

A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION OF EXPERIENCES OF  
GRADUATES OF ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOLS USING AN EXCLUSIVELY ONLINE  
CURRICULUM IN NORTH CAROLINA

by

Courtland Dwayne Coffey

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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2020

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APPROVED BY:

Harvey Klamm, Ed.D., Committee Chair

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological research was to describe the experiences of students of alternative North Carolina high schools as they transitioned from traditional conventional high schools to an exclusively online curriculum at alternative high schools and to understand the impact of that educational format on the students' preparation to succeed as high school graduates. Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, grounded on the belief that life changes result in new behaviors and self-perceptions and that individuals differ in their ability to adapt to change, guided this study. Thirteen volunteer graduates from three counties in North Carolina were purposefully selected to participate in this study. Data collection included journal entries, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group activity. The findings included six major themes that collectively tell the story of how these participants found the means to succeed with an online curriculum in an alternative high school setting: On-Site Relational Support; Ability to Focus; One-On-One Instruction; Reduction of Social Anxiety; Self-Pacing and Personal Responsibility; and On-Site Institutional Support. Future research needs to be conducted to broaden the scope of the relevance of the six themes by including the success stories of greater numbers of schools and participants. Research also needs to be conducted to verify the impact of the six themes on schools following implementation of the themes in changing school operations.

*Keywords:* alternative high schools, at-risk students, online curriculum, transitions

### **Dedication**

I dedicate this study to all of the “at-risk” students that I have had the honor to work with during my 23-year career in middle and high school education, in both traditional and alternative education, and in both the public and private sectors. You have made such an important impact on my life, that I would not be the person that I am today if I had not crossed paths with each of you. It is because of you that I want to research ways to better assist current and future students labeled “at-risk” in order for them to become successful and productive members of society. Each of you were created for a reason, as a unique individual, with God-given talents and abilities to serve a purpose greater than yourself. Never forget that you are important and valuable in this world! May God bless all of you and your families.

“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I set you apart”  
(Jeremiah 1:5, NIV).

## Acknowledgments

First of all, and most importantly, I thank God and my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for being with me throughout my life and through this doctoral process. This has been a long, hard, six-year process of taking classes, doing assignments, and conducting research, while at the same time working a full-time job in a school system and serving our country in the United States Army Reserve. I would have never made it without the good Lord's help. I continue to need Him, and I seek His wisdom and guidance every day.

I am also thankful for my parents, Bishop Courtney Wayne Coffey and the late Thelma Delephine Anderson Coffey, my brother Darrell Wayne Coffey and his girlfriend Melandy Waldron, nieces Kaylee A. Coffey and Madison N. Coffey, all my uncles, aunts, and cousins, my friends Mary Green, Michael Jarrell, Pamela Bowers, Monica Ezell, Tabitha Lacks, Marilyn Portman Durham, Ryan Powell, the late Raymond "Rainbow" Scott, Mimi Cappelletti, Kim "K.P." Blythe, Robert Farrar, Tricia Shearin Wilson, Sarah Moore, Steve White, Cathy Evans, Marilyn Wilson, Nora Joyner, the late Eric Smith, Cricket Lacks, the late Shirley M. Ruffin, Roger Lamm, Jesse Coughlin, Marlanea Dye, Jason Preddy, and the late Brandy E. Dunkum, my dog Lucky, and my fellow educators and Soldiers who have supported me throughout this doctoral process. God blessed me with the greatest parents ever. Everything that I do right in life is because of them. My mother passed away towards the completion of this study, but I am very grateful to God for allowing me to be able to share with her some of the results of this study just days before she passed away. My mother shared my joy of seeing this study come together in order to be a benefit to future students. My friends, co-workers, and fellow Soldiers have been there when I needed someone to console, destress, and vent with. Even though my colleagues

could not relate to what I was going through in going for a doctorate degree, by them just seeming to listen and giving me a nod with their heads helped me nonetheless.

I am also thankful for God leading me to attend Liberty University. When my friend Dr. Jeanie Williams Hawks graduated from Liberty University with her Doctor of Education degree, and told me that I really needed to go to Liberty to continue my studies, I listened to her and took her advice. I'm so glad that I did! Liberty University has been a wonderful experience and has developed me into being a Champion for Christ!

I want to especially thank my chair Dr. Harvey Klamm. Dr. Klamm was a huge help to me by always giving me positive feedback and encouragement. There were times during the dissertation process in which things seemed to drag slowly along and frustration tried to set in but Dr. Klamm kept me focused and motivated. Dr. Klamm was always available by phone, email, or in person if I needed him. Dr. Klamm spent a great deal of time and effort in helping to make this paper the best that it could be. I will forever be grateful to him. I also thank my committee member/research consultant Dr. James Swezey for his help prior to and during the dissertation process. I'm one of very few students who got to see a member of their dissertation committee featured on educational videos from Liberty University explaining the doctoral process to many other doctoral students!

Finally, I want to thank my fellow classmates Robert Lopez, Hilary Dodson, and Drew Van Dam. I would not have been able to complete the doctoral process without their friendship, encouragement, and jokes. Robert somehow even talked me into taking an additional class in order to earn my Education Specialist (Ed.S) degree in 2017. I thank God for meeting them and they are all friends of mine for life.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Emotional Disabilities (ED)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Alternative schools were originally created to individualize educational options for gifted and academically challenged students. The use of alternative schools and programs later expanded to include students who had behavior and/or emotional issues in the regular school setting (Raywid, 1999). Alternative schools were historically labeled as Type I (focusing on academics), Type II (distinguishing characteristic is discipline), and Type III (therapeutic for students with social and emotional problems) (Aron, 2006). Labeling identification became blurred as the use of alternative schools broadened to offer wider diverse ranges of academic options (NC Public Schools, 2018).

Due to budget cuts and teacher shortages, school districts have moved to using online learning, also referred to as distance learning, as the preferred method of delivering instruction and assessing student performance (Berardi, 2017). The exclusivity of using an online method brought scrutiny and criticism. Nay-sayers stated that adding the negatives associated with online learning to an already negatively challenged social setting only creates one more environmental element that may hinder, rather than improve, student learning (Lewis, Whiteside, & Dikkers, 2014). Despite the obstacles, numerous students succeeded by graduating from high school.

This study, grounded in Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory, sought to better understand how at-risk students transitioned from traditional high schools to alternative high schools that use an online curriculum and overcame obstacles to successfully become high school graduates, now living productive lives and making positive contributions to society. The

content in this chapter will provide a brief background of alternative online high school education, my motivation for conducting the research, the purpose for the study, guiding questions for the research, and significance of the inquiry, and definitions of key terms.

### **Background**

Alternative schools have existed for almost a century. Their primary goal has been to help students who were not in the mainstream of most students to receive a fair and equitable education. The focus, scope, and methods of instruction within alternative schools has evolved as institutions sought to support the changing needs of students

### **Historical**

Alternative schools began in the United States in the 1930's but really became popular starting in the 1970's (Conley, 2002). Aron (2006) reported that alternative schools were started to help academically gifted and academically challenged students. Over time, alternative schools increased in purpose to include options for students who had behavior, emotional, or social issues in the traditional school setting (Conley, 2007). Additionally, alternative schools were created to specifically help students with disabilities or special needs. One of the major selling points for the use of alternative schools has been the value students can gain from learning in a smaller school setting (Conley, 2002).

Conventional alternative schools for students with behavior problems have long been portrayed negatively due to environmental learning challenges (Dunning-Lozano, 2016; Free, 2017; Herndon & Bembenuddy, 2014). The wide range of student learning needs made it difficult for instructors to individualize pedagogical practices. The student population often lacked motivation to learn (Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian, Justin, & Lequia, 2016; Free, 2017). Poor

motivation led to problems in classroom management (Garner, 2016). The behavior of the students was reported to be, at times, so severe that school staff basically gave up and the students ran the schools (Free, 2017). Some alternative school students felt that their behaviors got worse by attending the alternative schools (Garner, 2016).

To respond to the identified wide range of student academic needs, there has been an exponential rise in the use of online learning methodologies as exclusive means for instruction and student knowledge assessment in conventional schools. The option to move to the use of online learning has provided the means to individualize instruction and decrease personality issues that often became associated between instructors and students in alternative schools (Berardi, 2017). An example of newly developed state sanctioned online learning opportunities that relates to this study is North Carolina's Virtual Public Schools (NCVPS) which is North Carolina's official online school. The availability of this learning option is enabling educational opportunities to be equitable for students in all forms of learning environments (North Carolina Virtual Public School, 2018).

## **Social**

Alternative school students reported feeling that the alternative schools were dumping grounds to get at-risk students out-of-sight and out-of-mind (Hodge & Rubinstein-Avila, 2014). As a result, negative self-image issues are amplified. This notion is often tied to racial and ethnic assertions attributed to the disproportionate levels of minorities in public alternative schools (Dunning-Lozano, 2016). Out of the 69 alternative public high schools in North Carolina, minority enrollment is 60% of the student body (majority Black), which is more than the North Carolina state average of 50% (Public School Review, 2018).

Due to budget constraints, the lack of qualified teachers willing to teach in these environments, the need to improve student behavioral management, and the need to individualize lesson content, leaders of alternative high schools have turned increasingly to the use online delivery as the exclusive means of instruction and assessment of student knowledge (Berardi, 2017). Online learning, though, has been reported to produce its own unique sets of challenges for at risk students. Studies by Bowers & Kumar, 2015; Delahunty, Verenikina, & Jones, 2014; Richardson, Maeda, Lv, & Caskurlu, 2017 reported social and emotional concerns with on-line learning compared to face-to-face learning. Nay-sayers have held that adding the negatives associated with online learning to an already negatively challenged setting only creates one more environmental element that may hinder, rather than improve, student learning (Lewis, Whiteside, & Dikkers, 2014). Beese (2014) postulated that online learning places a great deal of responsibility on the student and that the degree of autonomy may be overwhelming. There must be constant support personnel to address technical issues, facilitate accessibility to online teachers, and to coach the students. Beese also noted that online learning students must be trained in communication skills, organizational skills, technology skills, study habits, and time management skills. Despite the obstacles, some students succeed by graduating from this newly designed learning environment.

### **Theoretical**

Beyond the instructional issues, students transitioning to a new environment adds additional personal challenges. Schlossberg (1981) reported that the transition experience often results in new behaviors and self-perceptions. Schlossberg noted that individuals differ in their ability to adapt to change. The same person may react to different types of changes or even to



the same type of change at different times in life. Qualitative research is lacking regarding the experiences of students as they transition from traditional conventional schools to alternative schools and the impact of an online curriculum in preparation for graduates to have skills to transition to adult life (Beese, 2014). This study, grounded in Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory, sought to better understand how at-risk students transitioned from traditional high schools to alternative online high schools and overcame obstacles to successfully become high school graduates, now living productive lives and making positive contributions to society.

### **Situation to Self**

My career in education has consisted of working with at-risk youth. My first teaching job, at the age of 23, was as a physical education teacher at an all-boys, juvenile correctional center in Virginia. Since young people can stay in the juvenile justice system until turning 21 years old, I taught youths aged 13 to 21, which meant that I was not too much older than many of my students. The facility later became a school for boys and girls with mental, emotional, and behavior problems. I taught students at this facility for a total of six years.

After I completed a master's degree in educational leadership, I became a high school assistant principal in North Carolina. For the two years that I was a high school assistant principal, I oversaw discipline. This meant that I worked with many at-risk students. I created a good rapport with all my students by asking about their families, hobbies, interests, favorite sports teams, and how students were doing in school and at home. These interactions were more successful in helping to improve student behavior than any suspension or other type of punishment. I encouraged teachers to improve their relationships and interactions with all their students, but especially with the students who were struggling and those deemed at-risk.

Seeing my success rate with at-risk students, the superintendent appointed me to oversee the school district's alternative learning program/school. In this setting, most of the students took all of their classes online. What I personally observed was that many of the students appeared to struggle taking classes online. The students who struggled did not have the focus, determination, and skills to be successful with their online classes. The students complained that they needed licensed teachers, certified in different subject areas, on-site to help explain things to them and to answer their questions. I relayed these concerns to senior administration but was told that there was not funding available for licensed, certified teachers. Approximately half of the students that were sent to the alternative school ended up dropping out of school. This experience troubled me greatly and led me to find ways to impact positive change in the system.

Having been influenced in my professional education training that John Dewey's Pedagogic Creed (1963) postulated that education comes about as a result of the empowerment of a learner in a social situation, and enabling learners to construct knowledge as they interact socially, I questioned how were students at my exclusively online curriculum alternative high school able to graduate with minimal social interactions? My desire was to listen to the stories of graduates as they described their lived experiences before entering the alternative high school, during their time at the alternative online high school, and after graduating from the alternative high school.

Using an ontological philosophical assumption (Creswell, 2013) to the study, I sought to understand the participants' essence of reality in the phenomenon by gathering information from numerous graduates of alternative online high schools using journals, interviews, and a focus group to provide multiple perspectives in the pursuit of authenticating truth from their life

experiences. Ontology postulates the belief that a concept is best derived from multiple realities that are gathered and collected from many types of evidence (Creswell, 2013).

In addition, I used interpretivist and social constructivist research philosophies to form the framework for my study. Interpretivism uses small samples, in-depth investigations, and is qualitative in nature (Creswell, 2013). Social constructivism co-constructs reality between the researcher and the participants whose views are shaped by individual experiences (Creswell, 2013). I used the data acquired from the exponential stories of the participants in the study to create, through analysis, a final thematic collective that articulates the rich, unified, voice of the participants that expressed the emotions, adjustments, and outcomes of their lived experiences as they transitioned from conventional school to online alternative school and to adult life.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem that this research sought to address is that as alternative high schools have changed in definition and scope, there was a need to understand the academic experiences of alternative high school students who became graduates. Most specifically, how did these graduates become successful in transitioning to and completing their education at an alternative high school setting that exclusively used an online curriculum? Phillips (2013) reported that there is very little literature that recognizes the importance of student voice in the creation of different teaching and learning practices for at-risk students. Lewis, Whiteside, and Dikkers (2014) added, “While we know the factors that contribute to being identified as at-risk, more studies are needed to explore the experiences of students in a virtual setting, especially those who are classified as at-risk” (p. 2). Beese (2014) thus called for research regarding the experiences

of students as they transitioned from traditional conventional schools to online alternative schools and the impact of an online curriculum as graduates transitioned to adult life.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of graduates of alternative high schools that exclusively used an online curriculum in North Carolina in an effort to understand how these graduates successfully made the transition from traditional high school students to alternative high school students using an online curriculum. The central phenomenon of this study was generally defined as the ability of at-risk alternative high school students to successfully use an alternative high school setting and an online curriculum to become high school graduates.

The theoretical framework guiding this study was drawn from Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory. Transition Theory provides a three-phase structure for understanding the transition process and its effects on individuals: moving in, moving through, and moving out. Using Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory as a guide, the participants of this research study shed light on what made them successful with their transitions from traditional high schools to alternative high schools, their transitions from traditional high school classrooms working in a group with a teacher onsite to working independently online at an alternative high school, and their transitions from an alternative high school student to being a high school graduate who is now a member of society.

### **Significance of the Study**

Free (2017) reported that "despite their longevity and valiant mission, alternative schools are noticeably understudied. There is relatively little empirical research, particularly qualitative

research, on alternative schools” (p.1). Previous research studies have seemingly focused on environmental and methodological aspects of alternative schooling (Dunning-Lozano, 2016; Free, 2017; Herndon & Bembenuddy, 2014) and online learning (Beese, 2014; Harvey, Greer, Basham, & Hu, 2014; Heppen et al, 2017), but there is a gap in the literature regarding the voices of students who have graduated from alternative high schools, which only used an online curriculum, and who successfully transitioned to adulthood (Garner, 2016).

This study is significant in that it moves the research from the negative aspects reported as potentially hindering student success in online alternative schooling to the voices of those who have succeeded by graduation. This study adds to the literature by describing the experiences of students who overcame the negative obstacles and graduated from alternative high schools that exclusively used an online curriculum.

This study adds to the literature by providing needed qualitative research in which participants described their experiences of transitioning from traditional high school students to alternative high school students, transitioning from traditional classrooms with teachers to then taking all of their classes independently online at the alternative high schools, and then their transitions into society as alternative high school graduates (Lewis, Whiteside, and Dikkers (2014). This study enabled former alternative high school students, who were once labeled as at-risk and troubled, to describe the experiences which they believed turned their lives around and led to successful graduation and adulthood. The significance of understanding the phenomenon of students’ lived experiences is important because, as they described those experiences that led to their success, they may help current and future alternative high school

students become successful with their transitions through the system (Scott, Hirn, & Alter, 2014).

The study describes the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, stigmas, and emotions felt by the participants as they transitioned from traditional high schools to alternative high schools that used an online curriculum to help school administrators, guidance counselors, and others as they assist future students for their transition into, and out of, the alternative online high school experience.

### **Research Questions**

The research used a transcendental phenomenological approach, which was guided by Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory to describe and understand the transitional process of at-risk students as they moved from traditional high schools with traditional classroom instruction to alternative high schools using an exclusively online curriculum, to becoming alternative high school graduates.

#### **Central Research Question**

How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively used an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences that led to successful graduation? The reasons why it is difficult for students to be successful at alternative high schools are numerous (Breese, 2014; Free, 2017). This central research question sought to counter the trend of negative literature by encouraging participants to describe the phenomenon of going from at-risk and troubled students at traditional high schools to becoming successful in alternative high school settings with the exclusive use of an online curriculum. This question intentionally kept open the participants' ability to describe a wide variety of experiences to understand what led

them to turn their lives around and become successful alternative high school students using an online curriculum in order to graduate.

### **Guiding Question One**

How do graduates of alternative high schools who used an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences at the traditional high schools prior to being sent to the alternative high schools? Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) described a transition as “any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 33). Transitions bring about various changes in the individual’s self-perception or worldview that causes new behavioral patterns (Rall, 2016). A transition is defined by the person who experiences it, and that individual’s perception of the transition is more important than the transition itself (Schlossberg, 1981). Some transitions are brought about by conscious decisions by the individual while other changes are pushed upon the individual by other people or circumstances (Schlossberg, 1981). Three factors affect an individual’s ability to adapt during a transition: (a) characteristics of pre-transition and post-transition environments, (b) characteristics of the individual, and (c) the individual’s perception of the transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Participant responses to this question set the foundation for the following three guiding questions by allowing the participants to first describe their experiences at their traditional high schools before they were told that they were going to be sent to alternative high schools.

### **Guiding Question Two**

How do graduates of alternative high schools which used an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences in transitioning from the traditional high schools to the

alternative high schools? Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory offers insights into the factors related to the specifics of the individual in transition, the transition itself, and the environment in which the transition takes place. Transition Theory thus provides a three-phase structure for understanding the transition process and its effects on individuals: moving in, moving through, and moving out. This question focused on the moving into phase of Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981). When moving into a new situation, people must become familiar with new roles, relationships, and routines. Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg (2012) noted the importance of the moving into phase, in that it is in this phase that students will learn what will be expected of them. This question sought to have participants describe their feelings and emotions when told that they were going to be sent to the alternative high schools. This question also attempted to elicit descriptions from the participants of the reactions of their friends and family members when they found out that they were going to be sent to the alternative high schools. Participants were asked to describe the on-site relational support that they received from the school systems in helping them to transition from the traditional high schools to the alternative high schools and how they were welcomed at the alternative high schools.

### **Guiding Question Three**

How do graduates of alternative high schools which used an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences while being a student at the alternative high schools? This question is based on the moving through phase of Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981). It is during this phase that students will either succeed or fail with an online curriculum and with the alternative high school setting. The moving through phase is very important for students because they must "feel supported and challenged during their new journey" (Anderson,



Goodman, and Schlossberg, 2012, p. 57). It is during this phase that students will become high school graduates or high school failures. Participants were asked to fully describe their experiences at the alternative high schools with the staff members, other students, the facility itself, the daily schedule, meals, transportation, guidance counselors, and other on-site institutional support, and the benefits and/or difficulties of working online and independently, and any other experiences that the participants wish to describe. Participants were asked to describe exactly what led them to succeed at the alternative online high school.

#### **Guiding Question Four**

How do graduates of alternative high schools using an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences since graduating from the alternative high schools? This question is based on the moving out phase of Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981). Moving out is when people end one series of transitions and start to look forward to the next thing. The moving out phase will determine if, after a series of previous transitions, the final transition becomes integrated and a period of stability is re-established (Schlossberg, 1981). Participants were asked to describe their experiences since graduating from the alternative high schools. Participants were also asked to describe how their experiences at the alternative online high schools helped them currently: personally, with friends and family, and in their careers.

#### **Definitions**

1. *Alternative schools and programs*-Alternative learning programs and schools are safe, orderly, caring, and inviting learning environments that assist students with overcoming challenges that may place them at risk of academic failure and disruptive behavior so that they can learn, graduate, and become productive community contributors. The goal of

each program and school is to promote high-quality and rigorous academic and safety programs through developing individual student strengths, talents, and interests.

Effective alternative learning programs and schools encompass the following seven principles: clear mission, leadership, culture and climate, professional development, parent/ community involvement, curriculum and instruction, and monitoring and assessment (North Carolina Public Schools, 2014).

2. *At-risk students*-Students are considered “at-risk” when they experience low achievement regarding school performance and who suffer from an emotional disturbance or learning disability (Lewis, Whiteside, & Dikkers, 2014). According to the Department of Education in 2014, an at-risk youth is at risk of academic failure, substance abuse, early pregnancy, juvenile justice involvement, truancy, and early school dropout (Free, 2017).
3. *Bracketing or epoche*- “suspending our understandings in a reflective move that cultivates curiosity” (Creswell, 2013, p. 83).
4. *Coding*- “involves aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code from different data bases being used in a study, and then assigning a label to the code” (Creswell, 2013, p. 184).
5. *Memoing*- “researcher writes down ideas about the evolving theory throughout the process of open, axial, and selective coding” (Creswell, 2013, p. 89).
6. *Online Learning*- “an educational method in which electronic tools and information technology are used to deliver educational content and experiences” (Kim et al., 2017, p. 217).

7. *Qualitative Research*- A process that begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks which inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem, which lead to researchers inquiring about the world that which provides a collection of data from the natural setting which is sensitive to the people and places under study. This culminates with data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes (Creswell, 2013).
8. *Reflexivity*- researchers “position themselves” in a qualitative research study. The researchers tell about their backgrounds, how it informs their interpretation of the information in a study, and what they must gain from the study. The researchers are aware of their biases, values, and experiences, and are upfront with the readers of their studies (Creswell, 2013).
9. *Student Success*- For purposes of this study, student success will be defined as the ability of students to pass individual courses, get promoted to higher grade levels, and graduate from high school.
10. *Transcendental Phenomenology*- A scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear in consciousness (Moustakas, 1994).
11. *Triangulation*- researchers use multiple sources and methods to provide corroborating evidence to shed light on a theme or perspective. When a code or theme can be documented from different sources of data, it adds validation to the study (Creswell, 2013).

## Summary

Alternative schools have existed for decades to enhance student learning opportunities. Alternative schools for at-risk students seek to provide learning environments with the intent to help those who are struggling, mostly because of behavioral issues, in the traditional school setting. Online instructional methodologies have become popular alternatives to traditional instruction methods because of the decrease in cost and the unique ability to individualize lesson designs to meet diverse students' needs. While much of the literature contains negative research regarding the environments in alternative institutions and research regarding the use of an online curriculum in these schools, the literature is void of the voices of students who successfully transitioned through the system and became positive contributors to society. The purpose of this qualitative, transcendental, phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of graduates of North Carolina alternative online high schools. This study is significant in that it adds to the literature the descriptions of the experiences of those students who were successful with an online curriculum while being in an alternative high school setting. The study used a qualitative transcendental phenomenological philosophy and research design, which was guided by Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory as it described and understood the transitional process of at-risk students as they moved from traditional high schools with traditional classroom instruction to alternative high schools using an exclusively online curriculum, to becoming alternative high school graduates and now adults.

Chapter two reviews the theoretical framework supporting this research and a review of the literature pertinent to the study. The chapter's review of the literature includes research

regarding students at risk, the history of alternative schools, online education, and the impact of change on an individual's ability to successfully manage life transitions.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

As educators have encountered students who exhibited challenging behaviors such as low motivation, poor attendance, failing grades, disengaged or passive attitudes, or students who manifested academic problems due to consistently falling below grade level, the need for alternative schools materialized (Maillet, 2017). Despite these schools' growing numbers, little is known about their effectiveness in transitioning at risk students to eventual student successes (Hodge & Rubinstein-Avila, 2014). This chapter provides a discussion of the theoretical framework that grounds this research and then provides a review of related literature on the topic. This chapter will consist of a thorough review of currently available literature on the history of alternative schools and online learning. This chapter will also discuss the literature related to the problems with alternative high schools and the difficulties with an online curriculum for at-risk students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Although some transition challenges are universal for students, there are still questions as to why some individuals adapt more easily to a transition than others (Rall, 2016). This study was constructed and rooted in the theoretical framework of Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory. Using Schlossberg's Transition Theory as a guide, I sought to report the lived experiences of participants who shed light on what made them successful with their transitions from traditional high schools to alternative high schools, their transitions from traditional high school classrooms working in a group with a teacher onsite to working independently online at

an alternative high school, and their transitions from an alternative high school student to an alternative high school graduate who now successfully contributes to society.

