher

was very fulfilling. I was able to connect to the sample easily and hear the stories of

individuals who were genuinely interested in working with at-risk youth. Teaching and

learning in this setting provided me a true understanding of what a teacher must be

willing to experience from the lens of a content area specialist who is asked to socially

and emotionally support colleagues and students. It is a great honor to have experienced what can only be described as the *World Series of Teaching*. Furthermore, I have had the pleasure of working directly with top-level administration in regards to the lack of resources and the changes necessary to continue providing a school setting for students with social and emotional support.

As a former teacher in this environment, I highly recommend WIRE become more creative in seeking funding to equitably compensate staff for the efforts necessary in the classroom. In addition, a great need exists to provide these individuals with professional development that addresses the content area responsibilities and also be supported with social and emotional development for students in this environment. Plus, a need exists to have staff in the program for longer than 3-5 years. The time required to really impact the program lies in a teaching and administrative core of individuals that trust one another to take risks and to learn and grow in this very intense setting together. An organization that provides a stable learning environment for the students that need it the most must take the necessary steps to support staff in this environment—socially and emotionally.

For this particular study, the administrators at the top of the organization (key players) were at the end of their careers and retiring at the end of the 2014 fiscal school year. The challenges presented with major change happens in many school districts and has an impact on the organization at different levels. For WIRE, the impact was great, however; it was even more influential because of the moving and merging of two programs serving students that needed stability, socially and emotionally. The organization did not understand the impact this would have on the students and how

safety and trust in classrooms and schools are directly impacted by top-level

management. For schools to provide the best opportunities for students and staff to learn

and grow, educators must be more relational with one another and their students and

provide a socially and emotionally safe and trusted environment for all stakeholders.

Educators advocate a new strategy because it encourages educators to engage in difficult

self-assessments and to take responsibility for what they can control: the quality of their

relationships with colleagues, students, and their families, both in the classroom and

throughout the school community (Singleton & Linton, 2006).

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Appendix A: Sample Questions—Parents/Guardians

1. Explain your expectations for your child in relationship to the school?

2. Explain your expectations for your child in relationship to his or her responsibility to the family and home?

3. Describe your most current experience with school staff in the traditional or alternative setting?

4. Describe your experience in school as a student?

5. What is your current level of participation in school events at your students' school?

Appendix B: Sample Questions—School Staff

1. Describe your experience with working with staff and colleagues from a multicultural perspective?

2. Explain your perspective of the relationship between school administration and school staff?

3. Discuss the impact of family involvement in the academic success of students in both the traditional and alternative school setting.

4. How does a positive relationship with students impact success in academics?

5. What is your experience with social and emotional learning (SEL)? What is your opinion and thoughts about SEL?

Appendix C: Sample Questions—Students

1. Explain why you were referred to an alternative school setting?

2. How would you describe your peer group, both in school and outside of school?

3. Describe the positive relationships you had with school staff members in the past?

4. What values, beliefs, and norms have you experience—both in the home and

    school—that are consistent?

Appendix D: Sample Questions—Administrators

1. Describe some of the challenges you face as an administrator?

2. How would you describe your relationship with teachers and staff within the school?

3. How accessible are you to students during the school day? How would you describe your relationships with students in your school or school district?

4. Describe your leadership style.