Schlossberg (1981) theorized that as people move through life, they continually experience change and transitions. These changes often result in new networks of relationships, new behaviors, and new self-perceptions. Schlossberg noted that these life changes impact how humans adapt to specific events, including normal life transitions such as marriage and extreme hardship situations such as being incarcerated in a concentration camp. Schlossberg noted that the same person may react differently to different types of changes or even to the same type of change occurring at different times in life. A job loss may stimulate one person to develop new interests and take up new activities but lead another to a dead end marked by inactivity, boredom, and feelings of worthlessness. A geographical move may represent a great opportunity to one person but to someone else it may mean a loss of support and identity.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory describes how adults in transition deal with the extraordinary and mundane aspects of everyday living, but it can also be applied to individuals of all ages (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2009). Originally categorized as a theory of adult development, Schlossberg pointed out that her "transition theory can be applied to...young or old, male or female, minority or majority, urban or rural" (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989, p. 13). Using Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory as an outline, it is evident that the participants of this research study were able to shed light on what made them successful with their transitions from traditional high schools to alternative high schools, transitioning from traditional high school classrooms working in a group with a teacher onsite to working independently online at an alternative high school, and transitioning from an alternative high

school student to an alternative high school graduate who now successfully contributes to society.

Although transitions are often linked to specific events, transitions are more accurately described as processes that occur over time (Flowers, Luzynski, & Zamani-Gallaher, 2014). Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory postulates three phases: moving in, moving through, and moving out. Student development plays a crucial role in the changes that students face in life (Evans et al., 2009). Schlossberg's Transition Theory is a useful model to apply to transitions such as going from traditional high schools to alternative high schools.

Transition theory offers insights into the factors related to the specifics of the individual in transition, the transition itself, and the environment in which the transition takes place. This theory can be linked to educational outcomes through the provision of vital information required to create effective supports at the institutional level (Evans et al., 2009) and gives information needed to create institutional supports that can be used for later use in life (Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2002). Transitions represent changeability and unsteadiness and can be viewed positively, negatively, and/or indifferently (Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013).

Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) defined a transition as "any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 33). Three types of transitions described by Schlossberg (2011) are anticipated transitions, unanticipated transitions, and non-events. Anticipated transitions are ones that occur predictably, such as graduation from high school. Unanticipated transitions are not predictable or scheduled, such as divorce, sudden death of a loved one, or being sent to an alternative high school. Non-events are transitions that are expected but do not occur, such as failure to make a high school sports team.



There are four major sets of factors that influence a person's ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies, which are known as the 4 S's of Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg, 1989). The situation may consist of a trigger, something that precipitated the transition. For students being sent from the traditional high school to the alternative high schools, the leading cause is due to bad behavior (Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian, Justin, & Lequia, 2016).

The situation's timing may be when a student is having a hard time with a girlfriend or boyfriend or trouble at home. In a situation there may be questions of what aspect of the transition do the participants believe is within their control. Situations may have role changes, such as an alternative school student having to ensure he/she stays on task without an adult constantly redirecting.

A situation has a duration and alternative high school students often wonder are their placements at the alternative high schools permanent, temporary, or uncertain. Situations will have participants reflecting on if they have had previous experience with a similar transition, such as had the participants ever been sent to alternative high schools before or to juvenile correctional facilities in the past. Situations will possibly have concurrent stress, such as the transition to the alternative high school will also separate students from their friends and the potential to play sports. Finally, situations will make the participants assess their transitions to determine who or what is seen as responsible for the transition, and how is the participant's behavior effected by this person, such as a student blaming a principal, teacher, or a bad school climate as the reason the student was sent to the alternative high school.

The “self” of Schlossberg’s transition theory is classified into two categories: personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources (Schlossberg, 1989). Personal and demographic characteristics affect how an individual views life, such as socioeconomic status, gender, age, stage of life state of health, and ethnicity. Psychological resources include ego development, outlook, commitment, and values.

The “social support” of Schlossberg’s transition theory consists of intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions and communities (Schlossberg, 1989). Intimate relationships are important because girlfriends/boyfriends can encourage students to do better. Family units can get behind a struggling student and help the student to straighten up. It is important for networks of friends to stand with students who are sent to the alternative high schools and not ostracize them. Networks of friends can also be a positive influence on alternative high school students by themselves doing good in school. Institutions and communities, such as churches, social services, YMCA, etc., can council and mentor alternative high school students who are struggling to turn their lives around.

The “strategies” or coping responses of Schlossberg’s transition theory are divided into three categories: those that modify the situation, those that control the meaning of the problem, and those that aid in managing the stress in the aftermath (Schlossberg, 1989). Strategies could consist of joining a club, seeing a therapist, or being a part of a support program. The key is that the individual’s perception of the transition is more important than the actual transition (Schlossberg, 1981; Flowers et al., 2014).

Schlossberg’s transition theory and 4-S transition model has been used to describe individuals’ transitions into retirement (Goodman & Anderson, 2012), veterans transitioning into

university students (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014), second-career students into professional nursing (Dela Cruz, Farr, Klakovich, & Esslinger, 2013), first-generation college students of color transitioning to one predominantly white institution (McCoy, 2014), male transfer student athletes (Flowers et al., 2014), and veterans transitioning from military to civilian life (Anderson & Goodman, 2014), among many more examples. The common element in each of these examples focuses on people being faced with and adjusting to live impacting transitional events. The experiences of graduates of alternative high schools facing major academic methodological learning environment changes mirror the types of studies that have used Schlossberg's theory.

Schlossberg's transition theory is a viable theoretical framework to be used to guide this research study. The theoretical structure of the 4-S transition model provides the outline from which participants will describe three main academic and life transitions: transitioning from traditional high school to alternative high school, transitioning from traditional classroom instruction working in a group with a teacher present to working independently online at the alternative high school, and transitioning from the alternative high school into society as an alternative high school graduate.

### **Related Literature**

This section provides a review of the literature that is available related to at-risk students, the history of alternative schools, problems commonly identified with alternative schools, and the history of online learning, and research related to online learning. Knowing the history of both alternative schools and online learning is important because it explains the reasons for alternative schools and online learning as well as the direction that our nation's school districts are headed in regards to both. It is necessary to know the problems with alternative school and

online learning to better understand how crucial it is to hear the descriptions of the experiences of past at-risk students who were successful in both being at an alternative high school and using an online curriculum. It is important that this study is based on the following literature because it demonstrates how vital it is to hear the graduates of alternative high schools, which used an online curriculum, describe their experiences which made them successful with all of their transitions in hopes to help other alternative high school students in the future.

### **At-Risk Students**

For decades, there has been an effort to help a special population of struggling students deemed at-risk (McLeod, 2014). There are many definitions of what leads students to be labeled at-risk. Students are considered at-risk when they experience low achievement regarding school performance or suffer from an emotional disturbance or learning disability (Lewis, Whiteside, & Dikkers, 2014). An at-risk youth is considered to be at risk due to academic failure, substance abuse, early pregnancy, juvenile justice involvement, truancy, and early school dropout (Free, 2017). An at-risk student is any child who is unlikely to graduate, on schedule, with both the skills and self-esteem necessary to exercise meaningful options in the areas of work, leisure, culture, civic affairs, and inter/intra personal relationships (Sagor & Cox, 2013). An at-risk student is that a student who, on the basis of several risk factors, is unlikely to graduate from high school. Those risk factors include, but are not limited to: attendance at schools with large numbers of poor students, child abuse or neglect, delinquent behavior, family conflict and disruption, low achievement, low socioeconomic status, poor school attendance, retention in grade, school conflict and disruption, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and violence (Williams, 2013).

Many children come to school and are perceived as at-risk because they are burdened with a host of extreme hardships. Among these are the terrible consequences of poverty, abuse, physical handicaps, and personal or family chemical dependency (Sagor & Cox, 2013). However, some observers estimate that 80 percent of the at-risk population in classrooms are students who are defeated and discouraged learners, who are the opposite of their more successful counterparts who are highly motivated students (Sagor & Cox, 2013).

There are psychological factors that apply to people of all ages and abilities. These factors must be understood and internalized by educators, especially in regards to at-risk students before the educators can respond effectively to the problems faced by at-risk students (Sagor & Cox, 2013). One of these psychological factors is the innate need for satisfaction of our basic psychological needs. Sagor & Cox (2013) noted that both Abraham Maslow and William Glasser identified five central feelings that emerge as crucial to a student's emotional well-being. These five central feelings are the need to feel competent, the need to feel that they belong, the need to feel useful, the need to feel potent, and the need to feel optimistic.

To reach at-risk students, researchers have developed classroom strategies for helping at-risk students. Snow & Barley (2005) explained the strategies of whole-class instruction, cognitively oriented instruction, small groups, tutoring, peer tutoring, and computer-assisted instruction. Whole-class instruction is an intervention that involves the teacher working with the entire class simultaneously. This is commonly known as traditional classroom instruction. Cognitively oriented instruction has at-risk students thinking about how they learn and helps students to better plan and reflect. Students use skills that are both specifically and generally applicable. Small group instruction enables teachers to put at-risk students in both like-ability

and mixed-ability groups. Tutoring allows a wide variety of different types of individuals who tutor at-risk students effectively, such as professional, volunteer, and student tutors. Peer tutoring is an intervention that pairs students with one another in the classroom. Computer-assisted instruction is a strategy that is being used more and more with at-risk students while they are in school. This will be discussed in great detail later in this chapter and throughout this paper.

At-risk students most often demonstrate the predictors of dropping out of school. Rumberger (2011) wrote that individual predictors of dropping out of school fall into four broad areas: poor educational performance (failed courses, retention-having to repeat grades, academic achievement, and student mobility-having to attend different high schools), behaviors (engagement in the lessons, the types of courses being taken, deviance-drugs and alcohol, sexual activity, school misbehavior, etc., negative peer influence, and employment during high school), attitudes (goals and self-perceptions), and background (demographics, and mental and physical health). In addition to the individual predictors of dropping out of school, at-risk students usually also come from families that are not conducive for their children to be successful in school. In fact, family background (family structure, resources, and practices) has long been recognized as the single most important contributor to success in school (Rumberger, 2011).

More than a million students drop out every year, around 7,000 a day, and the numbers are rising (Rumberger, 2011). Students start disengaging long before they get to high school, and the consequences are severe--not just for individuals but for the larger society and economy. Dropouts never catch up with high school graduates on any measure. Dropouts are less likely to find work at all, and more likely to live in poverty, commit crimes, and suffer health problems.

Even life expectancy for dropouts is shorter by seven years than for those who earn a diploma (Rumberger, 2011). High schools must offer all students what they need to succeed in the workplace and independent adult life in order for students, especially those labeled at-risk, to find relevance in attending school to avoid dropping out.

Sagor & Cox (2013) noted that frequently the very students who are most dis-engaged at school are the same kids who willingly take risks and persevere for hours trying to master difficult skills outside of school. Intrigued by the motivation that kids willingly invest in skating, as well as being truly amazed at the tricks they could do, street kids were asked to explain what it took to become good at their sport and why they stuck with it. It was learned that it did not matter how difficult the challenge, or what was the nature of their past experiences. In the right environment, these at-risk young people could and would prevail at anything.

### **History of Alternative Schools**

The concept of alternative education has a long history located within a progressive tradition in education (McGregor & Mills, 2011). Although states differ in their definition of alternative education, most will agree that these educational programs are designed to meet the academic, emotional, and behavioral needs of students who do poorly in the traditional school setting (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015). Alternative schools began in the United States in the 1930's but really became popular starting in the 1970's. Alternative schools were started as schools that could help academically gifted, or academically challenged, students in a separate setting from the mainstream schools (McLeod, 2014). Alternative schools were created to specifically help students with disabilities or special needs (Conley, 2002). Alternative schools

focus on the belief that traditional public education does not sufficiently address the intensive needs of at-risk student populations (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015).

Although alternative schools began in the United States in the 1930's, the first schools to actually be called "alternatives" emerged in the 1960s, initially in the private sector and eventually in the public (Raywid, 1999). The alternative schools began to appear across the United States in many communities, but more often in urban and suburban localities than in rural ones. Urban alternative schools were largely aimed at making school work for minority and poor populations that were not succeeding. Suburban alternative schools were known to be innovative programs that sought to invent and pursue new ways to educate (Raywid, 1999).

Many early alternative schools were adopted to serve many purposes, including as an answer to juvenile crime and delinquency, a means of preventing school vandalism and violence, a means of dropout prevention, a means of desegregation, and a means of making all schools more effective (Raywid, 1999). Beginning in the 1970's, the alternative schools movement emphasized progressive educational principles, including the value of nurturing, democratic schools and the importance of independent thinking and experiential learning (Cucchiara, 2016). By the mid-1970's, a substantial number of alternative schools existed across the United States. Alternative schools could be divided into three types, according to what they wanted to change: change the student, change the school, or change the educational system (Raywid, 1999). Alternative schools also popped up throughout Australia in the 1970's (McLeod, 2014) to help individual students in need of structure.

Progressive educators sought alternatives to mainstream educational institutions and strategies by creating schools that emphasized small student-to-teacher ratios, student-centered



pedagogy, and hands-on activity (Selman, 2017). To adequately support the minority of students who function poorly within conventional school systems, alternative schools seek to provide an innovative curriculum that effectively engages student learning (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015). These ideas have since created many modern alternative schools. A type of alternative school with a distinctly punitive character has also emerged (Selman, 2017).

There was a shift toward political and social conservatism in the 1980s, particularly regarding youth, violence, and education – and people in the 1990s experienced the consequences of this shift the most. In 1990, George H.W. Bush claimed that by 2000, every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning (Selman, 2017). This single statement linked together the perceived issues of drugs, violence, and educational under-achievement with the best and only solution: tight control through enhanced discipline and security in schools (Selman, 2017). This commitment to efficient safety management manifested in multiple policies, particularly the Safe Schools and the Gun Free Schools Acts of 1994 (Selman, 2017). Together, these acts blurred the lines between the school and justice systems, mandating swift, certain, and severe punishments for a wide range of misbehavior, and tying school funding to this zero-tolerance approach. As a result, students were increasingly ‘pushed-out’ of school through suspensions and expulsions (Selman, 2017).

The disciplinary alternative school emerged as a solution to this push-out of students, satisfying demands for a supportive space in which students who displayed signs of pre-criminality could learn to behave correctly, without forfeiting a standard education (Selman, 2017). Districts around the country were encouraged to consider alternative schools for

suspended and expelled students (Selman, 2017). School districts which traditionally dealt with the challenging behavior of at-risk students by taking punitive approaches that focus on strict discipline and negative consequences, including zero tolerance policies, expelling students, and the use of security or safety officers (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015) have now created alternative schools.

A common public belief is that the point of alternative schools is to change the student and the student's performance. This is what has led to alternative schools being "last chance" opportunities to which youngsters are given as the only alternative to expulsion (Raywid, 1999). Many alternative schools are openly punitive, while others are called "highly structured" instead. There is substantial evidence from the growing body of positive behavior supports research that more preemptive approaches work better with at-risk youth than more punitive methods (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015). Some alternative schools even sell themselves as therapeutic communities (Raywid, 1999). In addition to academics, alternative schools are places where students, who may have had behavior, emotional, or social issues in the traditional school setting, are sent to continue their education (Aron, 2006).

In the United States, alternative schools serve nearly one million students at risk for academic failure for reasons such as chronic truancy, falling behind on credits, or social-emotional problems (Johnson, McMorris, & Kubik, 2013). Disproportionately low income, minority, and older alternative school students represent a marginalized population of young people often labeled as "problem" youth. Many alternative school students face social risk factors such as poverty and unstable family situations characterized by homelessness, histories of physical or sexual abuse, parents with chemical dependency issues, and witnessing domestic

violence (Johnson et al., 2013). Lacking stable, supportive home or community environments, some students arrive at alternative schools facing personal challenges such as chemical dependency or pregnancy and parenting as they work toward high school completion. Nationwide, enrollments in alternative education programs are rapidly growing and many eligible students wanting to enroll are being placed on wait-lists (Johnson et al, 2013).

According to the most recent related data available from the U.S. Department of Education in 2010, 64 percent of school districts in the United States report at least one alternative school or program, which equals approximately 10,300 district-administered alternative schools (Free, 2017). Students who attend alternative schools are typically removed from their traditional schools due to failing grades, truancy, suspension, and expulsion. Alternative schools aim at serving students who do not “fit in” traditional schools (Izumi, Shen, & Xia, 2013). Alternative schools designed to help students identified as being at-risk of dropping out of school before they receive a high school diploma can generate significant benefits to both individuals and to society, such as the importance of completing high school on future wages and the avoidance of incarceration (Gronberg, Jansen, & Taylor, 2017).

### **Alternative School Challenges**

Even with their positive mission, it is still debatable as to whether alternative schools are helping the students who attend them or whether they are further harming them both academically and socially (Free, 2017). There are several weaknesses specific to alternative schools, including: combining the disruptive, aggressive, and violent backgrounds of many at-risk youth potentially causing schools to become more like correctional facilities instead of educational institutions; uniting the student “perpetrators” and “victims” raises concerns that

students who are victims are then unknowingly placed in an “ecology of danger” meaning an environment that is viewed as dangerous, even lethal, where individuals, particularly youth, are perceived as having hostile intent; watering down the curriculum and not providing a rigorous educational background due to a more flexible curriculum and non-traditional approaches that may lead to students not succeeding in college or the workplace (Free, 2017).

**Lack of structure.** Past alternative school students have noted a lack of structure at alternative schools (Garner, 2016). Former alternative school students and educators felt that the alternative schools were warehouses and dumping grounds (Free, 2017) for disruptive students with behavior problems. There have been some concerns raised about alternative schools being constructed as a dumping ground for students unwanted by the education system where there is then little academic challenge (Mills, McGregor, Baroutsis, Riele, & Hayes, 2016). The behavior of these students is sometimes so severe that school staff basically give up and let the students run the alternative schools (Free, 2017). Some former alternative school students believe that their behaviors actually got worse from attending alternative schools (Garner, 2016).

**Behaviorally challenged students.** The most behaviorally challenged students are placed in alternative schools. Estimates suggest that between 12% and 50% of students in alternative schools and programs have disabilities and most youth are placed in restrictive settings as a result of significant behavior challenges (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013). Students who demonstrate the most challenging behaviors in school and are at risk of school failure are often placed in alternative schools (Long, Sanetti, Lark, & Connolly, 2017).

Public school districts report transferring youth to alternative schools and programs for a variety of reasons, including physical aggression (61%); disruptive verbal behavior (57%);

possession, distribution, or use of controlled substances (57%); chronic academic failure (57%); or truancy (53%); possession or use of firearms (42%); or other weapons (51%); arrests or involvement with the criminal justice system (42%); teen parenthood (31%); and/or mental health needs (27%), and therefore are required to support youth with a variety of behavioral needs and challenges (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013).

Alternative schools are to get “at-risk” students out-of-sight and out-of-mind (Hodge & Rubinstein-Avila, 2014). According to the Department of Education in 2014, an at-risk youth is considered to be at risk of academic failure, substance abuse, early pregnancy, juvenile justice involvement, truancy, and early school dropout (Free, 2017). The main out-of-school underlying factors leading to a youth being deemed at-risk include family tragedy, lack of support, poverty, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and exposure to violence and some of the in-school factors include academic performance, school engagement, discipline, truancy, and school climate (Free, 2017). Alternative schools for younger students can lead to students being separated from the mainstream and its benefits, and that poorly constructed and resourced programs will reinforce students’ poor outcomes from schooling (Mills et al., 2016).

**Academically challenged students.** The most academically challenged students are placed in alternative schools. For many years, alternative schools have served as placements for students with behavior problems. But since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, many traditional high schools have sent academically low performing students to alternative high schools to avoid being held accountable by ridding themselves of weak students whose test scores, truancy, and risk of dropping out threaten their standing (Vogell & Fresques, 2017).

Concerns that traditional schools artificially boosted test scores by dumping low achievers into alternative schools has been the subject of litigation and legislation in Louisiana, Pennsylvania, and California (Vogell & Fresques, 2017). Nationwide data has shown that the number of alternative schools has grown moderately over the past 15 years and steady increases occurred as new national mandates kicked in on standardized testing and graduation rates (Vogell & Fresques, 2017).

**Students with emotional disabilities (ED).** Students with emotional disabilities (ED) are often placed, and then kept, at alternative schools. Many students labeled with emotional and behavioral disorders placed in alternative school settings lack resilience and are likely to experience failure in school and beyond without carefully designed intervention programs (Zolkoski, Bullock, & Gable, 2016). When the least restrictive educational environment is deemed unsuccessful for students labeled as having emotional disabilities (ED), they are often placed in self-contained classrooms, if they are available, or alternative schools (Hodge & Rubinstein-Avila, 2014). When placed at alternative schools, the alternative schools' original intention is to return students to their original schools, which is the "least restrictive" educational environment. Reaching this goal is largely unsuccessful (Hodge & Rubinstein-Avila, 2014).

**Disproportionate numbers of minority students.** Another issue with alternative schools over the past 50 years is that disproportionate levels of minorities consistently make up the majority of students at alternative schools (Dunning-Lozano, 2016). Black and Latino students, in addition to youths from low socioeconomic backgrounds, are significantly overrepresented in public alternative schools and constitute one of the most vulnerable youth populations in the US (Dunning-Lozano, 2016). Black and Latino students endure systemic

barriers through discrimination, low expectations from teachers, and other points of academic failure, including discretionary policies in suspensions and referrals to alternative schools (Henderson, Washington, Hamit, Ford, & Jenkins, 2018).

Out of the 69-alternative public high schools in North Carolina, minority enrollment is 60% of the student body (majority Black), which is more than the North Carolina state average of 50% (Public School Review, 2018). Often located at a separate location from mainstream high schools, isolated from high achieving peers and offered a basic curriculum, the regular dropout rate from alternative high schools is nearly 10 times that of mainstream high schools in some states (Dunning-Lozano, 2016).

**Lower quality of instruction.** Educating students in a specialized setting away from their same-age peers is accompanied by a responsibility to ensure that the students who receive their instruction in those settings are not being systematically subjected to lower quality experiences that do not remedy educational opportunity and achievement gaps (Wilkerson et al., 2016). Across the country, alternative classes are being taught in crumbling buildings, school basements, trailers, and strip malls, and many lack textbooks and students sit in front of computers all day without interacting with teachers (Vogell & Fresques, 2017). When school systems either allows or mandates that a designated group of the school population be educated separately, it is incumbent on the LEA to ensure that placement in that alternative, segregated setting does indeed result in the desired positive outcomes for the affected students (Wilkerson et al., 2016).

In order to provide a quality education to all young people, it is vital that alternative schools are viewed as “different from” and not “inferior to” mainstream traditional schools

(Mills & McGregor, 2016). This responsibility is heightened when the designated subset of students is comprised disproportionately of students from historically marginalized groups (e.g., students of color and students who live in poverty), as is the case for alternative schools (Wilkerson et al., 2016). Sadly, states often hold alternative schools to lower standards, which includes exempting them from achievement goals, oversight, or reporting rules that traditional schools must follow (Vogell & Fresques, 2017).

Alternative school staff members may also feel inferior to traditional school staff members. Staff members at alternative schools have revealed that they are frustrated with the school's reputation within, and isolation from, the larger school district, lack of follow up and communication with "sending schools", lack of professional development, and lack of oversight from school district administration (Hodge & Rubinstein-Avila, 2014). There are unique struggles to provide educational services in alternative schools because those students exhibit academic and behavioral challenges in which the teachers and paraprofessionals in those schools must have specialized knowledge and skills in order to address those challenges (Mann & Whitworth, 2017).

Alternative school students must have meaningful learning experiences, not just to be in attendance and marked present in the gradebook each day. After all, the main purpose of education is student learning. While studies suggest the pervasive influence of accountability may be redefining how school leaders provide meaningful learning experiences and facilitating high achievement, little is known about school leaders of alternative schools administering accountability policies (Hemmer, Madsen, & Torres, 2013). If there are inconsistencies between meaningful learning experiences for at-risk



students and performance-based standards outcomes, this may suggest issues around equity and some alternative schools should be evaluated (Hemmer et al., 2013).

**Violent behavior and substance abuse.** There is a stronger tendency towards violent behavior and substance abuse at alternative schools than at traditional schools. Students in alternative schools have a measurably stronger tendency towards violent behavior and substance abuse than students from traditional public schools (Herndon & Bembenuddy, 2014). Students attending alternative high schools are significantly more likely than students attending traditional high schools to report engaging in all behaviors related to unintentional injury and violence, tobacco use, alcohol and other drug use, and sexual activity, and were significantly less likely to report participating in physical activity, including sports teams (Johnson et al., 2013).

Students learn through social interaction and observation of others' positive or deviant behavior. Often, students emulate the behavior they observe either directly or vicariously in social context (Herndon & Bembenuddy, 2014), which results in many alternative school students getting into worse behaviors once they start attending the alternative schools due to the oppressive negative peer pressure that can exist from the other students (Horsford & Powell, 2016). An important point to remember is that research has revealed that alternative schools can be effective in enhancing their students' potential to succeed by promoting more positive peer interactions, such as group projects, community service, and outreach programs (Herndon & Bembenuddy, 2014).

**Institutional damage.** Research has shown that there has been institutional damage caused by alternative schools. Some researchers are concerned about the institutional damage that alternative schools continue to generate for some young people, particularly those who have

been marginalized (Riddle & Cleaver, 2017). Marginalized young people often experience multiple disadvantages that further disconnects them from schooling. This can include poor language skills, fragmented family lives, poverty, low levels of parental education, lack of facilities, leisure that is distracting rather than supportive of school (Baroutsis, Mills, McGregor, Riele, & Hayes, 2016).

Young people who attend alternative schools often relate traumatic relationships and experiences with mainstream traditional schools, which they claim contributed to their disconnectedness from schooling (Baroutsis et al., 2016). Educators are keen to seek new ways of pushing back the margins and working at the edges of alternative schools in order to generate new possibilities for what alternative schooling might be (Riddle & Cleaver, 2017). Some educators actually look at alternative schools as a form of violence against young people, and are particularly critical about the increasingly standardized, regulated, ordered, inspected and test-driven alternative school systems aimed primarily at classification and ranking (Riddle & Cleaver, 2017).

**Pressure to keep students in alternative schools.** One of the most critical issues with alternative schools is the pressure to keep students in alternative schools, without the option of suspension or expulsion by alternative school administrators. This is a crucial element because it adds to the notion that alternative schools are dumping grounds and warehouses (Free, 2017) as discussed earlier, but most importantly, it causes more safety concerns for the students and staff of the alternative schools. If and when at-risk students know that they can exhibit inappropriate behaviors without the fear of suspension or expulsion, negative behaviors can escalate to the

point in which alternative school staff members have little control, and the school is no longer a safe learning environment.

Schools around the country are doing everything that they can to not suspend or expel students. School districts are attempting to reduce the reliance on exclusionary punishment, and out-of-school suspension and expulsion rates are declining as a result according to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (Selman, 2017). This makes it hard for school administrators and teachers to maintain classroom environments that are conducive to learning.

California legislators passed a law in 2017 eliminating ‘willful defiance’ as an expellable offense for all K-12 students (Selman, 2017), which means that students can totally refuse to do what teachers, principals, and other school staff tell them to do and they will not be expelled. Suspensions in New York City must now be approved by the mayor’s administration (Selman, 2017) which takes the ultimate decision making out of the hands of the school administrators who are tasked to handle student behavior, and the safety and welfare of all the students, while at the same time maintaining a learning environment that is conducive to learning. In Mississippi, schools are encouraged to “start handling discipline in-house” (Selman, 2017), which is a polite way of saying keep the students in the school buildings no matter what. These reform efforts are propelled in part by the public attention paid to an influx of academic literature documenting the school-to-prison pipeline, which is the process by which exclusionary reactions to school misbehavior pushes students out of schools and into the criminal justice system (Selman, 2017).

Even though schools are being tasked to keep students off the streets, they are still being expected to remove troubled kids from the classroom. Sending students to alternative schools is a frequently used option. An abundance of rules forms the basis of this training and shape the

daily experiences of alternative school students, controlling and limiting their behavior. While such rules are commonplace in most schools, the rules, regulations, and subsequent punishments commonly found in the alternative school are attempting to correct behaviors associated with failure in the mainstream school (Selman, 2017). The philosophy, then, of “these schools is that they must be *more* corrective, and *more* punishing” (Selman, 2017, p. 219).

Typical behavior management practices in these settings may be more punitive than positive (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013). Essentially, the alternative school restricts and closely monitors the student’s every move with the goal of instilling discipline and deference to authority. Through enforcement of rules, the alternative school attempts to teach students the importance of doing what they are told, and the consequences of insubordinate behavior. This transformation of bodies and minds, the docilization of students, is fundamental to the survival of alternative schools (Selman, 2017).

**Effectiveness of alternative schools.** There is a lack of research showing the effectiveness of alternative schools. Although outcome data is critical in determining the effectiveness and overall efficacy of alternative education, to date, relatively little is known about the short- and long-term academic and behavioral outcomes experienced by students who attend alternative schools (Wilkerson et al., 2016). In fact, although sparse, what little outcome data are documented in the professional literature suggest poor outcomes for students enrolled in remediation-based schools when compared to students enrolled in traditional schools (Wilkerson et al., 2016). Empirical research on the presence and effectiveness of behavior support practices in alternative education settings is limited and additional research is needed (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013).

Remediation-based schools tend to make very little progress toward resolving students' academic and behavior challenges and that, beyond the benefit of smaller class sizes, there are few advantages related to student performance to attending these schools (Wilkerson et al., 2016). Alternative schools serve too often as placements for future dropouts. Current studies show that while six percent of traditional schools have graduation rates below 50 percent, nearly half of alternative schools do (Vogell & Fresques, 2017).

Graduation rates of alternative school students could possibly be increased by using a variety of potentially effective proactive strategies including supportive school climates, preventive and positive practices, effective classroom management, social skills instruction, adult mentoring, individualized and function-based behavior support, flexibility and choice, functional assessment and curriculum, effective academic instruction/support, specialized teacher training, data-based decision making, collaboration, parent involvement, and organizing and implementing practices within a positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) framework (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013).

### **History of Online Learning**

In the United States, K-12 online learning in general has evolved from the long history of distance education. This history has paralleled many of the technologies used over the last two centuries—from print to media and communications technologies to the internet revolution. As the country began to expand, and the distances between schools and colleges and potential learners kept increasing, mail order correspondence courses became the first form of distance education, dating back to the 1880's (Kentnor, 2015; Lease & Brown, 2009).

In addition to mail order correspondence courses, over the years distance learning was also provided by radio, television, and later video courses by VHS tapes and DVD's, before now using computers and the internet (Kentnor, 2015; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). In the U.S., some of the first internet courses began in 1986 as part of a program called the Quantum Link Community College project, which was located in New Hampshire (Waters, Barbour, & Menchaca, 2014). The spread of personal computers also facilitated school use of computer-based and computer-aided instructional methods for supplemental practice and individualized instruction.

With the internet reaching beyond the walls of universities during the 1990s and expanding to the public, K-12 schools began to take advantage of this new medium for delivering education to younger learners (Waters et al., 2014). In these early years, much of the funding for K-12 online learning was supported by federal and state subsidies. The first online high school was started in California in 1991 (Barbour, 2010; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012).

Another one of the earliest examples of a school to provide supplemental virtual schooling was the Utah Electronic High School (Waters et al., 2014). This was followed by the Hawaii E-School, which was the first state-operated virtual school using only online instruction in the United States. By 1997, the state-funded Florida Virtual School and the federally funded Virtual High School (later VHS Inc. and now VHS Collaborative) were both established (Waters et al., 2014). This latter initiative involved a consortium of high schools that crossed state, and eventual national, boundaries.

Growth in K-12 online learning generally kept up a steady pace throughout the first decade of the 21st century and the numbers are continuing to rapidly increase (Beck, Maranto, &

Lo, 2014). A group of researchers began tracking the steady growth in K-12 online learning across all 50 states and the District of Columbia and learned that between 2004 to 2011 the number of states offering full-time and supplemental online learning programs for some students grew from just 11 states to all 50 states plus the District of Columbia (Waters et al., 2014).

Traditional school districts do not have much experience with online schools and have lost students to state and charter online schools. To retain students and offer alternative learning opportunities, more public-school districts are starting their own online schools (Taylor & McNair, 2018). Actual K-12 online learning enrollment numbers are somewhat difficult to come by because there is currently no single entity that track students and because of the wide variety of ways that students can engage in online learning (Waters et al., 2014).

Since the 1990s, online learning has come to represent one of the most transformational trends in K-12 education. The need and convenience of online schools seem to increase with rising social concerns about dropout rates, safety issues, bullying, and other types of peer pressures (Toppin & Toppin, 2016). The number of K-12 students participating in online courses increased by nearly 50 percent between 2007 and 2009 (Morgan, 2015).

As of 2010, 55% of school districts enrolled students in distance learning courses (Viano, 2018). Online schools are becoming a viable program option for increasing numbers of at-risk students, including students with disabilities (Cavanaugh, Repetto, Wayer, & Splitler, 2013).

When implemented correctly, online learning may give students more hope for the future. Online learning can force students to develop greater self-control and self-sufficiency and makes them responsible for their own learning (Kirby, Sharpe, Bourgeois, & Greene, 2010). Online learning can change their lives by giving students the tools to go out and to be able to go and do

whatever it is that they want, such as community college, regular college, or technical school (Meyer, 2015).

### **Online Learning Challenges**

Since the 1990s, online learning has come to represent one of the most transformational trends in K-12 education. The need and convenience of online schools seem to increase with rising social concerns about dropout rates, safety issues, bullying, and other types of peer pressures (Toppin & Toppin, 2016). As of 2010, 55% of school districts enrolled students in distance learning courses (Viano, 2018). Online schools are becoming a viable program option for increasing numbers of at-risk students, including students with disabilities (Cavanaugh, Repetto, Wayer, & Splitler, 2013).

There have been studies about at-risk students having challenges with online learning. Some students find it difficult to learn with online classes (Morgan, 2015). Online learning places a great deal of responsibility on the student and that degree of autonomy may be overwhelming (Beese, 2014). There must be constant support for learners from on-site school personnel to address technical issues, facilitate accessibility to online teachers, and to coach the students.

Difficulty with communication is one reason students sometimes prefer traditional classrooms to online classes (Kirby et al., 2010). Online learning students must also be trained in communication skills, organizational skills, technology skills, study habits, and time management skills (Beese, 2014). When it comes to online learning, insufficient planning and preparation, lack of support for students, and poor communication can limit the effectiveness of K-12 online learning programs (Beese, 2014).



**Onsite licensed teachers needed to assist online alternative school students.** There is a need to increase supports for at-risk students, particularly when students study in online learning environments (Lewis et al., 2014). Students steered to online alternative schools are those that need more in-person guidance and instruction, not less (Berardi, 2017). These at-risk students struggle with a lack of direction, including where to transition to next if they do in fact earn their diplomas (Berardi, 2017). Licensed teachers are necessary onsite to be able to view students' nonverbal cues in order to gauge when students are struggling mentally or emotionally (Morgan, 2015; Russell, 2002). A consistent human element is still necessary to help teach them to think critically and expand their ideas (Berardi, 2017; Lewis et al., 2014).

Interactive learning and the use of technology to explore and create are proven methods of engaging with at-risk students but there must be the right blend of online learning and teachers in order for there to be success (Smith, 2014). Strong gains in achievement occur when pairing technology with classroom teachers who can provide instant support and encouragement to underserved students. In fact, onsite teacher assistance seems to be a mandatory component for online learning of underprivileged students, since students who have worked in locations with the combination of online and in-person instruction have been more likely to develop an interest in the subject and succeed in class (Smith, 2014).

Struggling students who are made to take online classes are less motivated than more advanced students, and therefore need additional supports (Oliver, Osborne, & Brady, 2009). Developing trusting, positive, connected relationships with students and their families is important. Teachers having good rapport with at-risk students is important. When a positive rapport is established between teachers and students, students are more likely to attend class,

enjoy class, and are engaged in the lesson (Benson, Cohen, & Buskist, 2005). Good rapport leads to greater learning outcomes, better attendance, greater focus, increased enthusiasm, and greater participation (Grantz, Koernig, & Harich, 2009). Acknowledging students as people by learning their interests, personalities, and values, will dramatically help increase the students' academic engagement (Maillet, 2017). When a teacher is not available to assist students, the effectiveness of online classes is compromised (Ingerham, 2012).

**Lack of online education training for alternative school staff.** While K-12 online learning in the United States has increased dramatically, the ability of teacher education programs to adequately prepare teachers to design, deliver, and support has been deficient (Barbour & Harrison, 2016), which is crucial information when it relates to online learning for at-risk students. A few universities have begun to address this deficit through the introduction of graduate certificates in online teaching. Since at-risk students make up a large number of the students who participate with online learning, it is necessary that online teacher preparation programs include information of how to better educate at-risk students. Exposure to K-12 online learning content can have significant impact on student understanding of and interest in the design, delivery, and support of K-12 online learning (Barbour & Harrison, 2016).

**At-risk alternative school students lack skills for online courses.** The literature on online learning suggests that online courses require students to assume greater responsibility for their learning; thus, a successful online student may need high levels of self-regulation, self-discipline, and a related suite of metacognitive skills, which often fall under the broad rubric of self-directed learning (Xu & Jagers, 2014). Online learning is not beneficial for all students (Russell, 2002), particularly for disadvantaged students who have been known to receive added

advantages in traditional schools that the disadvantaged students do not receive with online learning, such as non-academic programs and supports (Morgan, 2015). Students need more discipline to succeed in an online course than in a face-to-face course (Xu & Jagers, 2014). Students who lack the ability to manage their time and lack the discipline and focus needed for online learning will struggle to be successful (Morgan, 2015). Sometimes online students experience less motivation than they do in traditional classrooms (Kirby et al., 2010). Students also agree that online courses require more personal responsibility and motivation, as well as greater time management skills, than do face-to-face courses (Russo-Gleicher, 2013).

**Lack of social interactions and cultural inclusion.** Studies have found that students in online courses experience higher levels of dissatisfaction, interpersonal isolation, feelings of unclear direction and uncertainty, and a lack of engagement in the learning process (Xu & Jagers, 2014; Bowers & Kumar, 2015; Saultz, & Fusarelli, 2017). Social presence, the ability to perceive others in an online environment, has been shown to impact student motivation and participation, actual and perceived learning, course and instructor satisfaction, and retention in online courses (Richardson, Maeda, Lv, & Caskurlu, 2017). Accordingly, some students may struggle to perform as well in an online course as they would in a similar face-to-face course (Delahunty, Verenikina, & Jones, 2014).

Kumi-Yeboah, Dogbey, and Yuan (2018) explored factors that promote and constrain online learning experiences and academic self-concept of minority students enrolled in an online high school in the Southwestern part of the United States. The key findings revealed seven factors: collaborative learning activities, opportunities for knowledge building, access to resources and time convenience, student–teacher interactions and open communication, student-

to-student interactions, improved behavior in online classroom, and parental support, will facilitate online learning experiences and the academic self-concept of minority students in the K–12 online school. Two factors from the study: the lack of social presence and the lack of cultural inclusion in course content, constrain the learning experiences and the academic self-concept of minority students enrolled in the online school (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2018). The key findings of the study are that collaborative learning, parental support, student–teacher interactions, and student–student interactions are essential elements of students learning in the online environment (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2018).

Both K-12 online learning opportunities and virtual high schools are increasing across the country (Corry, Dardick, & Stella, 2017). In 2013, an annual review of online learning reported that all 50 states in the United States provide some type of online learning opportunity for K-12 students and that 26 states partially fund state-established virtual schools (Lewis et al., 2014). More studies are needed to examine the quality of the high school student learning experience in the virtual environment, especially those of lower performing and at-risk students in order to design appropriate supports as this particular population of students continues to grow within virtual schools (Lewis et al., 2014; Heppen et al., 2017; Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2018; Harvey et al., 2014).

### **Summary**

Alternative high schools have existed for many decades in the United States. These schools were designed to keep “at-risk” students, who may have been suspended from the traditional high schools, in an alternative school setting so that they may continue their education. At-risk students are the ones most likely to drop out of school. These alternative high

schools were intended to ensure that these at-risk students graduate from high school but unfortunately, many of these alternative high schools turn into dumping grounds for this type of students.

Alternative schools have several challenges. Past alternative school students and educators have noted a lack of structure. The most behaviorally challenged students are placed in alternative schools. Many school districts also put the most academically challenged students in alternative schools. Students with emotional disabilities are often placed, and kept, at alternative schools. There are disproportionate numbers of minority students at alternative schools. Studies have shown a lower quality of instruction and education at alternative schools. There is a stronger tendency towards violent behavior and substance abuse at alternative schools than at traditional schools. Some researchers have claimed that there is institutional damage that is caused by alternative schools. School districts have pressured school administrators to keep students in alternative schools, no matter how bad the behaviors. There is even a lack of research that alternative schools are effective in improving student learning and behavior.

Research has shown that there is difficulty for at-risk students to succeed with online learning. This is due to lack of focus and direction and the need for on-site licensed teacher support. However, more school districts are moving to an online curriculum at their alternative high schools to counter the costs of providing several licensed teachers, certified in different subject matters, to the alternative high schools.

The gap in the literature of at-risk students, who are successful at both the alternative school setting and with an online curriculum, is what drives this study. This study contributes to the field of education by describing how these alternative high school graduates were successful

so that current and future alternative high school students can effectively make those transitions from traditional high schools to alternative high schools, succeeding with an online curriculum at the alternative high schools, and transitioning into society as alternative high school graduates now contributing to society. The purpose of Chapter Three will be to state the methods which were used to conduct the research study, which includes the design, sites, participants, procedures, data collection, and data analysis.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological research was to describe the experiences of graduates of alternative North Carolina high schools which exclusively used an online curriculum in their instructional pedagogy. The goal of this research was to seek the meaning behind how these formerly at-risk students at the traditional high schools were able to transition to their alternative high schools, become academically successful while taking their classes entirely online, graduate, and transition into adult life.

This chapter provides specific information as to how the study was conducted, including the research design, research questions, a description of the setting and the participants, the researcher's role, and the procedures which were followed throughout the study. Data collection and analysis methods are described in detail, as well as factors that affect trustworthiness of the study and ethical considerations.

### **Design**

The purpose of this research was to describe the lived experiences of graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively used an online curriculum in North Carolina. This study used a qualitative design. Qualitative research designs use a wide-ranging methodology which includes interpreted understanding of experiences, detailed collection methods which vary depending on the situation, and individual and synthesized themes (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014). Qualitative research answers what, why, and how instead of how many, as would be the case with quantitative research (Ritchie et al., 2014). Qualitative research produces details that gives understanding to complex issues that cannot be provided by other research

methods (Cooley, 2013). This study allowed the participants to describe, in their own words, their experiences of transitioning from traditional high school classrooms with a teacher onsite to alternative high school classrooms with the exclusive use of an online curriculum. These kinds of descriptions cannot be done with numbers (Bevan, 2014).

A phenomenological study is “committed to descriptions of experiences, not explanations or analyses” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). This study used the phenomenological method of qualitative research because it focuses on the experiences as described by those involved in a phenomenon and the meanings that the experiences had on the participants (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The descriptions of the experiences of the graduates of alternative high schools which used an online curriculum is important to the substance of this study, because they were the ones who were able to successfully transition from both traditional high schools to alternative online high schools, and from traditional classroom settings with a teacher onsite to exclusively using an online curriculum.

The method used in this study is deemed transcendental because by using the participants’ voiced experiences, the phenomenon can be viewed as completely new and open to all meanings (Simon & Goes, 2011) and “everything is perceived freshly, as for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). Moustakas (1994) refers to transcendental phenomenology as a “transcendental science” (p. 43), which evolved as a result of other sciences’ failure to consider human experiences. Getting the true essence of the lived experiences of the graduates of alternative high schools which used an online curriculum is accomplished by using their descriptions, in their own words, not the researcher’s opinions and viewpoints. This provides the most accurate quality of data to the study. Moustakas (1994) held that a transcendental



phenomenological method allows a researcher to bring forth into consciousness, preconceived ideas about the phenomenon and then set them aside. Transcendental phenomenology studies how experiences and objects are perceived by individuals. It is a person's perception of an event or object, not how actual or factual it may be, which is critical since humans gain knowledge primarily through their perceptions (Moustakas, 1994). Meaning is created when the object as it appears in our consciousness, mingles with the object in nature: "what appears in consciousness is an absolute reality while what appears to the world is a product of learning" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27).

Using this method allowed each statement to have equal value and allow the researcher to bracket the phenomenon so that there is clear focus of the research. Gaining meaning from the statements and developing insights as a result of the reduction process was enhanced in the process (Moustakas, 1994). The thoughts and descriptions of the experiences transitioning from the traditional high school to the alternative high school, and from the alternative high school using an online curriculum to becoming a high school graduate, provides information that was not previously available. Due to the researcher's experiences with alternative high schools and at-risk students, bracketing out the feelings and opinions of the researcher in the data analysis process allowed biases to be identified (Moustakas, 1994). Recording all thoughts, concerns, perceptions, and biases in a reflexive journal enabled the researcher to identify and bracket out prejudgments that may have been present because of prior experiences (Creswell, 2013).

### **Research Questions**

The study used a transcendental phenomenological approach, which was guided by Schlossberg's transition theory to help understand the transition process of at-risk students from

traditional high schools with traditional classroom instruction to alternative high schools using an exclusively online curriculum, to becoming alternative high school graduates and now successful adults (Schlossberg, 1981).

### **Central Research Question**

How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences?

### **Guiding Question One**

How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences at the traditional high schools prior to being sent to the alternative high schools?

### **Guiding Question Two**

How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences in transitioning from the traditional high schools to the alternative high schools?

### **Guiding Question Three**

How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences while being a student at the alternative high schools?

### **Guiding Question Four**

How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences since graduating from the alternative high schools?

### **Setting**

North Carolina was chosen as the geographic location for the study because North Carolina has one of the leading online public-school programs in the country with its North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS) component. The sites included three different school districts which contain alternative high schools that exclusively use an online curriculum. These schools were contained in buildings located independently, away from the traditional high schools' main student campuses. The three alternative high schools use staff members mostly for supervision, accountability, meals, and support. The schools provide minimum staff interaction and involvement with students when it came to their online courses. The alternative high schools were in districts at which the I have never worked, nor do I have any personal ties to whatsoever.

The pseudonyms for these three alternative high schools are Eastgate High School, Graves Mill High School, and Pleasant View High School. Eastgate High School is housed in a building that is connected to a middle school. The annual student population is about 50 students. The school serves 85% African American, 10% Caucasian, and 5% other races of students. Groves Mill High School resides in a former middle school building. The school serves 95 students each year. Demographically, the student population includes 64% African American, 19.1 % Caucasian, 11% Hispanic, and 5.9% of the students were two or more races. Pleasant View High School is in a modern new facility, specially designed and built to be the alternative high school. On average, the school population is made up of 50-60 students: 60% Caucasian, 30% African American, and 10% Hispanic students. Genders among the three schools are generally equal, 50% female and 50% male.

## Participants

Phenomenological studies require that the participants had experienced the phenomenon being studied, they are interested in the outcome of the study, and participants are willing to participate in the study (Moustakas, 1994). The scope of the study was limited to the similarities of the participants to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences and their unique circumstances. The study uses a combination of purposeful and convenience sampling to select the alternative high schools and graduates. Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to select sites and participants according to the purpose of the study (Creswell, 2013). Convenience sampling enabled the researcher to select sites and participants based on their convenient accessibility to the researcher (Creswell, 2013). Three large school districts were chosen because they produced enough graduates from their alternative high schools to ensure a large sample size and were located conveniently to the researcher.

Participants for this study were graduates of three alternative online high schools in North Carolina who are now at least 18 years of age. The participants had graduated within three years of the time of this study. This population and timeframe ensured information from participants to include pertinent experiences while providing a phenomenological connection between them and their circumstances. A pool of potential participants, with different genders and races, was sought in order to achieve a representation of diverse views (Cleary, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014; Creswell, 2013).

The outreach director of North Carolina Virtual Public Schools (NCVPS) provided the names, locations, and contact information of all the alternative high schools in North Carolina. She provided guidance as to which alternative high schools in North Carolina used an

exclusively online curriculum. Alternative high school principals were contacted and referred names, phone numbers, and locations of people who have graduated from their alternative high schools and who used an online curriculum while being students at the schools.

The initial pool of potential participants sent an invitation to join in the study consisted of 45 students (15 students from each alternative high school). Possible participants were chosen due to meeting all of the criteria to be participants in the study, being graduates and being gender and racially diverse. My original goal was to have at least five participants, consisting of a diversity of genders and races, from each of the alternative high schools. However, one alternative high school produced five participants, and the two other alternative high schools each produced four participants. This final group of 13 participants, consisted of eight females and five males, nine participants were African American and four were Caucasian.

Table 1

*Initial Pool of Participants*

<b>Alternative High School</b>	<b>Total Number</b>	<b>Gender Make-up</b>	<b>Racial Make-up</b>	<b>Age Range</b>
Eastgate High School	15	11 Females, 4 Males	12 Black, 3 White	19-22
Graves Mill High School	15	8 Females, 7 Males	11 Black, 3 White, 1 Hispanic	18-22
Pleasant View High School	15	10 Females, 5 Males	11 White, 3 Black, 1 Mixed Race	18-22

Table 2

*Final Group of Participants*

<b>Alternative High School</b>	<b>Total Number</b>	<b>Gender Make-up</b>	<b>Racial Make-up</b>	<b>Age Range</b>
Eastgate High School	4	3 Females, 1 Male	4 Black	21-22
Graves Mill High School	4	2 Females, 2 Males	3 Black, 1 White	18-21
Pleasant View High School	5	3 Females, 2 Males	3 White, 2 Black	19-22

**Procedures**

Following successful defense of the research proposal and after the receiving IRB approval, I contacted the outreach director of North Carolina Virtual Public Schools and received her willingness to help with the study. The outreach director provided the names, locations, and contact information of all the alternative high schools which used an online curriculum in North Carolina. I then went to each of the three school districts and introduced myself in person and coordinated with the principals to invite participants to join in the study (Appendix A). In those meetings, I explained the study in detail to the principals and to all central office personnel in which the alternative high school principals deemed it necessary to have knowledge of the study. The intent of the meetings was to seek the help of the principals to locate students who have graduated from their alternative high schools in the past three years.

A recruitment letter describing the study (Appendix B) with a consent form (Appendix C) was mailed to the potential participants. The recruitment letter included details specific to the study. Since these are graduates and are thus success stories, it was hoped that it would not be difficult to garner participants for the study. In addition to the general recruitment letter, I used

snowball selection methods by asking those agreed participants to help me locate more graduates that they know and could help me secure for the study. Participants were told that they may, at any time, submit artifacts that they believed were relevant to the study.

Methods of data collection were journals, one-on-one interviews, and focus group discussions. Interview and focus group questions were open-ended questions, meaning they cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. The open-ended questions elicited responses from the participants that were rich in details (Creswell, 2013). Interviews and focus group discussions were recorded using two recording devices and then transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Member checking was conducted by giving the transcripts of the one-on-one interviews and the focus group to the participants of the study for them to check for accuracy. Participants were encouraged to make corrections if needed. Member checking was also conducted at the conclusion of my research and analysis. A final draft of my study was presented to the participants of the study for examination and verification of correctness in detail and meaning (Creswell, 2013).

Prior to and throughout the data gathering process, personal experiences were described through epoche in which the researcher sought to identify and set aside (bracketing) pre-judgements, biases, and preconceived ideas (Moustakas, 1994). Following data gathering and production of transcriptions of recorded interviews and member checking for accuracy, manual analysis and NVivo software was used to examine the data in search of common threads of content. Further analysis of the common terms led to categories of grouped terms and from which thematic descriptors of the phenomenon were developed.

During manual analysis in the initial coding process, the I developed a list of significant

statements (horizontalization of the data), with each statement having equal worth (Creswell, 2013). I then wrote a description of what the participants experienced with the phenomenon (textural description) of the experience that included verbatim examples (Creswell, 2013). Following the textual description, I then wrote a description of how the experience happened (structural description), before finishing with a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions that reported the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2013).

All information was kept safe in a locked safe in a secure location at my home. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participants, alternative high schools, and school districts involved. Participants knew the procedures for discontinuing with the study, which was found in the letter of consent that they signed at the beginning of the study.

### **The Researcher's Role**

The role of a researcher in a qualitative study is to describe the phenomena in a natural state. In order to do this, the researcher must take on the role of the human instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As the human instrument, my role was as a non-participant interviewer in the data collection methods of journaling, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group so I could hear the voices of the participants and to give a detailed description of their experiences. I ensured that only the descriptions of the experiences of the participants, and what they deemed to be meaningful to the study, was used in the research. Member checking was used to ensure that the study accurately reflected the participants' description of the phenomenon. Bracketing (Creswell, 2013) was used to clarify my personal background, and to note any biases or



prejudgments that the I may have had in relation to the research. Biases and prejudgments were reported through memoing and reflexive journaling.

In an effort to avoid any pre-determined conceptions, the research for this qualitative phenomenological study did not take place in my school district nor any school district in which I ever worked. To prevent any potential biases or conflict of interest, I did not know any of the participants, staff members, or administrators involved in this study, prior to the start of the research.

### **Data Collection**

Using phenomenological research methods, data collection was focused on the participants' experience and how that it was related to the phenomenon being investigated (Perry, 2013). The methods of data collection used were journaling, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group. The participants were given the journals at the very beginning of the study. The journals were completed during the time that it took to complete the one-on-one interviews and prior to the focus group. The focus group began after the data from the one-on-one interviews and journals are analyzed. The focus group was the last chance to gather data, so it was essential in getting any remaining information to ensure a saturation of the data was achieved. These methods were triangulated to validate themes and to add trustworthiness to the study (Creswell, 2013).

### **Journals**

Participants were asked to maintain a journal over the course of two weeks, during the time that they had their individual interviews and were completed prior to the time of the focus

group. In this journal the participants reflected on their school experiences and wrote in response to the following prompts.

- Write a letter to your younger self, during the time that you were at the traditional high school and at the alternative high school.
- What advice would you give to your younger self?
- In what situations would you have handled things differently or the same? You can include descriptions of experiences that were specific to you (because of family members, friends, situations in the school, church, or community, etc.).

### **Interviews**

Since the participants of the study are now high school graduates, the interviews could be conducted anywhere. Interviews were conducted at locations selected by the participants. This allowed the participants to be more comfortable in both participating in the research study and in giving detailed descriptions of their experiences. Icebreaker questions were used to start the interview sessions to help participants relax and from which a relationship with the interviewer could be initiated. Pseudonyms for students and the institutions were utilized. A script of the interview questions was followed, but each participant was allowed to speak freely. Participants were given the questions before the interview so that they had more time to think of extended answers to the questions and to feel comfortable about going to the interviews. Follow-up questions were asked as participants provided basic content responses to the initial set of questions. Questions followed the moving in, moving through, and moving out phases of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory.

Questions related to transitioning to the alternative high school:

1. Describe your experiences as a student at the traditional high school.
2. Describe your thoughts and feelings when you were told that you were being sent to the alternative high school.
3. Describe any experiences you had with online learning prior to attending the alternative high school.
4. Describe your experiences of the actual transition from the traditional high school to the alternative high school.

Questions related to experiences during attendance at the alternative high school:

5. Describe your experiences at the alternative high school.
6. Describe your thoughts and feelings of being a student at the alternative high school.
7. Describe how you were treated as a student at the alternative high school.
8. Describe your beliefs on the quality of education that you received at the alternative high school.
9. Describe the quality of the site (the alternative high school building and classrooms) and the services (meals, availability of guidance counselors, transportation, medical) of the alternative high school.

Questions related to the student success that led to graduation and life success:

10. Describe exactly what made you successful at the alternative high school in order to become a high school graduate.
11. Describe what made you successful at online learning while at the alternative high school in order to become a high school graduate.
12. Describe your experiences of transitioning from an alternative high school student

and having to work totally independent online, to now being a high school graduate and going back to working with others.

13. Describe what ways in which your time at the alternative high school and/or online learning has or has not prepared you for living life as an adult.

Interview questions one through four allowed the participants to describe their experiences of being at the traditional high schools and exactly what (actions, behaviors, etc.) led to them being placed at the alternative high schools. These questions related to the “moving in” phase of Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory, which is the lead up to an actual transition.

Questions five through nine allowed the participants to describe their experiences while at the alternative high schools. These were descriptions of their experiences with the alternative high school facilities, staff, meals, etc. and the participants’ use of online learning. These questions aligned with the “moving through” phase Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory.

Questions 10 through 13 allowed the participants to describe their experiences of graduating from the alternative high schools and transitioning into society. These questions aligned with the “moving out” phase of Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory.

### **Focus Group**

A focus group was developed from the interviewed participants. The plan was to meet in a centralized location, as close as possible to all of the participants in the study. I was going to provide pizza and soft drinks at the focus group session to create a comfortable environment and informal atmosphere so that the participants of the focus groups could provide new usable information that was not obtained in the formal interview session. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, the focus group could not be held in person but instead was done virtually.

Focus groups are great in that they allow participants to “hear each other’s responses and to make additional comments beyond their original responses as they hear what other people have to say” (Patton, 2015, p. 475). Since the focus group was another method to gather data, questions for this group were designed after analysis of the one-on-one interviews and journals were completed. From that analysis, questions for clarification or improved depth were developed. A Zoom meeting option was used so that the participants that could not attend physically because of COVID-19 were still able to hear and interact virtually. If work, scheduling conflicts, lack of internet services, etc. kept participants from attending the focus group, follow-up transcripts (transcripts from the focus group that have gone through the member checking process) were sent to those participants. Participants were asked to provide written input to the focus group questions after reading the comments from their peers.

Prudent focus group questions developed after gathering data from the online journals and the one-on-one interviews. The focus group questions addressed the following:

1. Since the time that your one-on-one interview and journal was completed, describe any additional thoughts or reactions you have had regarding your time at the traditional high schools and the alternative high school.
2. Describe anything else that made you successful by being an alternative high school student and/or using online learning.
3. What advice would you offer to students who are being sent to the alternative high schools?

4. What advice would you give to traditional and online alternative school administrators that would help them help students remain in school and avoid dropping out?
5. What about your experiences did you think I would cover, but I did not touch on?
6. Describe anything else that you would like this researcher to know that has not been discussed in this study.

Question one was intended to get the participants to relay what thoughts and feelings that they had towards the interview questions and their responses since their individual interviews were completed. It was intended as an icebreaker to get the members of the focus group to open up and start the discussion.

Question two got the focus group participants to add to their responses to their personal interview questions. Many times, people think of important points and details after the opportunity has passed by.

Question three gave the focus group participants the opportunity to become mentors to future students going from traditional high schools to alternative high schools by letting them know what can be done to become successful students at the alternative high school. This information can help set up future alternative high school students for success.

Question four was a question that will help with the enormous problem in schools today of the high student dropout rate. Knowing what former “at-risk” students, who beat the odds of being dropouts themselves and instead became graduates, believe to be important advice for administrators to help stop student dropouts, is essential information.

Question five allowed the participants of the focus group to feel like they have some type of ownership of the study (which they do) and empowered them to think of things that were not brought up in the individual interviews. The researcher may have not thought of pertinent questions to the study that the participants may think of since they were the ones, after all, who experienced the phenomenon.

Question six is intentionally a broad question used to encourage participants to give any and all information that they feel may be relevant to the study. The focus group participants were told during this question that this is the time to add anything that they would like to the study, even if they are not 100% sure themselves if it is relevant or pertinent to the study.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis procedures followed Moustakas's (1994) guidelines for transcendental phenomenological research, which included epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. Data analysis was based on Moustakas' (1994) suggestions for data analysis, by identifying and listing all ideas that were relevant to the experience.

Phenomenology attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudice. It requires looking at things openly, undisturbed by the habits of the natural world. The challenge is to describe things as they are, to understanding meanings and essences in the light of intuition and self-redirection. Intuition is essential in describing whatever presents itself (Moustakas, 1994).

Moustakas (1994) described the relationship between phenomenology and human science inquiry. Transcendental science grew out of a discontent with science that was based exclusively on material things. Criticism grew from the belief that science failed to take into account the

consciously experiencing person. Moustakas (1994) explained that phenomenology is transcendental because it adheres to what can be discovered through reflection on subjective acts. The only thing that we know for certain is what appears before us in our consciousness, and that fact guarantees its objectivity. Transcendental phenomenology, thus, is a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in our consciousness. Perception is regarded as the primary source of knowledge. Phenomenology commits itself to descriptions of experiences, not explanations or analysis and “that what appears to be appearing is actually appearing” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 61).

Through listening, recording, and analyzing the lived experiences of graduates from these schools, I desired to produce a unified voice that would articulate the lived experiences of these graduates before attending the alternative high schools, their transition to alternative online high schools, and their transition to life after graduation. This study provided a unique view into an educational environment that is generally thought to be a last hope atmosphere that is laced with negative chances for student success.

Moustakas (1994) described the researcher as a “human scientist” and stressed the importance of epoche, in which “everyday understandings, judgements, and knowings are set aside” (p.33). In an effort to be as unbiased as possible when viewing the phenomenon, the researcher bracketed out his own preconceived thoughts, opinions, and assumptions about the subject (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994) to help identify any biases or ideas that may affect the analysis due to his time working with at-risk students over the years. I kept the research questions in mind while doing data analysis in order to bracket the analysis around these questions (Moustakas, 1994). I did not allow follow-up questions in the interview and the focus



group to become influenced by bias by only phrasing the wording of the questions to the descriptions of the experiences of the participants. This is similar to memoing in grounded theory research, in which the researcher writes down ideas about the evolving theory (Creswell, 2013). In phenomenological studies, this is known as epoche. Epoche is the act of the researcher setting aside biases and beliefs in order to see a phenomenon through a fresh lens (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher ensured that epoche was accomplished by using only the descriptions that the participants provided and what they felt were meaningful to the study.

Each individual interview and the focus group discussions were audio recorded and then transcribed by a professional transcriptionist, and the use of the participants' direct quotes were used for authentic responses and meanings in crafting the cohesive voice of the participants. Member checking was used by giving the participants copies of the transcripts of the one-on-one interviews and focus groups for them to review for accuracy. The transcripts of the interviews and focus groups and the participant journals were reviewed multiple times to discover statements and phrases that seemed to reveal the essential components of the phenomenon (van Manen, 2014). Horizontalization was done in order to make sure that every piece of data was given equal value. During this process, I looked for commonalities or differences, listed non-repetitive statements, and sought to avoid overlapping statements (Moustakas, 1994). Irrelevant data was removed in hopes to better observe the central phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenological reduction was used to bracket the research question in a way that was unbiased and receptive to the participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Phenomenological reduction ensured "a complete textural description of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 96). The reduction used Moustakas' (1994) seven-step process consisting

of bracketing/epoche, open coding, horizontalization, textural descriptions, structural descriptions, clustering into themes, and text-structural synthesis.

Because imagination can provide the opportunity for biased influence to appear in data analysis (Moustakas, 1994), I used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to counter that potential. In doing so, the development of themes came from the experiential story rather than researcher influence.

Finally, all information was synthesized to determine the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). A final review allowed the data to be categorized into the specific themes across the three data sources: On-Site Relational Support, Ability to Focus, One-On-One Instruction, Reduction of Social Anxiety, Self-Pacing and Personal Responsibility, and On-Site Institutional Support. Triangulation of the data strengthened the study by taking information from multiple data sources and identified themes and ideas that were shared, which ensured consistency among the three data sources and eliminated outliers.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness has also been called the validation of the research (Creswell, 2013). Trustworthiness was ensured by maintaining objectivity during the interviews and focus groups. Interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist, and those documents were reviewed by the participants (member checking). Bracketing identified researcher ideas and biases. Triangulation of the data was used to give the study credibility. The researcher ensured the trustworthiness of the research by establishing credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

### **Credibility**

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality. The researcher ensured credibility by having peers review the data and findings to ensure that the study reflected its purpose. Data acquired through interviews, focus groups, and journaling were triangulated to strengthen the credibility of the study, in order to ensure that the themes, patterns, and ideas were the same across all data types (Creswell, 2013). Member checking was done by having the participants to review the coded and analyzed data (Creswell, 2013).

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability and confirmability deal with consistency, which was addressed through the provision of rich detail about the context and setting of the study. I described the entire set of procedures so that if the study were to be repeated with the same procedures and using the same participants it would lead to the same conclusions. To ensure dependability, the researcher documented all steps and followed a logical progression (Patton, 2015), including the one-on-one interviews and the focus group, while the participants kept recording in their journals during the entirety of the study.

Confirmability ensures that the data and interpretations of the data are not made up but can be backed up by actual findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I ensured confirmability of the study by keeping all recordings. Those recordings were transcribed by a professional transcription service. The transcriptions were presented to the participants of the study so that they could verify their words. The researcher also showed the participants a copy of the study when it was completed so that the participants can verify that their words were not taken out of context (member checking). Bracketing through memoing and reflexive journaling was done to ensure that the researcher's potential bias and pre-judgements did not affect the study.

## **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the possibility that what was found in one context is applicable to another context and the generalization in terms of case-to-case transfer (Patton, 2015). The participants in this study attended three different alternative high schools in North Carolina and had varying experiences to share. I provided rich descriptions of the participants, the settings, and the data (Creswell, 2013) to present diversity in settings and populations. The demographics of the three schools is like the other North Carolina alternative schools using online curriculum so the potential for transferability is increased. Conversely, the study was limited to students in alternative high schools in North Carolina, and the same results may not replicate in different parts of the country or if a larger pool of participants was utilized.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The study followed ethical guidelines in receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Liberty University, seeking administrative approval from three different school districts consisting of three different alternative high schools in North Carolina, and receiving written informed consent from each participant being interviewed. I had no hidden agendas and did not personally benefit from the outcome of the study. The research at the three different alternative high schools were locations that I had never worked at, nor had visited prior to the study. I did not have any prior interactions with participants. Schools and participants names were protected by using pseudonyms. All participants were treated equally without partiality (Rockinson-Szapiw & Spaulding, 2014). Participants could withdraw at any time. Interview and focus group questions were open-ended and conversational in nature so that any misunderstandings could be corrected while the interviews and focus groups were conducted

(Moustakas, 1994). All transcripts, journals, notes, and data were stored throughout the study in a safe at the researcher's home. My computer was password protected and stored in the safe at my home when not in use.

### **Summary**

For this study, a qualitative transcendental phenomenological methodology was used. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively used an online curriculum in North Carolina. The study adds to the existing research in both the areas of alternative high schools and online learning for at-risk students. The descriptions of the experiences were examined and reviewed to give further insight into how current and future students of alternative high schools can transition successfully from the traditional high schools to the alternative high schools, be effective with online learning while at the alternative high schools, and then transition into society as graduates of the alternative high schools.

The justification for the design and the reasons for choosing graduates of alternative high schools to be the participants in the study were clearly presented in this chapter. This chapter provided detailed information on the research process, description of the setting, participants, the researcher's role, data collection, and data analysis. The data collection methods of one-on-one interviews, journals, and focus groups which were used in the study, and the specific ways in which the data were analyzed, insured the most accurate results for the study. Issues in ethics and trustworthiness, such as credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, were of uppermost importance. Those issues were addressed to ensure that the results of the study are usable, will not cause harm to anyone, and that they follow Institutional Review Board (IRB)

guidelines. The protection of the participants' privacy and anonymity was ensured throughout the entire process of the study and even now after the completion of the study. All documents and materials related to the study are being kept in a secure location in a locked container.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative, transcendental, phenomenological research was to describe the experiences of thirteen graduates of alternative North Carolina high schools as they transitioned from traditional conventional high schools to an exclusively online curriculum at alternative high schools and to understand the impact of that educational format on the students' preparation to succeed as high school graduates. The central research question sought to explore how graduates of North Carolina alternative high schools which exclusively used an online curriculum described their experiences. Four guiding questions supported the thrust of the central question by examining participants' experiences at their traditional high schools prior to being sent to the alternative high schools, experiences in transitioning from the traditional high schools to the alternative high schools, experiences while being a student at the alternative high schools, and experiences following graduation from the alternative high schools. This chapter descriptively tells their story. Beginning with uniqueness's in the demographic descriptions of the participants lives and school settings, their individual experiences, after being subjected to detailed coding analysis processes, resulted in thematic terms that collectively describe how these students overcame adversity and found success in their online high school alternative programs.

### **Participants**

This qualitative transcendental phenomenological research study includes 13 participants, five graduates from one alternative high school and four graduates from each of the other two alternative high schools. All participants shared their experiences of when they were students at

the alternative high schools and how those experiences helped them to become alternative high school graduates. To protect the identity of the graduates, pseudonyms (fake names) are used. The pseudonyms were created by the participants themselves, in an effort by the researcher to make the participants more comfortable and so the participants would take more ownership with the study. The participants in this study included eight females and five males. Nine of the participants were African-American and four of the participants were Caucasian, which is an accurate representation of the overall graduate population, collectively, of the three alternative high schools that were used in this study (Eastgate High School: 85% African-American, 10% Caucasian, 5% other; Graves Mill High School: 64% African-American, 19% Caucasian, 11% Hispanic, 5.9% other; Pleasant View High School: 60% Caucasian, 30% African-American, 10% Hispanic).

### **Ahmad**

Ahmad was an eighteen-year-old, African-American male, who graduated in 2020. Ahmad had problems with focusing while at the traditional high school. Ahmad shared that at first, “it was kind of scary” going to the alternative high school because he didn’t know what to expect. Ahmad stated that he had one online class at his traditional high school and that it was harder than the online learning at his alternative high school, due to him not receiving as much individual help. Ahmad said that he benefitted from the smaller class sizes at the alternative high school. Ahmad felt like it was a better environment at the alternative high school, which made him a more confident person.

### **Amanda**



Amanda was a twenty-one-year-old, African-American female, who graduated in 2016. Amanda had gotten into trouble on numerous occasions due to bad behavior prior to being sent to the alternative high school. Amanda believed that most of her behavior problems were due to her inability to communicate effectively. Amanda shared that her aunt worked in the school system. It was embarrassing to Amanda that she was sent to the alternative high school because Amanda thought that it would reflect negatively on her aunt. Amanda stated that she had a “nonchalant” approach to her education at her traditional high school. Amanda had this same “I don’t care” attitude at her alternative high school some mornings but the teachers and staff members helped her to focus and get her school work completed. The alternative high school also helped Amanda with her communication skills, which she attributes to her being able to graduate from high school and now being a successful college student.

### **Big Tee**

Big Tee was a twenty-two-year-old, African-American female, who graduated in 2016. Big Tee shared that “it was a weird experience” when she first went to her alternative high school because she had to go through a metal detector and she had never been to a school where students had to get searched when they came in. Big Tee said “we had students who were bad coming in with the students who were there for different reasons.” Big Tee stated that students at her alternative high school couldn’t go to prom, football games, and basketball games, “because people looked at us different.”

Initially, Big Tee was skeptical about attending her alternative high school because of the smaller size but ended up liking it because she enjoyed the one-on-one attention from the teachers. Big Tee believed that her time at the alternative high school helped her to look at

things with a different perspective. Big Tee stated that the help that she received at the alternative high school helped her to mature a great deal.

### **Brittany**

Brittany was a twenty-one-year-old, Caucasian female, who graduated in 2017. Brittany struggled to make passing grades, starting in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. As a result, failure resulted at her traditional high school. Brittany got pregnant at the age of 16. Brittany shared that her traditional high school was in a very small rural community and that everyone knew her, knew that she was pregnant, and knew that she was going to “be that one that was going to drop out and not succeed and just become another high school drop out.” Brittany was contacted by the alternative school and started attending shortly thereafter. Brittany stated that once she arrived at the alternative high school and started taking classes online, “everything turned around for me.” Brittany stated that her “grades instantly turned around” to A’s and B’s. Brittany shared that because of how quick she was able to push through her classes at her alternative high school, she was able to graduate in 2017, the exact time that she was supposed to graduate. Brittany explained that she learned how to pay her taxes and how to mail a letter while attending her alternative high school.

### **Da’Nias**

Da’Nias was a twenty-one-year-old, African-American male, who graduated in 2016. Da’Nias stated that at the traditional high school he was not focused on academics but instead he was focused on friends. Da’Nias stated that they were the wrong friends, “friends that wasn’t trying to do right or friends that was always trying to do this and that besides focus on schoolwork.” Da’Nias said that hanging out with the wrong people not only caused his grades to

drop but it also caused him to start getting into fights, which then led him to not being allowed to play high school sports. Da’Nias got kicked off the high school football team, which really hurt him.

Da’Nias said that he felt “broken” when he was told that he was being sent to the alternative high school because he really loved being around all of his friends at his traditional high school. When first attending his alternative high school, Da’Nias thought that the other students there really didn’t care about their work or anything that was going on. Da’Nias quickly learned that “some people in there actually cared, they just took the wrong choices like I did.” When speaking about his alternative high school building, Da’Nias explained that his alternative high school was connected to a middle school, and that he had to eat lunch in the middle school cafeteria. This environment made Da’Nias feel like he was a high schooler back in middle school again and “that didn’t make me feel good at all, like I was mad about it.”

Da’Nias shared that when he first attended the alternative high school, he was 15 years old and on house arrest but was allowed to go to school. Da’Nias was one of the smartest students at his alternative high school and turned his life around while there, to the point that his alternative high school staff members got Da’Nias to speak to younger at-risk students about how he once “was one of the ones with the worst attitudes” but he made changes in order to become a high school graduate. Da’Nias stated that “they looked at me actually as like a prodigy.”

### **Emma**

Emma was a twenty-one-year-old, Caucasian female, who graduated in 2019. Emma was the shyest, and most nervous, of all of the 13 participants in the study. Towards the beginning of

her one-on-one interview, Emma stated “I’m not good at this,” in which the researcher replied “hey, just relax. Just put it in your own words. You’re doing fine.”

Emma had a child while she was in high school, so attending the alternative high school was the best fit for her. Prior to attending her alternative high school, Emma had difficulty with online learning but was able to grasp it at her alternative high school due to the extra help of the teachers and staff members around her. Emma explained that she benefitted from the small number of students at her alternative high school because she didn’t like being around a bunch of people. Emma felt that without attending the alternative high school, she probably would not have earned a high school diploma.

### **Kathleen**

Kathleen was a twenty-one-year-old, Caucasian female, who graduated in 2017. Kathleen attended her traditional high school for two and a half years but felt that she was overlooked because the school was so big. Kathleen shared that in high school she had anxiety issues. Kathleen believed that the smaller size of the alternative high school and the smaller classes helped with her anxiety.

Kathleen stated that she struggled a little bit when she first attended her alternative high school because she had to get “get into that routine of not sitting down in a classroom and having a lecture every day.” She explained that she initially had a fear that she would not succeed because she wasn’t given specific requirements of what to accomplish each day, stating that her teachers at her alternative high school weren’t saying “oh here’s a worksheet today and here’s your homework for today.” However, once Kathleen realized that she had the freedom and independence to work as fast (or slow) as she wanted in order to complete her online curriculum,

she was motivated to work hard to get her classes done quickly so that she could graduate on time.

Kathleen is a manager at a pharmacy right now, and believes that she is organized, independent, and good at time management due to her time at her alternative high school. Kathleen stated “I’m very organized now. I’m really good with time management because I do work with other people. They depend on me because I’m the manager, and when I did online schooling, I had to make sure I kept myself in check or else I would get behind. I had to be very independent.”

### **Lee**

Lee was an eighteen-year-old, African-American male, who graduated in 2020. Lee actually applied to attend his alternative high school. Lee repeated 10<sup>th</sup> Grade at his traditional high school, and during the summer leading up to his 11<sup>th</sup> Grade year, Lee told his mom that he wanted to attend the alternative high school, saying “Momma, I’m trying to graduate on time, maybe you can get me over there to the alternative high school. I can speed up doing the work and I can graduate on time.” Lee felt that doing online learning at the alternative high school helped him to graduate because Lee felt that he couldn’t do everything on his own and benefitted from the assistance that he received from alternative high school teachers and staff members on-site. Lee explained that he “had heard things about alternative school like ‘oh, that’s some bad kids’” but he didn’t pay attention to what he had heard because he was focused on graduating and felt like “I’m here to finish early or finish on time.”

### **Lex**

Lex was a twenty-two-year-old, African-American female, who graduated in 2017. Lex said that she came from an elementary school in the country, so when she was sent to a traditional high school in the city, she could not get used to it. Lex said that she was always in “drama.” Lex had a hard time finding the right crowd to hang around at the traditional high school and always felt like she was being bullied. Lex added that at her traditional high school, she “felt like the teachers weren’t giving me the one-on-one support that I needed.”

Lex explained that her first thought of being sent to an alternative high school was that it was just for people who misbehaved or behind on their grades but learned that the alternative high school also provided services to help students succeed. Lex loved the teachers at her alternative high school and said that the teachers were “very kind” and that “even though they do still discipline you, when you misbehaved, they actually try to enforce what they really want you to do and they try to work with you and talk to you about it before they just actually suspend you.”

Lex stressed that she is very proud to be a high school graduate. “I’m very proud of myself because when I first went to high school, I was bad. I just didn’t want to do anything. Didn’t want to do no work. I didn’t think that actually graduating was in my category. Then once I had online classes, they gave me hope.” Lex went on to say “and now that I’m a graduate, it’s like I feel unstoppable.”

### **Michael**

Michael was a twenty-one-year-old, African-American male, who graduated in 2016. Michael stated that he was never at a traditional high school, in that when he started high school, he attended an early college high school of about 240 students. Michael always liked the smaller

school setting. While at the early college high school, Michael focused more on making friends than making good grades. Michael said that when he was at the early college, “I bought in socially but never really bought in academically, which is the reason why I had to leave early college.” When Michael’s grades were insufficient for him to remain enrolled at the early college high school, Michael was given the option to go to the traditional high school or to go to the alternative high school. Michael chose the alternative high school because of the overall smaller school setting and smaller individual class sizes. Michael stated that attending his alternative high school “was a wakeup call for me.” Michael is currently serving proudly in the United States Air Force. “I’m currently enlisted in the Air Force, so a lot of the things that we do is pretty much working to complete a common goal in a specific amount of time. So online learning has taught me to value my time.”

### **Munk**

Munk was a twenty-three-year-old, Caucasian male, who graduated in 2016. Munk shared that when he was a student at the traditional high school, there were too many distractions that sidetracked him from focusing on academics. Munk stated that he constantly stayed in trouble at the traditional high school and so he looked into doing something else, which was to attend the alternative high school. Munk figured that his alternate high school “couldn’t be any worse than what I was already doing. I figured it had to be better, so it was worth the shot and then whenever I got the chance over there, I was right.” Munk’s peers at his alternative high school came to him during the school day if they were having problems with their vehicles, since they knew that Munk was good with auto mechanics. Munk used this as motivation to complete

his online curriculum early each day, so that he could help his fellow students with their vehicles in the parking lot. Now as an adult, Munk is a successful mechanic in North Carolina.

### **Nicole**

Nicole was an eighteen-year-old, African-American female, who graduated in 2020. Nicole shared that she didn't get the help and attention that she needed at the traditional high school. Nicole chose to go to the alternative high school because she had a child. Nicole stated "that move was the best move I made so far while I was in school, especially in high school anyway." Nicole said that she actually felt relieved when she was told that she was able to go to the alternative high school because she could concentrate much better than at the traditional high school. "I focus way better doing online classes on my own than to just sit in a regular class. I'm the type that's easily distracted, so with me doing online classes and with me doing it on my time, it was way easier for me."

### **Skylar**

Skylar was a nineteen-year-old, African-American female, who graduated in 2020. Skylar said that her experience at the traditional high school was "pretty difficult, honestly." Skylar stated that her traditional high school had about 1,200 kids there and that she had really bad social anxiety. Skylar had difficulty concentrating because of the big environment at the traditional high school, so the smaller setting of the alternative high school was a great help.

When Skylar was first told that she was being sent to the alternative high school, she didn't really know what that meant. Skylar explained "I thought that it was for kids who are not doing it. I thought that it was for bad kids, troubled kids, and that they couldn't function in a normal high school. So that's why they send you there. So, I was iffy about that too. But once I



got there, it was actually really good.” Skylar stressed several times about how supportive everyone was at her alternative high school. Skylar is now a college student and credits the coaching and guidance at her alternative high school helping her to function in larger groups and the larger college environment.

## **Alternative High Schools**

### **Pleasant View High School**

Pleasant View High School is located in the south-central part of North Carolina. Pleasant View High School is a small, non-traditional high school geared toward students who are not succeeding in a traditional high school setting. Pleasant View High School incorporates a caring philosophy and approach that combines strong personal relationships between staff and students with an intense focus on academic achievement. Pleasant View High School has low student to teacher ratios (18:1) and students receive one-on-one attention when needed.

Pleasant View High School has been in existence for 12 years. The first graduating class consisted of eight students. In 2020, the alternative school graduated 62 students. Over the last six years, the graduating classes have been consistent in the 50-60 student range. The alternative school’s success has garnered much support in its local county. Pleasant View High School is now located in a modern new facility specially designed and built to house the school. In the past, Pleasant View High School was located in a retired school building before being moved to an unused middle school wing.

Potential Pleasant View High School students are identified by graduation coaches and counselors at their home traditional high schools or referred by community health

professionals. The students selected demonstrate the aptitude and ability to complete a high school program but have other factors, socially or emotionally, that are inhibiting their success.

Pleasant View High School's demographics mirror its county's demographics. The school turns over yearly with half of the students leaving due to graduation, so the demographics are not consistent. On average, Pleasant View High School has 60% Caucasian, 30% African-American, and 10% Hispanic students. Genders vary but usually it is 50% female and 50% male. The local county has placed a significant financial commitment to the success of the school. The staffing for teachers and support personnel is beyond the ratios allotted to traditional schools and each student is offered door to door bus transportation county wide.

### **Eastgate High School**

Eastgate High School is located on the northern border of North Carolina. The alternative high school has been in operation for over ten years but has gone through several changes. Changes that would include name, location, and the students that they served as well as how they were served. As many other alternative high schools throughout the state, this school grew out of the need to provide students with behavioral, academic, social, and personal adjustments while learning in a smaller environment. It was a belief that a smaller setting with specialized care would continue to give students the desire to academically thrive. To keep students feeling as they were still a part of the larger school system, students attended the alternative setting within a school in the district. The alternative high school became a place where many students enjoyed attending.

An exceptional children's teacher was also on staff to serve those students who enrolled with an Individual Educational Plan (IEP). A counselor assisted with the scheduling and

counseled students frequently to remove any barrier to learning and made home visits when necessary. The Dean of Students helped the principal with discipline and supervised students through the day. These classrooms became pretty chaotic from time to time, but at the end of most school years, graduates grew from this school.

Students with large number of behavioral infractions may be recommended to attend the alternative school by administration. Parents may request that their child attend the school because of the smaller setting and less distractions, and normally the students agree to this request due to constant negative experiences. If any new students (from out of the county) try to enroll in any high school in the county, and they were once enrolled in an alternative learning environment, they must first attend the alternative high school for one semester.

The alternative high school is now in a building with more space for students and staff. The school now has a full-time social worker and counselor who serve students. Each year there are students who make gains on the end of year state and local tests, which is always a celebration for students who many times had been written off as a failure. The school serves more black males than any other ethnic/gender group. Because of the success of these students and how their success adds to the success of the district, it is believed that the school will continue to be a viable option for parents and students.

Notable methods employed by this alternative high school have promoted learning success in its students. An Awards Day Program at the end of each grading period is led by students. Parents were invited to the program and a community group provides refreshments. The Weekly Wrap Up is scheduled each Friday to enable the student body and teachers to meet to discuss their week. A yearly Career Fair has been a great success in lining up students with

possible employers. Faces of Hope is an event in which speakers speak in classrooms to encourage students to press forward. The Giving Tree is a program in which gifts on the tree are given to students before going home for Christmas. A Clothing Give Away program ensures that all students and families in need have good clean clothing. Finally, the alternative high school has a Suggestion Box, in which parents, staff, and students can make suggestions to improve the school.

### **Graves Mill High School**

Graves Mill High School is located in the north-central area of North Carolina. The alternative high school serves students who would normally attend one of two large traditional high schools in the county. The alternative high school is located in a former middle school building in the county. The alternative high school was named the county's School of the Year for the 2018-2019 school year.

Graves Mill High School is located in a very rural area of North Carolina. The alternative high school serves 95 high school students. The teacher-to-student ratio is 1 to 14, which is the lowest among the three high schools in the county. The alternative high school employed 16 full-time teachers in 2015 but that number dropped to an average of 9.6 full-time teachers in 2019 due to the increase of online learning. The racial breakdown of Graves Mill High School is 64% African American, 19.1% White, 11% Hispanic, and 5.9% of the students were two or more races. Ninety-eight percent of students at Graves Mill High School qualified for free/discounted lunch.

Graves Mill High School attributes much of its success to the ability to work closely with its students, frequently one-on-one, through online assignments. The alternative high school

used to share a middle school building with a middle school but the middle school moved to a former high school building, leaving the entire former middle school building for the alternative high school. This opened more space and the ability to spread out among more classrooms. This created smaller numbers of students in each classroom, which allowed students the ability to concentrate on their online assignments with little or no interruptions or distractions.

### **Results**

The results for this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study are reported in detail, using the participants' actual descriptive words as they conveyed their experiences, beliefs, and feelings as they sought to succeed with an online learning curriculum in an alternative high school building. The research process for this study included in-depth one-on-one interviews, a focus group, journal articles, and triangulation of the data to validate the worthiness of the data collected from the multiple data collection methods. Once the data collected was analyzed, codes were identified and narrowed into major themes (Appendix E). Appendix E lists the codes (key words and concepts extracted from the data) that were identified and the major themes which emerged. The major themes listed in Appendix E were validated through a triangulation of the data. The results are reported in this section in a systematic manner, using the themes that best describe the participants' collective story. Following the thematic section, the participants' answers to the central research question and the three sub-research questions are correlated with the themes.

### **Themes**

Through the one-on-one interviews, focus group, and journal articles the 13 graduates of each of the three alternative high schools in the study qualitatively described the details of their

experiences leading up to, participating in, and graduating from programs that exclusively used online curriculum. Data analysis was completed using coding processes to assign labels to clusters that formed after the extraction of key words and concepts from the data, thus leading to the emergence of themes. The analysis reduction followed Moustakas' (1994) seven-step process consisting of bracketing/epoche, coding, horizontalization, textural descriptions, structural descriptions, clustering into themes, and text-structural synthesis.

During the bracketing/epoche stage, I set aside pre-judgements, biases, and preconceived ideas (Moustakas, 1994). I did this by clarifying my personal background and noting any ideas, biases, or prejudgments that I may have had in relation to the research. Coding involved assigning labels to clusters of similar concepts after the extraction of key words and concepts from the data. I did this by writing down key words and phrases that occurred during the one-on-one interviews, the focus group, and the journal articles. During horizontalization, I developed a list of significant statements and gave each statement equal worth (Creswell, 2013). I then wrote a description of what the participants experienced with the phenomenon (textural description) that included verbatim examples (Creswell, 2013). Following the textural description, I wrote a description of how the experience happened (structural description), which led to the clustering into themes, which were patterns that kept emerging from the data (Creswell, 2013). Finally, I finished with a composite description of the phenomenon, incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions that reported the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2013). I had the participants verify this textural-structural synthesis, in order to point out any inconsistencies and errors. The synthesis of the study (the phenomenon) which emerged is that student success was based on both the on-site relational and institutional

support aspects that the participants received. Without these constructs, success would not have been possible.

From the coding process of extracting key words and concepts from the data, six major themes emerged that collectively tell the story of how these participants found the means to succeed with an online curriculum in an alternative high school building: On-Site Relational Support, Ability to Focus, One-On-One Instruction, Reduction of Social Anxiety, Self-Pacing and Personal Responsibility, and On-Site Institutional Support.

### **Theme One: On-Site Relational Support**

All of the participants in this study reported the importance, almost the necessity, of having adults on-site and in-person to assist them by answering questions with their online assignments. These staff members also helped the participants by giving them support and encouragement, not only to complete their online assignments, but also to come to school each day and to be their absolute best. The alternative high school staff members provided a comfortable, friendly, and welcoming school climate which was instrumental in the success of the participants with their online learning. Monk said “it was like another family.” The participants reported that without the staff members being present to push the students to complete their online assignments, they probably wouldn’t have completed the online assignments on their own. These staff members also ensured a proper learning environment at the alternative high schools that was conducive to learning.

Before taking classes at her alternative high school, Kathleen had the same pre-conceived thoughts and beliefs that many students, parents, community members, and even teachers at traditional high schools have about alternative high schools and using an online curriculum at the

alternative high schools. There is a misconception that students are sent to the alternative high school buildings to just sit behind a computer all day and not receive any help with their assignments and that the students are basically on their own to get the assignments completed.

Kathleen cleared up this misconception by saying:

I had pictured it to be like everyone's sitting in a classroom, doing their online work and if you got stuck on a problem that was just it, you had to push through it and figure it out by yourself. But at my alternative high school, the teachers were way more experienced, I guess. They, even though it was you're teaching yourself, they helped teach you because if you got stuck on a problem it wasn't just like, "Oh well, that's it." A teacher was there to help coach you through it.

Several participants explained the importance of having staff members and teachers present on-site inside the alternative high school buildings to help the students with the online curriculum. These staff members and teachers gave face-to-face assistance, support, and motivation to the students, which the students stated was critical to their success at the alternative high schools and with the online curriculum. Da'Nias was able to graduate using an online curriculum but he was clear that he wouldn't have been able to do it without there being on-site help and assistance at the alternative high school building:

Oh, the online classes were, actually, it was good but there were times where I did need like face-to-face help, you know what I'm saying? Because it's certain things that I couldn't ask the virtual, you get what I'm saying? Certain things I couldn't ask my computer or if I did, it was asking straight for the answer and there wasn't any learning



anything. I really needed to know how, what it would be face-to-face talking to a teacher.

Ahmad mentioned that at the alternative high school, “the teacher was always willing to help. The teacher was always willing to help anyone.” This was echoed by Skylar when she said that the staff “were really welcoming. They’re really supportive.” Emma stated “the principal and staff, they were there to help...gosh, helping. That’s the main thing. The helping and listening to when I asked what I needed help for. Being there when I needed the help with the schoolwork.” Monk expressed that at the alternative high school “it was more freedom but they wanted to make sure that you were still learning and doing what you needed to do. But it was a lot more relaxed, a nicer environment” than the traditional high school.

Brittany said that she received assistance and encouragement from the principal, the teachers that helped them with their online learning assignments, and even the lady at the front desk! Brittany stated, “The principal is, he was fantastic with us. He really made us feel like he wanted us to succeed and all the teachers were really nice as well. That helped.” The lady at the front desk “was amazing too. She really helped us, the smiling faces and stuff helped every morning.”

Participants described the need to be in a supportive environment in order to be successful at the alternative high schools, since many of them came to the alternative high schools with underlying issues such as anxiety, depression, anger management, and teen pregnancy. Brittany conveyed how alternative high school students depend on the assistance and encouragement of the staff members on-site when she stated “Everyone needs someone there. We’re all there for a reason, I really think.” Interestingly, several of the participants shared the

reasons why they attended the alternative high schools, without being directly asked why by the researcher. Brittany shared that she got pregnant at the age of 16. Nicole and Emma also had children at a young age. Kathleen and Skylar had social anxiety. Lex and Da’Nias anger issues. It is because of these issues that many of the participants described the need to be in an environment in which the participants were supported by the staff members at the alternative high schools. Skylar described the way in which she felt supportive at her alternative high school:

They were really kind. The main word that keeps popping into my head for them is supportive because they know that a lot of the kids that come there are dealing with certain things, whether it be anxiety or depression or just not being able to function right at a traditional high school. So, they're very welcoming and they're also supportive if you need anything. Let's say we're going on a trip. If you need help financially, they'll do what they can to help you out. They're really kind to people and they do what they can to help out all the students there.

Even though Lex attended a different alternative high school in North Carolina that was 162 miles away from the alternative high school that Skylar attended, Lex had the same thoughts as Skylar about how important it was that the staff members at the alternative high school were friendly, supportive, and that they truly cared. Lex stated “My teacher was very kind and I just, I loved it. If I could go back, I would go back to an alternative school before I go back to a high school.” Lex went on to explain that at the alternative high school, the staff members were willing to talk to the students and work out issues, instead of to just quickly suspend them:

I loved it. I loved the teachers that was there. I loved how they cooperate. Even though they do still discipline you, when you misbehaved, they actually try to enforce what they really want you to do and they try to work with you and talk to you about it before they just actually suspend you. But the teachers and stuff there are wonderful. I loved it.

Several participants stated that the staff members at the alternative high schools pushed them to be successful. Big T stated “Alternative kids, they really graduated because they get the help. Most of them got pushed to.” Lex agreed, stating the alternative high school staff members “could really see that I’m a good person. And they actually pushed me to be a better person.” Nicole added “the teachers were just way more helpful and were pushing me to finish and they didn’t let me give up.” Emma concurred, stating “The people, the adults, the teachers and principals that pushed me to do it and telling me I've got this. Don't say you can't do it but you can. So, pushed me to do and that's about it. Pushed me, I guess you could say pushed me to do it.” Emma summed it up how being pushed by the alternative high school staff members led to her success:

What made me successful was mainly pushing harder. The principals and teachers and them telling me, "You've got this. Don't give up." Doing the best I can and trying too. Not guessing on stuff. Just trying my hardest to get it. Make sure I made it a good, a passing grade or whatever. And make sure I done the work on time and got it finished and make sure I was there when I needed to take a test or whatever.

Monk believed that being pushed in life is necessary in today’s society. Monk stated “it’s a tough world that we live in now and you just got to keep on pushing and never give up and that’s kind of sort of the whole attitude that they had there.” Nicole shared that being pushed by

staff members and teachers in her alternative high school building gave her the motivation to complete her online assignments there at the school, which probably wouldn't have happened if she had to complete the online assignments by herself at home:

What made me successful was the motivation from my teachers. That's what made me want to keep pushing and to actually finish, to get to where I needed to be, because the more I tried to give up, the more they will push me more and more to continue to do my work and to continue to finish. And they didn't stop until I finished.

Lee echoed the same sentiments that Nicole had about the importance of having teachers and staff members on-site to help the students to complete their online assignments. Lee told of this one teacher, in particular, at the alternative high school that helped Lee with the online curriculum. Lee stated:

It was really this teacher, this really good teacher. It was really him because he would quiz me every day. One day I probably would go in there and do three assignments. Before I would leave, he would tell me, "You got to do some more, you got to graduate." And I'd go in, remember what he said, so I was doing it. When he'd seen me doing the assignments seriously, he would tell me, "Good job, he's proud of me." And when I didn't know stuff, he'd really sit there with me, through the day and help me complete it, asking questions, asking what do I know, if I don't know he'll enlighten me on what it was I was confused about.

Like Lee, Kathleen stressed that she was successful with her online curriculum because

staff members and teachers who worked with her in-person at the alternative high school showed that they really cared about the students and would go above and beyond to assist and motivate them to complete their online assignments. Kathleen shared the following:

I don't feel as if I was treated any different than the regular high school, like the aspect of teacher to student. But they did care about you, I feel, so much more than a traditional high school. It wasn't just if you pass you pass, if not you don't, but it was more of they did whatever they had to do to make sure that we passed. They would stay after school with you. They would come in early with you, whatever they had to do to make sure that you got it and that you would pass. It wasn't just we were a statistic there, but more as if they wanted...that's what they were working for. They wanted us to pass just as much as we did.

In addition to the on-site relational support that the participants received from the alternative high school staff with their on-line learning assignments, the participants in all three alternative high schools benefited from the atmosphere of a smaller learning environment in a smaller school building with fewer numbers of students in the classrooms. The participants went from having to go to huge school buildings that could possibly house over a thousand students, to school buildings that kept only a couple hundred students at a time at the most, but usually a much lower number of students than that. Brittany stated "It's a one-story school so you know your way around pretty quick." The participants also transitioned from classrooms at the traditional high schools that had one teacher for over 30 students, to being in classrooms that had around 10-12 students at the alternative high school. This smaller learning environment assisted

the students who suffered from social anxiety and led to the values supported in theme two:  
Ability to Focus.

### **Theme Two: Ability to Focus**

Ten of the participants described an increase in their ability to focus at the alternative high schools, compared to their traditional high schools, by being in classrooms and buildings with a smaller number of students and by taking their classes online. Lex stated that her alternative high school “was very small. It was where I could concentrate and stay focused.”

Ahmad stated:

It seems like it was harder for me to focus in the regular classrooms with lots of students. Well, once I went to the alternative school, once I got to meet the teachers, it was all kind of better than the high school, because it was in the classrooms, there was less people in the classrooms. And I felt like that in this school I can get more help and I can focus there. At alternative school with less people in the classroom and more help just gave me a better opportunity to focus and really want to do my work and be successful and graduate.

Monk agreed with Ahmad. Monk described the larger class sizes at the traditional high school as having too many distractions, which caused him not to be successful. This is what led Monk to seek the opportunity to be moved from the traditional high school to the alternative high school:

I made it what it was, it was my own doings, but it was just way, way more kids there, way more people in a class. You just kind of miss some of what's getting told to you and there's always going to be the class clown and stuff and all that bunch of distractions and

stuff and it just didn't end up being my thing. I didn't do very well. I stayed in trouble and it just wasn't my type of thing, so I looked into doing something else.

Lee and Da'Nias actually went one step further than Ahmad and Monk, in stating that not only fewer students in the classrooms at the alternative high school helped them to focus, but also fewer overall students in the alternative high school building helped them to better focus. Lee said that he was not as focused as he should have been at his traditional high school because of all of his friends being in the building. Da'Nias echoed those sentiments by Lee, explaining:

My experience from my traditional high school, it was like, Okay, first time being at a high school. So of course, it was bigger and a lot more people and alot different types of personality, you know what I'm saying? So, it was like attention from every corner. So, it was like kind of hard to focus on work when I'm coming straight into a building straight from a school that really wasn't so hard on people. It was actually like college even though I didn't even get to that experience neither, but when I went to high school, it was just like, "Wow, all these people, all these friends." So, I was more focused on friends and then when I started focusing on friends, I was focused on the wrong friends, friends that wasn't trying to do right or friends that was always trying to do this and that besides focus on schoolwork.

In addition to the students who stated that the smaller number of students in the alternative high school classrooms and buildings helped them to better focus, participants explained that the online curriculum helped them to better focus on their academics. Lee described it like this, "Get your computer, sit down, start working. Soon as you sit down, you start working until you go to the gym before school ends at 12. So, it was good because it wasn't

as many distractions. You really sit there, do your work until the time stops.” Big T said that taking college-level courses online at her alternative high school made her “look at things from a different perspective” and increased her ability to focus. Skylar added:

Online learning helps a lot for me because I tend to focus more when I can be in my own little world, my own space. In a traditional high school, you have all the kids around you and they'll talk and it's distracting. But with online learning, it's just you and your computer and your headphones and also the teacher, if you need help. So, it's easier for me to concentrate on what I'm doing.

Kathleen liked the flexibility that an online curriculum provided for her in order to better focus. If there were times that she felt anxiety or was stressed and could not focus, she could take a break and resume her lessons at a later time. Brittany and Nicole both described in detail how using an online curriculum helped them to excel by increasing their ability to focus.

Brittany explained it this way:

The online learning really helped me because I was able to go back, study, put my headphones in, and I've always been the type of person that enjoyed putting headphones in and zoning into what I'm learning. And the online courses helped me more than someone sitting there writing it on a whiteboard, trying to describe it to me. I was able to learn. I didn't have to constantly think about anybody else really, but what I was doing. I felt like I was able to study and really concentrate better in my own area, my own space in the school instead of being in a classroom with others.

In addition to Brittany, Nicole said that she was “relieved” that she was able to use an online curriculum at the alternative high school in order to increase her focus:



I actually felt relieved because it was easier for me anyway, and that I concentrate way better doing it that way. With me having a child, it was so much better for me. Online learning, I focus way better doing online classes on my own than to just sit in a regular class. I'm the type of person that's easily to get distracted, so with me doing online classes and with me doing it on my time, it was way easier for me...like I keep saying I was happy and it was easier for me and it was a relief for me, so yeah. I like it, I would recommend it for somebody that's not doing too good in public school, around a lot of people it's way easier and it's a better opportunity.

In describing what Nicole believed about the quality of education that she received at the alternative high school and her ability to focus, Nicole stated:

The education I got was good, way better than when I was getting in the regular high school, because like I said before, I really can't focus like that, and I focus better more when I was at the alternative school because I have more help and the classes was way easier for me to do them online. So, the way I could focus with the online class was better for me and the way that the online class show me how to do my work more.

### **Theme Three: One-On-One Instruction**

Interestingly, the participants felt they prospered more from the one-on-one instruction that they received on-site at the alternative high school from in-person help from teachers and staff members who worked there, than they did from the actual teacher of the online course who was located sometimes hundreds of miles away. The small class sizes at the alternative high schools allowed the teachers and staff members to be able to give more one-on-one instruction to the students as they completed assignments. Da'Nias stated "we had to limit it to like seven

people per class and we used up to, I think eight classrooms. Yeah, so there was one-on-one.”

The number of students in Big T’s alternative high school classrooms were slightly larger than that of Da’Nias’ alternative high school classrooms, but were still about a third of the size of Big T’s traditional high school classrooms, which allowed her to get “more attention.” According to Big T:

I actually kind of liked it. Like I said, at first, I was kind of skeptical about it because it's smaller than a regular school, so at first, I felt like I was more disadvantaged because they were moving me. But after a while, like I said, I liked it. I liked it because it's more hands-on and teachers, most teachers have what? 25 to 30 students in the class? So then when you go into a place with 10 or 11 students, it's more hands-on, and you don't have to worry about the teachers talking to maybe five out of 30 of y'all. Instead, the other teachers at the alternative schools, they all walk around and participate with the students hands-on. So yeah, it was more better.

Big T went on to say how strongly she felt about the effectiveness of alternative high schools because of their one-on-one instruction, saying, “alternative school, I'd prefer alternative school to anybody. If anybody wants to graduate, be more hands-on, and more focused, then yeah, because the classes are smaller and the teachers are great. It helped me out a lot. And if I could do it all over again, I would definitely go back.”

Brittany, Monk, and Kathleen described how they felt like just another number or “body” when they attended the traditional high school and were sometimes overlooked. However, when they became students at the alternative high school, they received more one-on-one instruction

and benefitted from the additional attention that they received from the teachers and staff at the alternative high school. According to Brittany, at the traditional high school:

Everything's on paper and how you have to take a test every week and you're not really getting the help that you need at school with the teachers. There's so many other kids that they're worried about. You're just one out of 30 in times. It was difficult for me to pass my classes and then whenever I got pregnant, it made it even more harder because how [traditional] high schools are.

Monk felt like just another body at the traditional high school. "I mean it was just another body being there. It wasn't, you weren't quite getting as much of the information and stuff as you thought you should. And just everybody, too much going on." Monk went on to describe how he, and some of his fellow students, did well at the alternative high schools due to more one-on-one instruction. "I mean they had kind of similar problems I had. They worked better with being in smaller environments, more hands on, more one-on-one. But some of the stuff would get tough and hard to figure out some at times if you ever needed a helping hand, they were always right there for you." Kathleen shared the same sentiments, saying "I felt as if I was maybe overlooked a little bit just because my [traditional high] school was so big. I don't know if I got that one-on-one experience that I did at my alternative high school." Kathleen said that at the alternative high school, "if you got stuck on a problem it wasn't just like, 'Oh well, that's it.' A teacher was always there to coach you through it."

Ahmad and Lex described how it was harder to completely understand what the teacher was instructing due to the large class sizes and the lack of one-on-one instruction at the traditional high schools. Ahmad stated:

It took me a harder time to learn what teachers was saying compared to the alternative school. The alternative school was kind of better because in alternative school we had one-on-one teaching. It was like it was home. With one-on-one teaching it was better because I could understand more what the teacher was saying. And if I had any questions the teacher was always right there to answer the questions. Compared to the regular high school where there's a lot of students and they had to go to each student before they came to me...I feel like the alternative high school was better because it was a better way of learning. Like I said, you get more help, one-on-one, with the teacher and they was always willing to help. They corrected you and showed you the right way of doing stuff. If you was wrong they would show you the right way and make sure that you got it and you know the right way of doing it. Yeah, the one that made me more confident was the one-on-one and you got more help.

Like Ahmad, Lex didn't feel like she was getting the one-on-one instruction from teachers that she needed at the traditional high school. However, at the alternative high school, Lex felt that she was getting "two teachers in one." According to Lex:

I quickly adjusted to the alternative school. It was a smaller crowd. It was less people. So therefore, the teacher could actually concentrate more on one person at a time and give you that one-on-one study that you need and they actually explained to you and set you down and told you stuff. But as far as drama and stuff and the crowds, it was very small. It was where I could concentrate and stay focused. It was just like a regular high school. It was just in a smaller building. Doing online learning at the alternative high

school, even though I was online, I still had a teacher there that just in case if I had any questions that would help me. So, it was like I had two teachers in one.

Skylar and Lee were very passionate in describing the benefits of getting one-on-one instruction from the teachers and staff on-site at the alternative high school building with their online curriculum. Both of these participants were initially worried about having to take their classes online, but they soon realized that they were going to get help from the teachers and staff at the alternative high school. Skylar explained:

It was great. When you start out you get your computer. We all have assigned computers for our homeroom. All of our courses are online. So, we have virtual classes, but there's a teacher in every room to assist you if you need help. So, let's say you don't understand something on your course online. You can ask the teacher and they'll always help you. You can do tutoring after school. There are certain kids that'll help you out or certain teachers that will help you out after school if you really need. There's a lot of support behind the educational system. It's not as hard as I thought it was going to be when I first got there. I thought the online thing was going to be hectic, but it really wasn't.

Lee expressed the necessity of having one-on-one instruction at the alternative high school to help students with their online curriculum. Lee even stated that without the one-on-one instruction, he would have probably just gone to the Google website to search for the answers to the questions on tests and assignments, without really learning the content of the lessons. Lee described the one-on-one instruction that he received from the teachers and staff members on-site this way:

They helped me with my work when I was confused. When I was sitting down next to my teacher in my room and he'll walk me through it. Help me out on things I didn't know. They taught me what I needed to learn. Education-wise, if you didn't know anything about what was going on, they'll explain to you the test so you can know about what you working on, what you need to know. Online learning... I think if I wasn't around a teacher or anything like that and I was confused about something that I had needed to do so I could complete the whole class, I'd go to Google.

#### **Theme Four: Reduction of Social Anxiety**

Six of the participants expressed that the smaller alternative high school building and the smaller class sizes helped them with social anxiety issues. Monk and Kathleen believed it also helped to create a sense of family. Monk stated “I felt from day one a complete, just a complete different environment. I mean it was smaller, less people, everybody there was super, super nice. It was like felt more connected as like a family instead of just being at a school.” The students all worked together to help each other succeed. Minimizing the participants’ social anxiety allowed the participants to focus more on their academics. Kathleen explained:

A lot of people at my school suffered from social anxiety or depression and there were kids that were there that weren't bad kids but were stereotyped to be bad kids. I think they had it beat in their head that they were, so everyone had their own little cliques at first, like at the beginning of the year. But I feel like at the end of it, everyone, since it is smaller than a traditional high school, everyone bonded to be like one family and we all helped each other to make sure that we all passed, if that makes sense. We were all there for each other...As far as what the school was like, it helped me that our school was so

small. We were literally one hallway of classroom and that helps me because the whole big school environment just really freaked me out at the time. I'm not sure why, but this was just a phase in my life that I was in my anxiety. Looking back now it's kind of silly I feel like, but then I just didn't want to be in a big crowd and with it being smaller, it was like none of us tried to be perfect. We all knew that someone there was going through something and we were all there for each other and the smaller school made it better for that.

Ahmad expressed that his social anxiety at the much larger traditional high school caused him to be afraid to answer questions. In contrast, at the alternative high school, the smaller setting gave Ahmad the confidence to answer questions and to be a better student:

The classrooms was like the building was smaller than a regular high school. And the classroom was the same size. Some of them was small, but other than that, it was the same size, which is less students...At alternative high school it seemed like I became a better student and more confident in myself and doing my work. Compared to the regular high school where I knew stuff, but I was like afraid to answer questions and stuff, but I wasn't sure if it was going to be the right answer and stuff like that.

Brittany's social anxiety was caused by meeting new people for the first time. Due to the large numbers of students at the traditional high school, this was an overwhelming feeling. However, at the alternative high school, the smaller school building, smaller number of students, and even the physical appearance of the classrooms gave Brittany structure and allowed her the ability to minimize her social anxiety:

I was a little nervous to meet all the new people, and it was a smaller group of us, so it's not like there's a huge school full of kids. There's only so many of us. There's not even ... It was 12 or 13 classrooms whenever I was there. It's not like there was a whole bunch of us, so it was different. I was really nervous, but whenever I got there, I was able to settle in very quickly and adapt. It helped me a lot with structure. And the classrooms were good sizes. It wasn't a lot of us. It wasn't like a huge class or even. All the classrooms were so nice. They always made the classrooms very educational in the backgrounds and the nice books and stuff.

Skylar and Michael shared that the large number of students at their traditional high schools caused social anxiety, which limited their ability to concentrate. Skylar stated that at her alternative high school, “there's maybe probably not even a hundred kids that attend the school and it's not big.” But at the traditional high school, Skylar said that her “experience was pretty difficult, honestly. The school that I went to, the public school is really big. There's about 1200 kids there and I have really bad social anxiety. It's hard for me to concentrate in an environment that big, so it was difficult.” Michael echoed the feelings of Skylar, saying “I felt that that environment was perfect for me in terms of population. I'm not really a big fan of a big crowds or whatever. So that was pretty much my experience. It was a smaller, smaller school.” Michael had the option of either going back to his traditional high school or being enrolled in the alternative high school. Michael choose to go to the much smaller alternative high school due to his social anxiety issues, which proved to be a good decision. Michael explained, “It was recommended to me that the alternative high school was smaller, it was family-oriented and that



was pretty much it. It was easy to communicate with the teachers, ask questions and everything like that, so it was pretty good.”

### **Theme Five: Self-Pacing and Personal Responsibility**

Nine of the participants described that their ability to succeed with an online curriculum at an alternative high school setting because they enjoyed the ability to work at their own pace and felt a personal responsibility to be in control of their own education. Some of the participants were behind a grade level before being sent to their alternative high school, so they liked the opportunity to quickly complete their classes online, in order to move on to another online course. Some participants reported that they were able to catch back up with their peers and get on grade level. Sometimes, it even allowed the participants to earn the credits necessary to graduate in order to graduate ahead of their peers. Nicole mentioned that the teachers of the online curriculum “work around how fast you move.” Da’Nias explained that he was able to graduate due to working at a good pace and paying attention. Da’Nias stated “I can say I did graduate by doing it online. So, it is a good experience because if you sit there and actually pay attention, it's telling you everything you need to know, it's just up to you to pay attention and learn from it.” Lee described that he was able to save time and get more schoolwork done by taking his classes online at the alternative high school, because he didn’t have to keep moving to different classrooms, like he did at the traditional high school.

Yeah, it was real different. As soon as I had went to the alternative school, it was like everything was online, everything. So, it was like you could just really sit there and do your work. You pace yourself and they give you, "Do this and do as many as you can." They don't give you a certain limit to do. Really, you can go over what they give you to

do...so, you can get more work done just sitting there doing the work. It's not really like, "I'm at this classroom. Got to walk to this class," like the regular schools. It was all online work.

Skylar liked that she didn't have to wait on other students. "Plus, everybody is going at their own pace. So, you don't have to wait. If somebody else in your class is behind and not where you're at in your lesson, you don't have to wait on everybody to catch up. You just go at your own pace and finish the course as you get through it." Brittany was a year behind before attending the alternative high school but was able to graduate on-time due to the online curriculum and working at her own pace. Brittany described it this way:

All the teachers were so helpful because you moved at your own pace and however fast you made it through your course, it was all up to you how much you wanted to work for it. I actually wasn't supposed to graduate until 2018 because of how bad my grades were my freshman year at my traditional high school. But because of how quick I was able to push through my courses, I was able to graduate on time, the exact time I was supposed to for my traditional high school...I would definitely say the online schooling helped me a lot. That was probably the one thing that really helped, was taking away the notebook and the stressful test every week and doing everything online at my own pace. That really helped me a lot...just being able to move at my own pace and I was the only one that had control of it. I was able to study on my own. I taught myself at the computer.

Michael liked the online curriculum over traditional methods of instruction. "I honestly liked it more than the traditional way of the teacher teaching you and you just follow along. It was a self-paced environment and pretty much the teachers were there for to provide clarification

and assistance if you needed help with anything.” Michael explained that students must have a great deal of discipline and motivation to be successful with an online curriculum:

So in online learning, you really just have to have a lot of discipline and motivation because you can go there and begin class or whatever, but it's self-paced so you, not that you can do what you want, but you can kind of maneuver how you want to for that class period. And it provided great opportunity to move as quickly as possible being that it's self-paced. I could if I wanted to, I could've finished the class in about two months and pick up another class after those, after that or whatever to learn my credits faster, which could ultimately help me graduate faster... I feel as though I accomplish a lot more by myself because working independently, it's a free-flowing work style, and alternative high school they taught me motivation, self-discipline and self-awareness.

Ahmad described that he was successful with an online curriculum because working at his own pace also allowed him the means to better understand what the teacher was saying:

Well, over there, all our classes were online. So that was even better because sometimes in a regular classroom, like what the teacher was saying I couldn't really catch on to what they was saying. And being that it was online, you can go back and re-read and then go forward and answer the questions. And you can better understand what the question was saying compared to when the teacher's talking about it...yeah, you work at your own pace and there wasn't nobody rushing you. And the teacher, they won't rushing you in teaching.

Ahmad explained that the teachers didn't go at the students' pace at the traditional high

school. According to Ahmad, “asking the teachers to repeat the question, they weren't repeating the questions, they'll just keep on going. And if you didn't get it then you just didn't get it. You just had to ask another student.” Kathleen echoed Ahmad’s description of teachers at traditional high schools and how things were better with the online curriculum at the alternative high school by saying:

I think really, it's just like going at your own pace. It wasn't like a teacher was just standing over you. If you didn't get it the first time it was like, not the teachers ever called me stupid, but it wasn't like they were condescending about it. Like, "Why do you not get this?" You were your own teacher, so it was if you didn't get it and then you could go back and reread it or do another practice problem just to make sure that you understood it.

Kathleen shared that she had anxiety issues and even the thought of online learning scared her at first. Kathleen stated “I had never really taken any online classes before, so the thought of having to teach myself was scary. I was obviously scared of failing, of going there and it not being something that was going to be good for me or something that I could teach myself and not making the grades that I wanted because I really had high expectations for my schooling.” Kathleen shared that initially she was not successful with the online curriculum:

I think for the first few weeks I struggled a little bit just getting into that routine of not sitting down in a classroom and having a lecture every day. But once I got over that fear of what if I'm not teaching myself the correct way or getting behind because there's really not like, "Oh, here's a worksheet today and here's your homework for today." It was free

will and you could get it done as fast as you wanted to or you could get behind as fast as you wanted to.

Kathleen described that she was driven to get her assignments completed as soon as possible, which enabled her to excel by successfully pacing herself.

I am the kind of person who, if our assignments are unlocked, I want to finish all of them. I finished classes super-quick because I wanted to get done fast. I feel like I had that drive that if it was open, I wanted to get it done. Transitioning there was kind of hard because at first, I did get behind, but then as soon as I realized that I could get ahead and finish faster, I would come straight home from school and work, work, work, work, work until I got done.

Kathleen found that working at her own pace helped her to catch up on her schoolwork if she was having a bad day.

I think working at your own pace really helped. I'm not sure if all online high schools are like that, but we have 24-hour access to our curriculum. If it was a day that I just really couldn't focus because of my anxiety or I was just stressed out or whatever it was and I really couldn't focus that well at school, I could come home and kill it and do 14 quizzes at one time, I felt like. Whether I wasn't comfortable in the spot that I was in that day, mentally, I would come home and get my pajamas and rock it because it was online.

Whereas if it would have been a traditional high school, I would've just had to fail a quiz and be fine with it.

In contrast to the other participants in the study, Monk's personal motivation of working at his own pace was to get his assignments completed quickly in order to free up some free time

to be able to help other students and staff members with mechanical work, which he really enjoyed.

You kind of just did your own thing at your own pace and if you had any kind of questions or anything, they were always there to give you a hand. If you can't figure it out and then you have people that are experts in that, that can give you a little helping hand. I went through, did all my classes, anybody who I needed a hand or anything would help me out and everybody came to me because I've always been a mechanic growing up, helping them out and stuff...and there were even times where if I was ahead in class or something like that, I had basically just free time. I would go out and I would help. I would help diagnose somebody's car or something in the parking lot on my lunch break or something like that.

Kathleen, Michael, and Monk shared that their time at their alternative high schools, working at their own pace, and the personal responsibility that came along with online learning, has helped them now in their lives as adults. Kathleen stated:

I'm a manager at a pharmacy right now, so I do work with a lot of people and I don't feel like that my high school being online set me back any at all with that. I still feel as if I'm very organized now. I'm really good with time management because I do work with other people. They depend on me because I'm the manager and whenever I did online schooling, I had to make sure I kept myself in check or else I would get behind. I had to be very independent...whereas a traditional high school, I feel like the teachers there are saying like, "Hey, you didn't turn in your research paper. Hey, you didn't turn in this project. Hey, you didn't turn in this. You didn't turn in this." I was the only one that was

looking after myself with an online environment. If I didn't turn it in, it was no one else's fault but mine. I had to grow up really quickly I feel like and now as an adult, no one's standing over my shoulder saying, "Did you pay this bill? Did you do this? Did you do this? Hey, don't forget this." Whereas online, I was always the one held accountable for it. As an adult now, I feel like I hold myself way more accountable.

Michael agreed with Kathleen. "I definitely think it's helped to prepare me for living life as an adult. Like I said, I enjoyed working at my own pace. With that being said, you begin to find out how to make use of your time and how to complete a task. You begin to learn how you can set goals for yourself and complete the tasks within that timeframe that you set." Monk concurred with the sentiments of Michael and Kathleen by giving a ringing endorsement of alternative high schools that use an online curriculum, saying:

But it all still kind of relates. I do my own independent thing, kind of as I did there in school online and learning slowly. You go in there and you do your own thing at your own pace and it helped a lot into my work life after being a graduate because it just helped me kind of slow down and take my time and figure out what I need to know. Along with going at your own pace and not overdoing it. It was nice. I feel that alternative high schools like that need to be more than what they already have been in the past because there's a lot more students out there that are in the same situation that I was in. And I feel like it can help a lot more students out as it did me.

### **Theme Six: On-Site Institutional Support**

Seven of the participants described how on-site institutional support at the alternative high schools helped them to graduate. The on-site institutional support included guidance

counselors, nurses, principals, and coaches, among others. The on-site institutional support helped to take care of the students' physical, mental, emotional, and social wellbeing, which was essential for the overall success of the students. Da'Nias felt that he couldn't make it with just doing the online curriculum at the alternative high school without the school's on-site institutional support. The on-site institutional support looked at the student as a whole person, not just focusing on academics. Da'Nias was passionate in his description of why he needed the help from the on-site institutional support at his alternative high school:

Well, actually I take it, basically I learned from it in both ways, but when you're talking about the online, it's like when you're learning from someone that's actually not going through something like my computer or the teacher that was teaching me online, didn't have feelings like I'm talking to a robot, I'm learning from the robot. So, it's like, even if I needed help outside of school, like dealing with my feelings or what's going on with my family, probably then I couldn't do it. That's why I always wanted to be around regular help. Like that's why I always reached out for extra help. That's why people always came to me and said they saw something in me because I never did. Only I did get in trouble, but they did see that I tried to turn myself around, get back on the right side. So, when it came to online and the different people, it was different. Like the online was there for the school and there was like the guidance counselors and the teachers was also there for helping me with anger and other things.

Lee talked about how easy it was to gain access to a guidance counselor, saying "if you had needed to talk to them, you'll tell your teacher and they'll call to see if they're there. Or they'll just tell you to go to so-and-so today and then you could talk to them." Michael noted "we



had guidance counselors over there. They were always available to help. We had nurses who were always available.” Skylar agreed with Lee and Michael, saying “the counselor is always there to talk to you if you need any help or if you just need to ask somebody to help you calm your nerves or anything.” Skylar went on to say this about the guidance counselors and nurses at her alternative high school:

The counselors are really good. There are usually about three or four of the counselors there a day and the nursing staff. I noticed that when I went to traditional school, it was really hard to get through to the counselors. They tried to help, but it wasn't really effective because they had so many other students that they had to help, too. And it was like I was just another one of the ones that they had to help. But when I got to the alternative high school, it was different. I could actually have one-on-one time with a counselor and have them help me out and figure out what I needed to do to be less stressed in class.

Kathleen described how the guidance counselors were critical in helping her to get over her social anxiety issues:

I saw our counselor out a lot because of my anxiety. Sometimes I would just work myself up and just tell my teacher like I just need a second. I would walk to the guidance counselor and talk to her for a little while and then afterwards I was fine to go back to class. There were times where she had to calm me down, like I'd be on the verge of an anxiety attack for whatever reason, and she would calm me down and then I would be okay.

Da’Nias explained that the guidance counselor’s faith that Da’Nias could succeed actually made Da’Nias believe in himself.

Oh, when it came to like guidance counselors, they had a really good guidance counselor in there. They had certain people to talk to certain people to get them calm. And that's why I had that one person. He used to always come to me like, "Hey son, you don't want this" and there were other certain people that had other people went to talk to them too. So, it's like every time I came it's like if I felt like I was doing good, I was making him proud. You know what I'm saying? Because he was really looking after me. I'm saying like as far as like helping me outside of school, helping me inside of school. Because I was playing sports at one point in time, he tried to get me back on the football team or whatever, but I couldn't do that because I was in alternative school or whatever, I was on house arrest at the time.

Da’Nias really wanted to play on the high school’s football team and expressed his disappointment that his alternative high school did not allow its students to participate in sports or other extracurricular activities. However, several students were allowed to participate in sports and other extracurricular activities at their alternative high schools. Skylar’s alternative high school even had a scuba team! Skylar talked about the opportunities that existed at her alternative high school:

They give out scholarships to kids to go scuba diving. It was like a scuba diving experience and they have trainers that help you out. You have to do a swim test and stuff and they'll take you to different places and let you scuba dive. And they have different

trips we go on. It's a really fun experience. And there are still things to do although we are at a different type of school. I really liked it...you can do tutoring after school.

At Michael's alternative high school, "it never felt like an alternative high school other than how small it was. Other than that, we still went on field trips. We had extracurricular activities like leadership, yearbook clubs, stuff like that. We had a little basketball team. So those alone, they made my experience worthwhile, so it was pretty great."

Ahmad and Brittany described how their alternative high schools had incentives, which encouraged the students to want to succeed. Ahmad said "we had a goal we had to reach and if we reached our goal on Friday, they got this school store. So, all your points that you made for doing your work, you get to go to the store with all your points. They had snacks and snacks was different points. So however much points you get, you can get anything you want in the store."

Brittany said this about the incentives at her alternative high school:

Like the principal always had us doing something. It was they were bringing in pizza for us every week or we would have movies once every week, or a few times a month. If you were doing all, you were staying green on your grades if you were doing good, making 80s or above, they made us have incentives that we really wanted to do well. We wanted to push ourselves. It gave me good boundaries and good incentives and I wanted to do well...It helped me a lot with social skills, I think. Being able to develop the skills I needed to succeed in the real-world scenarios.

Brittany and Skylar were very vocal in explaining that the on-site institutional support that they received at their alternative high schools not only helped them to be successful while

being students so that they could graduate but also set them up for success now as adults.

Brittany stated:

It totally has prepared myself as an adult. I remember when I was at the traditional high school, I had this class that I had to take and she was trying to teach us how to pay our taxes and I couldn't understand it at all. And I always thought ... I actually voted twice before I went to the alternative high school. And then I got to the alternative high school and there was one course that I took it, it was able to tell me how to pay my taxes, talked to me about economics in the world, and how to send a letter in the mail. Basic stuff that you really ... Traditional high schools are not teaching it. And I don't think if it would have been for the alternative high school, I probably would have struggled a lot my first-time paying taxes or my first time for needing to put something in the mail. It's simple stuff, normal kids, normal people, they don't know how to do that now because they're not being taught.

Skylar believed that the on-site institutional support that she received at her alternative high school will help her with her social anxiety as an adult:

It'll be easy for me to adapt to working with other people or larger groups because I've had that counseling and I've had people help me out with that. And then we also go on trips to big places. I have the counselors there to help me through her stuff. It's a lot easier now that I've had that kind of coaching and guidance at my alternative high school for when I go off into bigger environments. Besides getting prepared for being able to handle myself in larger environments, it's taught me a lot about being more confident in myself, in a sense. When I was in the traditional school I wasn't as confident in myself as

far as my self-esteem and also my work ethic. I knew that I was a smart kid. I knew that I was a good student and I can do work, but it was hard for me to push myself considering everything that was going on around me. And when I got to the alternative high school, talking to the counselors, it helped me realize that I don't need to be so down on myself so much because I'm perfectly capable of doing good work and being a good student and not having to worry about everybody else around me. I need to just focus on me and my work, which is really good.

### **Answers to Research Questions**

The research questions were developed from the literature review regarding alternative high schools and online learning for at-risk youth. The central research question sought to discover how did graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences. The four guiding questions sought to explore specific factors that are contained within the central question. The answers to the guiding questions combine to provide an in-depth answer to the central question and were answered through the six themes that materialized. Codes were identified from the data analysis process. The data analysis process also methodically narrowed down the codes until the emerging themes were developed.

**Central Research Question: How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences?** The participants of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological research study were graduates of three alternative high schools in North Carolina which exclusively used an online curriculum. The 13 participants in the study described the ways in which attending alternative high schools,

and using an online curriculum, helped them to be successful students, and later become high school graduates. The participants described the ways in which they were not successful at their traditional high schools before attending their alternative high schools, and why attending their alternative high schools and using an online curriculum, made a positive difference. The participants also described the ways in which their time at their alternative high schools, and using an online curriculum, set them up for success in their lives now at adults.

The participants described several reasons why they were not successful at their traditional high schools. These reasons included academic, behavioral, emotional, or a combination of reasons. Several participants noted that they felt their traditional high school buildings and classroom sizes were too large and had too many students, which led to social anxiety. The participants' descriptions of how their alternative high schools helped them with their social anxiety issues resulted in the emergence of the common theme of a reduction of social anxiety. Kathleen felt that the smaller size of the alternative high school helped her with her social anxiety and felt "overlooked" at the traditional high school. Skylar concurred with Kathleen, stating that she found the experience at her traditional high school as "pretty difficult, honestly" due to her social anxiety. The larger school buildings and classroom sizes at the traditional high schools also caused some of the participants, such as Da'Nias Michael, and Lex, to focus on friendships and popularity, instead of academics, which tied to the theme of ability to focus. Da'Nias stated that they were the wrong friends, "friends that wasn't trying to do right or friends that was always trying to do this and that besides focus on schoolwork."

Some participants felt bullied and that there were more conflicts at the traditional high schools. Lex referred to the conflicts at her traditional high school as "drama" and that she could

never find the right crowd to hang around with and always felt like she was being bullied. Participants also stated that the classrooms at the traditional high school contained too many students, which caused distractions and lack of one-on-one instruction and support. Monk shared that when he was a student at the traditional high school, there were too many distractions that sidetracked him from focusing on academics. Nicole agreed with Monk, saying that she actually “felt relieved” that she was being sent to the alternative high school, in order to concentrate better. Almost all of the participants said that they didn’t use online learning at all at the traditional high school. Nicole, Emma, and Brittany became pregnant while attending their traditional high schools and were only able to stay in school by attending their alternative high schools and using an online curriculum. The assistance that these students received resulted in the theme of on-site relational support. The participants described the transition from their former high school to the alternative high school as a smooth one, with few complications, due to how welcoming the alternative high school teachers and staff were to the participants upon their arrival at the alternative high schools. Monk described it as “it was like another family.” Every participant in the study shared similar sentiments as Monk, which demonstrated the importance of the theme of on-site relational support. The experiences noted contributed to the development of three themes: on-site relational support, one-on-one instruction, reduction of social anxiety.

Several participants explained that they weren’t made to attend their alternative high schools but chose themselves to leave their traditional high schools and attend the alternative high schools. Even the participants who were assigned to their alternative high schools understood why they were being sent to their alternative high schools. Both the participants who were assigned to the alternative high schools, and the participants who chose to attend the

alternative high schools, initially had some reservations about attending their alternative high schools because of the negative connotation that alternative high schools were just for “bad kids”. This misconception was quickly corrected once they started classes at their alternative high schools. Interestingly, not one participant in this study argued that they should not have been sent to their alternative high schools.

Monk stated that he constantly stayed in trouble at the traditional high school, so he looked into doing something else, which was to attend the alternative high school. When Michael’s grades were insufficient for him to remain enrolled at the early college high school, Michael was given the option to go to the traditional high school or to go to the alternative high school. Michael chose the alternative high school because of the overall smaller school setting and smaller individual class sizes.

The participants overwhelmingly stated that they benefitted from what became the theme of the on-site relational support that they received from the teachers and staff members who were present in the alternative high school building. Ahmad stated the “the teacher was always willing to help.” Kathleen concurred with Ahmad, stating “A teacher was always there to coach you through it.”

The participants explained that they had an increase in their ability to focus, a strong common theme among all of the participants, while attending the alternative high school because of being in a high school building and classrooms with fewer students and using an online curriculum. Ahmad explained “At alternative school with less people in the classroom and more help just gave me a better opportunity to focus and really want to do my work and be successful



and graduate.” Brittany added “I felt like I was able to study and really concentrate better in my own area, my own space in the school instead of being in a classroom with others.

A common theme that emerged was that the participants thrived by getting more one-on-one instruction at the alternative high school compared to at the traditional high school. The participants explained that this was more so because of the teachers and staff members on-site helping them with their online assignments, than their actual on-line class instructor. Big T stated “teachers at the alternative schools, they all walk around and participate with the students.” Ahmad agreed, saying “with one-on-one teaching it was better because I could understand more what the teacher was saying.” The extra help made Lex state that she felt like she had “two teachers in one” helping her with each of her online classes.

The theme of reduction of social anxiety emerged when several participants described that the alternative high school setting and an online curriculum helped them with their social anxiety. Monk and Kathleen believed that it helped to create a sense of family. Ahmad agreed and said at the alternative high school, he became more confident. Brittany got over her fear of meeting new people. This was due to smaller high school buildings and classrooms, which lowered the number of other students that the participants had to be around at any given time. The online curriculum helped the students who suffered with social anxiety by allowing them to totally focus on their academics.

Many participants described that having the opportunity to work at their own pace led to taking responsibility for their academic success. This ultimately led to the emergence of the theme of self-pacing and personal responsibility. Nicole enjoyed how the teachers of the online

curriculum “work around how fast you move.” Skylar liked that she didn’t have to wait on other students, so she could work ahead of schedule to complete her online courses quicker.

A very important theme that emerged in the data was effective on-site institutional support. The participants agreed that the on-site institutional support at their alternative high schools, which included guidance counselors, nurses, coaches, tutoring, sports, and clubs, along with on-site incentives and rewards to do better academically, assisted them with their physical, mental, emotional, and social wellbeing. Da’Nias explained that if he only took his classes online with the on-site institutional support to help him, he probably wouldn’t have been able to graduate because he needed help with his feelings. Skylar, Lee, and Michael agreed, and said that the guidance counselors were always available to help. The participants explained that at the alternative high schools, the on-site institutional support showed that the schools cared more than the academic success of the students but also the overall wellbeing of all of the students. This practice of helping the whole person was critical in the success of the participants at their alternative high schools.

The participants felt that their time at the alternative high schools and using an online curriculum have helped them to be successful now that they are adults. Participants explained that they are more responsible, can work independently without direct supervision, and are more confident in themselves. Participants who suffered with social anxiety prior to attending their alternative high schools explained that they now can do better around other people and in large groups due to the help and assistance that they received from several different sources while attending their alternative high schools. Participants even noted that they are better able to do

simple life skills, such as mailing a letter, paying their taxes, and voting. All skills attributed to experiences and learning gained from their time at their alternative high schools.

**Guiding Question One: How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences at the traditional high schools prior to being sent to the alternative high schools?** The participants described several reasons why they were not successful at their traditional high schools before being sent to their alternative high schools. These reasons were academic, behavioral, emotional, or a combination of reasons. Combining these concerns led to the theme of social anxiety. The traditional high school buildings and classrooms were too large and had too many students, which led to social anxiety among half of participants. The social anxiety that the participants suffered with caused some of them to be deemed as “bad” kids at the traditional high schools. According to Kathleen, “A lot of people at my school suffered from social anxiety or depression and there were kids that were there that weren't bad kids but were stereotyped to be bad kids.” Brittany had difficulty meeting new people at her large traditional high school because of her social anxiety. Ahmad couldn't focus and wouldn't even ask questions at his traditional high school, due to fear of being ridiculed, because of his social anxiety. Skylar even described her experience at her traditional high school as “difficult, honestly” due to her “really bad social anxiety.”

The larger school environment at the traditional high schools also caused some of the participants, such as Da’Nias, to focus on friendships and popularity, instead of academics. Da’Nias was the opposite of the participants who didn't do well at the traditional high schools

due to social anxiety. Da’Nias wanted to meet people, be popular, and be around his friends.

Da’Nias said “Wow, all these people, all these friends... it was like attention from every corner.”

Some participants felt bullied and that there were more conflicts at the traditional high schools. Lex said that she was always in “drama” and felt like she was bullied. Participants, such as Brittany, Monk, and Kathleen described how they felt like just another number when they attended the traditional high school and were sometimes overlooked. Monk felt “like just another body” in his traditional high school.

Participants also stated that the classrooms at the traditional high school contained too many students, which caused distractions and lack of on-on-one instruction and support, which developed into themes of ability to focus and one-on-one instruction. Skylar explained “in a traditional high school, you have all the kids around you and they'll talk and it's distracting.” Brittany talked about the lack of one-on-one instruction and support at the traditional high schools, saying “Everything's on paper and how you have to take a test every week and you're not really getting the help that you need at school with the teachers. There are so many other kids that they're worried about. You're just one out of 30 in times.” Three female participants became pregnant while attending the traditional high school and were able to stay in school only by attending the alternative high school and using an online curriculum. Brittany explained, “it was difficult for me to pass my classes and then whenever I got pregnant, it made it even more harder because how [traditional] high schools are.” The participant consensus was that there was a lack of effective on-site institutional support at their traditional high schools. Resolution at the alternative school led to the theme of on-site institutional support.

**Guiding Question Two: How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences in transitioning from the traditional high schools to the alternative high schools?** The

participants described the transition from going from traditional high schools, with the traditional method of instruction of teacher on-site instructing a classroom of students, to moving to alternative high schools, using an online curriculum. The participants described the transition as a smooth one, with few complications, due to how welcoming the alternative high school teachers and staff were to the participants upon their arrival at their alternative high schools. The alternative high school staff members provided a comfortable, friendly, and welcoming school climate which was instrumental in the success of the participants with their online learning, and was a big part of the theme of on-site relational support. Monk said “it was like another family” when he arrived at his alternative high school. Big T was skeptical at first about going to her alternative high school, but changed her mind, saying “at first, I was kind of skeptical about it because it's smaller than a regular school, so at first, I felt like I was more disadvantaged because they were moving me. But after a while, like I said, I liked it.”

All of the participants said that they had never, or had rarely, used online learning while attending their traditional high schools. However, for most of the participants, it was an easy transition taking online classes when they arrived at their alternative high schools. In regards to an online curriculum, Nicole stated “I actually felt relieved because it was easier for me anyway, and that I concentrate way better doing it that way.” Ahmad explained the transition, saying “So that was even better because sometimes in a regular classroom, like what the teacher was saying

I couldn't really catch on to what they was saying. And being that it was online, you can go back and re-read and then go forward and answer the questions.”

In contrast, it did take Kathleen a little while to get used to the transition to online curriculum, with her saying “I think for the first few weeks I struggled a little bit just getting into that routine of not sitting down in a classroom and having a lecture every day.” However, once Kathleen got used to the online curriculum, she excelled and was motivated to complete her assignments. Kathleen explained “Transitioning there was kind of hard because at first I did get behind, but then as soon as I realized that I could get ahead and finish faster, I would come straight home from school and work, work, work, work, work until I got done.”

**Guiding Question Three: How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences while being a student at the alternative high schools?** The participants overwhelmingly stated that they benefitted from the on-site relational support, a re-occurring theme in the study, that they received from the teachers and staff members who were present in the alternative high school building. Kathleen explained that she had pictured doing an online curriculum at the alternative high school as everyone sitting in a classroom doing their online work and if they got stuck on a problem, they were on their own to figure it out. To her surprise, teachers were present on-site at the alternative high school to help her with any problems. Ahmad stressed that he needed the face-to-face help by the teachers at the alternative high school with his online curriculum, or he probably wouldn't have made it. Ahmad mentioned that at the alternative high school, “the teacher was always willing to help. The teacher was always willing to help anyone.” This was echoed by Skylar when she said that the staff “were really welcoming. They're really

supportive.” Nicole added “the teachers were just way more helpful and were pushing me to finish and they didn’t let me give up.” Emma concurred, stating “The people, the adults, the teachers, and principals that pushed me to do it and telling me I’ve got this.”

The participants explained that they had an increase in their ability to focus while attending the alternative high school because of being in a high school building and classrooms with fewer students and using an online curriculum, a common theme among the participants. Ahmad stated “it seems like it was harder for me to focus in the regular classrooms with lots of students. Well, once I went to the alternative school, once I got to meet the teachers, it was all kind of better than the high school, because it was in the classrooms, there was less people in the classrooms.” Monk agreed with Ahmad, saying that there were too many distractions at his traditional high school, which caused him to be unsuccessful there. Da’Nias explained that at the traditional high school, he focused on people and friends, but at the alternative high school with an online curriculum, he focused on his schoolwork. Skylar discussed how it was easier for her to concentrate on her online curriculum at the alternative high school because she would get on her computer, put in her headphones, and focus on her online assignment.

The participants thrived by getting more one-on-one instruction at the alternative high school compared to at the traditional high school. One-on-one instruction was an important theme among the participants. The participants explained that this was more so because of the teachers and staff members on-site helping them with their online assignments, than their actual on-line class instructor. Da’Nias mentioned that his alternative high school limited the classes to seven students per classroom. The other two high alternative high schools in the study had around 11 students, on average, in a classroom. Monk felt like just another body at the

traditional high school but felt like he mattered at the alternative high school because of the one-on-one instruction, saying “I mean it was just another body being there. It wasn't, you weren't quite getting as much of the information and stuff as you thought you should. And just everybody, too much going on.” Kathleen concurred with Monk, explaining “I felt as if I was maybe overlooked a little bit just because my [traditional high] school was so big. I don't know if I got that one-on-one experience that I did at my alternative high school.” Ahmad chimed in, explaining “With one-on-one teaching it was better because I could understand more what the teacher was saying. And if I had any questions the teacher was always right there to answer the questions.” Lex explained that by having the teacher of her online classes helping her, and the teacher on-site at the alternative high school helping her, she had “two teachers in one.”

Half of the participants described that the alternative high school setting and an online curriculum helped them with their social anxiety. Reduction of anxiety became a resultant theme. This was due to the smaller alternative high school buildings and smaller class sizes, which lowered the number of other students that the participants had to be around at any given time. Monk and Kathleen described their alternative high schools as “family.” Kathleen went on to say that due to students suffering from social anxiety, they were “stereotyped to be bad kids.” The smaller alternative high school setting, with the online curriculum, helped them with their social anxiety and they excelled academically and behaviorally. Ahmad was scared to answer questions at his traditional high school due to his social anxiety but he didn't have to worry about that at his alternative high school because of the online curriculum. The online curriculum helped the students who suffered with social anxiety by allowing them to totally focus on their academics.



The participants described how they were successful at their alternative high schools, and using an online curriculum, by having the ability to work at their own pace. Students also enjoyed knowing that they were personally responsible for their academic success, a foundational view leading to the theme of self-pacing and personal responsibility. Some participants, such as Brittany, were up to a grade level behind where they should have been and working at their own pace allowed them to catch up. Brittany explained “because of how quick I was able to push through my courses, I was able to graduate on time, the exact time I was supposed to for my traditional high school.” Nicole mentioned that the teachers of the online curriculum “work around how fast you move.” Skylar expanded on what Nicole said by saying “plus everybody is going at their own pace. So, you don't have to wait. If somebody else in your class is behind and not where you're at in your lesson, you don't have to wait on everybody to catch up. You just go at your own pace and finish the course as you get through it.” Michael summed it up by saying “so in online learning, you really just have to have a lot of discipline and motivation because you can go there and begin class or whatever, but it's self-paced...and it provided great opportunity to move as quickly as possible being that it's self-paced.”

The participants described how the on-site institutional support at their alternative high schools, which included guidance counselors, nurses, coaches, tutoring, sports, and clubs, along with on-site incentives and rewards to do better academically, assisted them with their physical, mental, emotional, and social wellbeing. The participants' rich descriptions of this vital element contributed to the emergence of the theme of on-site institutional support. This practice of helping the whole person was critical in the success of the participants at their alternative high schools. Da’Nias explained it this way “like the online was there for the school and there was

like the guidance counselors and the teachers was also there for helping me with anger and other things.” All of the participants described their guidance counselors as always being available and willing to help. Skylar noted “the counselor is always there to talk to you if you need any help or if you just need to ask somebody to help you calm your nerves or anything.” Kathleen needed help from her guidance counselor to calm her down when she had anxiety attacks.

Da’Nias explained that because of a guidance counselor believing in him, and the guidance counselor’s faith that Da’Nias could succeed, caused Da’Nias to believe in himself. Some of the participants said that a nurse was always on site and all of the rest of the participants said that a nurse was always readily available in case they needed help. Some of the participants talked about how their alternative schools had sports, tutoring, clubs, and other extracurricular activities, which were beneficial to the participants. Ahmad and Brittany described how their schools had incentives, such a school store where you could get snacks with points that you earned from doing your work, and pizza parties.

**Guiding Question Four: How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences since graduating from the alternative high schools?** The participants described the ways in which their time at the alternative high schools and using an online curriculum have helped them now in their lives as adults. Monk described that his motivation to quickly complete his online assignments at his alternative high school was in order to free up so time to do mechanical work, such as diagnose someone’s car in the alternative high school’s parking lot. Monk is now a mechanic as an adult. Participants explained that they are now more responsible, can work independently without direct supervision, and are more confident in themselves. Kathleen is

now a manager at a pharmacy. She believes that her alternative high school and the online curriculum helped her to be more organized, really good with time management, and holding herself accountable, saying “online, I was always the one held accountable for it. As an adult now, I feel like I hold myself way more accountable.” Michael, who is now a member of the United States Air Force, agreed with Kathleen, saying “I definitely think it's helped to prepare me for living life as an adult.”

Participants who suffered with social anxiety prior to attending their alternative high schools explained that they now can do better around other people and in large groups due to the help and assistance that they received from several different sources while attending their alternative high schools. Skylar believes that the on-site institutional support that she received at her alternative high school will help her with her social anxiety as an adult. Skylar stated “it'll be easy for me to adapt to working with other people or larger groups because I've had that counseling and I've had people help me out with that.”

Participants even noted that they are better able to do simple life skills, such as mailing a letter, paying their taxes, and voting, from their time at their alternative high schools. Brittany said this about her alternative high school and using an online curriculum “It totally has prepared myself as an adult...I got to the alternative high school and there was one course that I took it, it was able to tell me how to pay my taxes, talked to me about economics in the world, and how to send a letter in the mail.”

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of graduates of alternative high schools that exclusively used an online curriculum in

North Carolina in an effort to understand how these graduates successfully made the transition from traditional high school students, to alternative high school students using an online curriculum, to now being high school graduates. Descriptions of the experiences of 13 participants, who graduated from three different alternative high schools, in three different counties, in the State of North Carolina provide supporting documentation into the feelings, issues, and support the participants experienced as they sought to find success at their schools. The participants richly shared why they were not successful at their traditional high schools, their transitions to their alternative high schools using an online curriculum, what made them successful at their alternative high schools using an online curriculum, and how their time at their alternative high schools helped them be better prepared for living life now as adults. In keeping with the main element of a qualitative transcendental phenomenological research study, six resultant themes, which emerged after a thorough analysis of the data, are thoroughly discussed: On-Site Relational Support, Ability to Focus, One-On-One Instruction, Reduction of Social Anxiety, Self-Pacing and Personal Responsibility, and On-Site Institutional Support. The chapter concludes by tying the themes to answers sought in the original research question and four guiding questions. Chapter 5 will provide a formal conclusion to this research study.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of graduates of alternative high schools that exclusively used an online curriculum in North Carolina in an effort to understand how these graduates successfully made the transition from traditional high school students to alternative high school students using an online curriculum. This study provides a significant contribution to the literature to better understand how at-risk students can succeed in an alternative high school setting using an online curriculum. The findings and implications of relevant literature and theoretical concepts, delimitations and limitations, and recommendations for future research are summarily presented in this chapter.

### **Summary of Findings**

Data was collected for this study from one-one-one interviews, a focus group, and journal articles from 13 participants, who graduated from three different alternative high schools using an online curriculum, located in three different counties in North Carolina. After the completion of the collection of data, the data was compiled and downloaded into NVivo, a computer software program used to assist with the analyzation of the data. The data was analyzed to aggregate codes into emergent themes. Themes that emerged from the original list of codes that are directly related to each of the research questions were On-Site Relational Support, Ability to Focus, One-On-One Instruction, Reduction of Social Anxiety, Self-Pacing and Personal Responsibility, and On-Site Institutional Support. A thorough examination of findings from this study provides future researchers a baseline to further explore answers to research questions in consideration of how to better assist at-risk high school students, in an effort to help them

succeed academically, behaviorally, mentally, and emotionally, in order for them to become high school graduates and prosper later as adults.

### **Central Research Question and Guiding Questions**

The central question driving this study asked: “How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences?” All of the participants described their experiences at their alternative high schools, using an online curriculum, as critical to them being able to graduate from high school. The participants explained that the assistance, support, motivation, and incentives that they received on-site at the alternative high school, in addition to the one-on-one instruction that they received from their online course’s instructor and the teachers on-site at their alternative high schools, helped them to be successful at their alternative high schools using an online curriculum. The participants also described how the smaller size of their alternative high school buildings, and the lower number of students in their alternative high school buildings and classrooms, increased the ability for one-on-one instruction and reduced their social anxiety. The combination of the smaller numbers of students and the online curriculum increased the participants’ ability to focus on their academic work. The participants described that they enjoyed being personally responsible for how much academic online work they completed each day, in an effort to graduate on-time with their peers. Several participants described themselves now as adults as being independent, organized, dependable, confident, accountable, and good with time management thanks to their alternative high schools and using an online curriculum.

The first guiding question asked: “How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences at the

traditional high schools prior to being sent to the alternative high schools?” The participants were united in describing their experiences at their traditional high schools as being unsuccessful for a variety of reasons. The larger numbers of students in their traditional high school classrooms decreased the likelihood of meaningful one-on-one instruction and increased the number of distractions, which affected them academically. It was hard for many of the participants to ask questions in their traditional high school classrooms, because they felt that their teachers were moving too fast for them or they were scared to ask a question in front of many students out of fear of embarrassment. For some students, the larger size of their traditional high school buildings, and the larger number of students in their traditional high school buildings and its classrooms, increased their social anxiety, which affected them mentally and emotionally. Many participants felt just like a number or a body at their traditional high schools. Some students focused on making friends and being popular at their traditional high schools, instead of on their academics. Three female participants got pregnant while being a student at their traditional high schools, so attending their alternative high schools and using an online curriculum was the only way for them to graduate from high school on time.

The second guiding question asked: “How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences in transitioning from the traditional high schools to the alternative high schools?” The participants overwhelmingly described their transition from their traditional high schools to their alternative high schools as a smooth one. The participants explained that the way in which they were warmly welcomed at their alternative high schools set the stage for them to be successful. A few participants described the transition as a little rocky for just a few days or weeks, due to going

from sitting in a traditional high school classroom with a teacher on-site giving direct instruction to a large group of students, to now working on their own with an online curriculum at the alternative high school. Those participants explained that once they realized that they weren't truly on their own with their online curriculum at their alternative high schools, since there were teachers and staff members on-site at the alternative high schools to help them, they quickly adjusted to the transition.

The third guiding question asked: "How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences while being a student at the alternative high schools?" All of participants described their experiences at their alternative high schools while using an online curriculum, as critical to their ability to graduate from high school on time with their peers. The participants explained that in addition to taking their classes online, it was essential to have the assistance, support, and motivation from the teachers and staff members on-site at their alternative high schools. The participants described the ways in which an online curriculum and their smaller alternative high school buildings, with smaller numbers of students in the buildings and classrooms, increased their ability to focus and reduced their social anxiety. In addition to the off-site instructor of the online courses, the smaller numbers of students in the alternative high school classrooms allowed for more one-on-one instruction, due to the participants also receiving instruction from the teachers on-site at their alternative high schools. The participants explained that they benefitted from working at their own pace and being personally responsible for their academic success in order to graduate on time with their peers. The on-site institutional support consisting of guidance counselors, nurses, coaches, tutors, sports, clubs, and incentives at the alternative high schools focused on the whole



person, not just academics. The participants explained that they prospered due to this wholistic approach.

The fourth guiding question asked: “How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences since graduating from the alternative high schools?” All of the participants described their experiences since graduating from their alternative high schools, and now living life independently as adults, as successful. The participants explained that this is largely due to their experiences at their alternative high schools and using an online curriculum. Participants stated that the encouragement and motivation that they received at their alternative high schools has helped them to want to keep excelling in life. Some participants explained that the help that they received with their social anxiety issues from their teachers, staff members, guidance counselors, nurses, and others at their alternative high schools has helped them overcome social anxiety as adults. Participants described their ability to focus and to now work independently and without much direct supervision as adults, as being directly related to working at their own pace and being personally responsible for their academic success when they used an online curriculum at their alternative high schools. Participants described that they learned some basic life skills at their alternative high schools that they still use now as adults, such as how to mail a letter, do their taxes, and to vote in elections.

### **Discussion**

Empirical and theoretical evidence leading to the findings in this study are drawn from the review of literature provided in Chapter Two. This is done to compare and/or contrast possible relationships in the research conducted, both past and present, for at-risk students who

have attended alternative high schools and for at-risk students who have used an online curriculum. This discussion confirms, corroborates, and extends previous theoretical and empirical research by contributing to the field of study and adds new application to the topic.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

Using Schlossberg's Transition Theory as a guide, I sought to report the lived experiences of participants, in an effort to shed light on what made them successful with their transitions from traditional high schools to alternative high schools, their transitions from traditional high school classrooms working in a group with a teacher onsite to working independently online at an alternative high school, and their transitions from an alternative high school student to an alternative high school graduate who now successfully contributes to society. Beyond the instructional issues, students transitioning to a new environment adds additional personal challenges.

Schlossberg (1981) theorized that transitional life experiences often result in new behaviors and self-perceptions. Schlossberg noted that individuals differ in their ability to adapt to change. The participants in this study viewed school transition in difficult circumstances as positive opportunities. Participants described how transitioning from their traditional high schools to their alternative high schools with an online curriculum helped them focus on academics, helped them with anger and social anxiety issues, and made them feel more self-confident. While most of the participants stated that it was a smooth transition to go from their traditional high schools to their alternative high schools with an online curriculum, Kathleen did describe her transition as difficult in the very beginning because she had to get used to "not sitting down in a classroom and having a lecture every day."

Schlossberg (1981) hypothesized that as people move through life, they continually experience change and transitions. These changes often result in new networks of relationships, new behaviors, and new self-perceptions. The findings of this study corroborate Schlossberg. When describing their transitions from their traditional high schools to their alternative high schools using an online curriculum, the participants in this study explained that they went from having, as Da’Nias described, “the wrong friends” who did everything but “focus on schoolwork” at their traditional high schools, to being around students whose only focus was their online curriculum. The participants described new behaviors that they developed after they transitioned to their alternative high schools using an online curriculum. Kathleen explained students who suffered from social anxiety were “stereotyped to be bad kids” at their traditional high schools but once they learned new coping skills at their alternative high schools, their behaviors changed for the better. Participants described how they developed new self-perceptions once they transitioned to their alternative high schools using an online curriculum. Ahmad and Skylar became more confident in themselves. Kathleen described herself as more organized, really good with time management, and is able to hold herself more accountable better than she ever did before.

According to Schlossberg’s (1989) 4 S’s of transition, four major sets of factors influence a person’s ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. All four of these factors were found to be true as the participants in this study shared their experiences. The “situation” of Schlossberg’s transition theory consisted of the participants being sent from their traditional high schools to their alternative high schools. This transition was either mandated by the participants’ school systems or of the participants choosing. The participants described the

reasons for this transition as being because of behavior, academic, and social issues, as well as teen pregnancy. The participants were able to cope with the situation factor because of how welcoming the teachers and staff onsite at the alternative high schools were to the participants once they arrived at their alternative high schools.

The factor of “self” of Schlossberg’s transition theory in this study was how the participants felt about themselves during their transitions from their traditional high schools to their alternative high schools. Participants described themselves as feeling more confident and even relieved upon their transition to their alternative high schools. Some participants described how they felt more comfortable socially in the smaller school setting. Participants explained that they didn’t feel like just a number or a body at their alternative high schools, like they did at their traditional high schools. Participants described that they felt more empowered, motivated, and developed a sense of self-responsibility in their academic success at their alternative high schools.

The “social support” factor of Schlossberg’s transition theory in this study consisted of the on-site relational support that the participants received at their alternative high schools. The participants described how the teachers and staff members who were present at their alternative high schools helped them with their transition from their traditional high schools to their alternative high schools with an online curriculum by always being available to assist the participants. The participants also described how even the students were willing to help each other to succeed and that there was a sense of family at their alternative high schools. The participants described how the support and encouragement that they received by their teachers

and staff members at their alternative high schools was critical to the participants becoming high school graduates.

The factor of “strategies” of Schlossberg’s transition theory in this study consisted of the guidance counselors, nurses, coaches, sports, tutors, clubs, and incentives that were available at the alternative high schools to help the participants cope with their transitions from their traditional high schools to their alternative high schools with an online curriculum. The participants who had social anxiety, depression, anger, and self-confidence issues at their traditional high schools described how the guidance counselors and nurses at their alternative high schools were instrumental in helping them to eliminate, or at least reduce, those issues so that the participants could concentrate on their online curriculum. The participants described how clubs and sports, such as the scuba diving team, made them feel like they had a real high school experience, like their peers at the traditional schools. The participants described how the incentives that were provided at their alternative high schools motivated them to come to school, have good behavior, stay on task with their online curriculum, make good grades, and earn the credits necessary to graduate on time.

### **Empirical Foundations**

Prior studies regarding the challenges of alternative high schools for at-risk students included works by Free, 2017, Mills et al., 2016, Long et al., 2017, and Vogell and Fresques, 2017. Free (2017) felt that, even with their positive mission, it is still debatable as to whether alternative schools are helping the students who attend them or whether they are further harming them both academically, and even socially, due to being isolated from the general student body and limited opportunities to socialize with peers. In contrast, all 13 participants described how

their alternative high schools helped them academically, in that each participant became a high school graduate.

Prior to this research study, there was a lack of research showing the effectiveness of alternative high schools. Earlier research showed that relatively little was known about the short- and long-term academic and behavioral outcomes experienced by students who attend alternative schools (Wilkerson et al., 2016). In fact, although sparse, what little outcome data are documented in the professional literature suggest poor outcomes for students enrolled in remediation-based schools when compared to students enrolled in traditional schools (Wilkerson et al., 2016). Empirical research on the presence and effectiveness of behavior support practices in alternative education settings is limited and additional research is needed (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013). The novel contribution that this study gives to the field of research regarding the effectiveness of alternative high schools, specifically, is that it shifts the focus from why alternative school that use online curriculum by describing the ways that students found paths to success.

**Facilities.** Prior research reported lower quality facilities and instruction at alternative high schools, compared to traditional high schools. According to (Vogell & Fresques, 2017), across the country, alternative classes are being taught in crumbling buildings, school basements, trailers, and strip malls, and many lack textbooks and students sit in front of computers all day without interacting with teachers. This was not the case with the three alternative high schools in this study. In fact, Pleasant View High School is a modern new facility, built in 2017, that was specially designed and built to house the alternative high school. All of the participants described their alternative high schools in a positive way, saying that their buildings were

comfortable, well lit, and conducive to learning. The participants in this study all stated that they had continuous help from the teachers of their online courses, as well help from their teachers and staff members onsite at their alternative high schools. Lex stated that she even felt like she had “two teachers in one.” Kathleen said “a teacher was always there to coach you through it.”

**Social anxiety.** Free (2017) postulated that alternative high schools may lead to students not succeeding in college or in the workplace. Yet, in this study, Brittany stated her alternative high school “totally prepared myself as an adult.” She cited the smaller school building, smaller number of students, and even the physical appearance of the classrooms gave her structure and enabled her to minimize her social anxiety. Skylar reported that she can work in bigger environments and has more confidence, thanks to her time at her alternative high school. Kathleen is a currently a manager at a pharmacy and believes that she is organized, independent, and good at time management as a direct outcome from her experiences at the alternative high school Monk is a successful mechanic, and Michael is currently serving proudly in the United States Air Force. Both attest to the smaller environment and focused life skills training they received at their schools.

**Social behavior.** Garner (2016) noted that alternative school students believe that their behaviors actually got worse from attending alternative schools due to a lack of structure. Garner (2016) explained that a lack of classroom management and structure at the alternative schools caused the students to have poor motivation towards their academics, which in turn caused additional behavior problems among their students. Participants, in this study counter this view by describing how their behaviors improved while at their alternative high schools. Amanda had gotten into trouble on numerous occasions due to bad behavior prior at her

traditional high school prior to being sent to her alternative high school. Amanda believed that most of her behavior problems were due to her inability to communicate effectively at her traditional high school. Life changed when she received individualized help with her communication skills at her alternative high school. Lex was always in trouble and felt bullied at her traditional high school. Lex explained that she did not have these issues at her alternative high school due to more attention from teachers and a smaller number of students. Kathleen felt that many students, who suffered from social anxiety or depression, were stereotyped to be bad kids because of their bad behavior at their traditional high schools. However, once Kathleen and others who suffered from social anxiety and depression received help at their alternative high schools for these problems, they demonstrated improved overall behavior. Smaller class sizes, classroom management, better structure, and the additional on-site institutional support that these participants received while attending their alternative high schools were noted as positive elements leading to improved behaviors.

**Relationships.** Participants in this study agreed with Baroutsis et al. (2016) that young people who attend alternative schools often relate traumatic relationships and experiences with mainstream traditional schools, which they claim contributed to their disconnectedness from schooling. Lex always felt like she was being bullied at her traditional high school and had a hard time finding the right crowd to hang around with. Kathleen said that students like her, who suffered from social anxiety and depression, were labeled as bad kids at their traditional high schools. Skylar's social anxiety caused her experience at her traditional high school to be "pretty difficult, honestly." With the traumatic experiences that some of the participants in this study (and in prior studies) had with their traditional high schools, it makes it even more beneficial to



know what made the participants in this study have a favorable impression of education once they attended their alternative high schools.

**Online curriculum.** Regarding the value of online curriculum, the participants of this countered Beese (2014) that reported that online learning places a great deal of responsibility on the student and that degree of autonomy may be overwhelming. Even though this could be true of some students, the participants in this study thrived by having that personal responsibility. Participants liked the ability to work online, on their own, so that they could make-up credits at a faster pace in order to graduate on time with their peers. Some participants liked knowing that their progress was all up to them with an online curriculum, that they did not have to wait on slower students or speed up to catch up to more advanced students. Monk seemed to agree with Xu & Jagers' (2014) assessment that students need more discipline to succeed in an online course, saying "you really just have to have a lot of discipline and motivation" but added he was able to learn those skills to be successful with his online curriculum at his alternative high school, saying "I feel as though I accomplish a lot more by myself because working independently, it's a free-flowing work style, and [at the] alternative high school, they taught me motivation, self-discipline and self-awareness."

**Pedagogy.** Berardi (2017) noted that students steered to online alternative schools are those that need more in-person guidance and instruction, not less. Smith (2014) reported that onsite teacher assistance seems to be a mandatory component for online learning of underprivileged students. The participants of this study seemed to confirm the studies by Berardi (2017) and Smith (2014) by explaining that they needed the one-on-one help from the teacher onsite at their alternative high schools with their online curriculum, in addition to the instructor

of their online course who was at another location. The participants of this study reported that they indeed benefitted from the assistance, support, encouragement, and motivation that they received from the teachers and staff members onsite at their alternative high schools. This study notes the importance of alternative high schools taking care of the whole person, not just focusing on the content delivery in online curriculum which corresponds with Maillet's (2017) findings that acknowledging students as people by learning their interests, personalities, and values, will dramatically help increase the students' academic engagement.

**Life skills.** Students who lack the ability to manage their time and lack the discipline and focus needed for online learning will struggle to be successful (Morgan, 2015). However, what is interesting about this current study, is that the online curriculum actually helped the participants develop discipline and focus. In fact, the ability to focus was one of the six themes that emerged from the analysis of the data in this study. The participants explained that they were able to focus more with an online curriculum at their alternative high schools, than with traditional methods of instruction at their traditional high schools because every student could focus on their own individualized curriculum with their own online curriculum instructor and they had limited distractions from other students due to the small numbers of students in the classrooms and not having to change classrooms several times a day.

### **Implications**

This study was conducted to address a gap in the literature regarding graduates of alternative high schools which used an online curriculum. Prior studies regarding the effectiveness of alternative high schools and studies of online learning for at-risk students have portrayed a negative view for at-risk students. However, this qualitative transcendental

phenomenological study is unique in that it examines the successes of at-risk students, both in the alternative high school setting and using an online curriculum.

### **Theoretical**

Qualitative research is lacking regarding the experiences of students as they transition from traditional conventional schools to alternative schools and the impact of an online curriculum in preparation for graduates to have skills to transition to adult life (Beese, 2014). Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory was found to be a valuable research tool for viewing the transitional experiences of the participants in this study as they journeyed through Schlossberg's three phases: moving in, moving through, and moving out. The participants' transitional journeys were provided personal insights into what made them successful with their transitions from traditional high schools to alternative high schools, transitioning from traditional high school classrooms working in a group with a teacher onsite to working independently online at an alternative high school, and transitioning from an alternative high school student to an alternative high school graduate who now successfully contributes to society.

Although some transition challenges are universal for students, there are still questions as to why some individuals adapt more easily to a transition than others (Rall, 2016). In this study at-risk students described their transitional experiences as positive due to numerous contributing factors such as quality facilities, caring faculty and staff, small class sizes, online and on-site teacher support, physical and mental health support with the provision of nurses, guidance counselors, and career counselors. The on-site institutional support system was credited with providing the foundation for their academic and emotional successes when going from traditional

high schools to alternative high schools and going from traditional methods of instruction to using an online curriculum.

The facilities at these alternative schools were equivalent to their previous high schools. The participants in this study described the teachers and staff members at their alternative high schools as welcoming, nice, kind, and supportive when they first arrived at their alternative high schools from their traditional high schools. The participants described how it was crucial to their success at their alternative high schools and using an online curriculum to have the face-to-face interactions with the teachers and staff members on-site at their alternative high schools because of the ways in which their teachers and staff members on-site motivated them, worked with them, and kept them on task. The participants described how the teachers and staff members on-site at their alternative high schools helped, coached, and pushed them to become better students and people. Most importantly, the participants described how the teachers and staff members genuinely cared about them. The teachers and staff members at the alternative high schools cared about more than just academics, they also cared about the whole person (health, relationships, feelings, emotions, family matters, community concerns, etc.). The participants described how the teachers and staff members at their alternative high schools made them feel like members of a family after they transitioned to their alternative high schools from their traditional high schools.

Implications from this study point to a series of program assessment components that practicing alternative high school administrators, faculty, and staff can use with regards to facilities, pedagogy, curriculum design, and student support processes that these participants noted as critical elements leading to student success. Comparing the negative concerns from the

literature to the positive reported experiences of the participants, it is recommended that alternative high school administrators include transitional students' voices in program assessment and revision. Recommendation is also made to utilize this study's findings as foundational components in assessing environmental and student support practices when designing and implementing overall program assessments, leading to program revisions.

### **Empirical**

Two important protocols are emphasized from analysis of the participants' collective story. The first protocol addresses the importance of instructional support for at risk students learning through an online learning curriculum format. From the participants' descriptions, it is critical that students at alternative high schools using an online curriculum have in-person help from teachers and staff members on-site in order to push students to succeed by giving students support and encouragement to complete their online assignments, come to school each day, and to give their absolute best effort in completing tasks in a timely manner. The alternative high school students described the importance of having teachers and staff, on-site at their alternative high schools, to assist them with their online curriculum, in addition to the online instructor offered by the curriculum provider. Specifically, the participants pointed to the need for teachers in each of the major subjects of English/Language Arts, Math, Social Studies, and Science. The addition of in-house instructors enhanced the quality of instruction for these at-risk students by giving them the means to gain immediate feedback to asked questions and to gain supplemental face-to-face instruction from an adult when needed. Lex described this as having "two teachers in one."

The second protocol is the necessity for small numbers of students in alternative high school buildings, but especially in each of their alternative high school classrooms. Small class size directly corresponds to three of the six themes that emerged from the analysis of the data: ability to focus, one-on-one instruction, and reduction of social anxiety.

This study thus supports the importance of having protocols that provide for face-to-face instructional support in addition to online instructional support offered by curriculum providers for at risk students learning through an online learning curriculum format and instructional facilities that are compatible to traditional schools, with consideration being implemented regarding institutional and classroom sizes to provide learning environments conducive to helping at-risk students overcome negative odds and be successful in an alternative high school setting that uses an online curriculum. From these empirical findings, it is recommended that alternative high school leaders proactively assess and adjust their learning environments to ensure that the value of online curriculum, as a means to individualize instruction, is enhanced to meet the academic learning needs of at-risk students by providing, in addition to online teacher support, face-to-face qualified teacher support in each of the major subjects of English/Language Arts, Math, Social Studies, and Science to improve students' opportunity for learning success with their online curriculum. Additionally, it is recommended that the learning environment be numerically structured so that identified social and emotional needs leading to positive learning outcomes of at-risk students are supported.

### **Practical**

From the results of this study, on-site institutional support, such as guidance counselors, nurses, coaches, tutors, clubs, extracurricular activities, and behavioral incentives, are

determined to be valuable contributors leading to transitional success for at-risk students who attend alternative high schools using an online curriculum. Students cannot just be sent to alternative high school buildings, placed behind a computer, and be expected to do everything on their own with only the help of the instructor of their online course, who is usually hundreds of miles away.

Quality facilities, built specifically as an alternative high school using an online curriculum, were noted as important contributors to students' social and emotional well-being not feel like second-class citizens, which is frequently the case when the alternative high school is housed in old, unused, former school buildings. Smaller facilities reduce the stress for students with social anxiety issues and smaller numbers of students in the buildings and classrooms will allow for fewer distractions, enhanced Wi-Fi capability, increased opportunity of one-on-one instruction, and a sense of family often missing for these students in their outside of school community. It is recommended that school districts around the country follow the model of Pleasant View High School and delegate funding for building schools specifically to be used as alternative high schools using an online curriculum.

It is further recommended that funding be provided to adequately staff these schools so that academic, social, emotional, and career needs of at-risk students are met. Complementing online teacher support with on-site teachers and support professionals consisting of guidance counselors, nurses, coaches, and tutors and adding clubs, extracurricular activities, and behavioral incentives will address the educational needs of the whole learner. Meeting the needs of the whole learner will result in higher graduation success rates and, most importantly, the means by which these special students are given a path to life success.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitation in this study is the rationale behind the decision to limit or define the boundaries of this study. In this qualitative phenomenological study, I chose participants who had graduated from three alternative high schools in North Carolina which used an online curriculum. The three alternative high schools were located in three different counties in North Carolina, two in rural counties and one in an urban county. The purpose of my decision to use graduates, instead of current students, was to get the descriptions of former alternative high school students who had succeeded with both the alternative high school setting and online learning to become graduates. Graduates in this study were proven success stories, so their descriptions of what works and what doesn't work holds merit.

A key limitation was in the number of participants, even though I sought to include diversity in the group. All of the participants in this study had different faults, issues, and obstacles to overcome in order to become graduates of their alternative high schools. The participants experienced diversity in life issues, such as poor academics, anger, fighting, criminality, lack of confidence, social anxiety, and teen pregnancy. Their life issues covered the major reasons why students are sent to alternative high schools around the country, which enabled this study to cover a number of ways in which alternative high schools using an online curriculum can help the majority of their student to be successful. This study's racial diversity among the participants is reflective of the actual racial makeup of each of the alternative high schools that were used in this study. When it comes to gender diversity, I was not as successful. Even though the alternative high schools reported that the gender makeup of their students varies, it is usually around 50% males and 50% females. Although every effort was made to get



an even number of male and female graduates to participate in this study, the total participants consisted of eight females and five males.

My researcher bias at the beginning of the study was that I looked negatively towards both alternative high schools and using an online curriculum for at-risk students. Due to my prior personal experiences as an alternative high school administrator and what I had read in pre-existing literature, I was part of those with the predominant belief that alternative high schools and an online curriculum were not effective for at-risk students. However, I knew that there were students who were successful in both an alternative high school environment and with using an online curriculum. Why weren't their voices being heard? I wanted to hear from those students, rather than to continue agreeing with the naysayers. If there was another side, I wanted to see and hear it for myself. I came into this study with an open mind and was excited to hear from the participants, in their own words, exactly what made them successful in an alternative high school setting and using an online curriculum. Since all of the participants were at-risk students who graduated from alternative high schools that and used an online curriculum, the participants were living examples that alternative high schools and an online curriculum can work if the proper conditions are met. After hearing the participants enthusiastically describe the reasons of what made them successful at their alternative high school and with an online curriculum, I found myself cheering for them and for the methods that made them successful, which transitioned my researcher bias from the negative to the positive.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study used the actual descriptions of the experiences of graduates of alternative high schools using an online curriculum in North Carolina in an effort to discover what methods and

strategies were effective in helping at-risk students to become successful in both an alternative high school setting, and with online learning, in order to become high school graduates. As early as 2015, I began doing a review of the literature regarding alternative high schools, and online learning for at-risk students. Although there are research studies explaining why alternative high schools, and online learning, are not effective for at-risk students, this study is unique in that its participants, consisting of all former at-risk students, describe how at-risk students can actually be successful in both an alternative high school setting and with online learning. The participants of this study clearly described that they were successful in an alternative high school setting, and with online learning, due to the on-site relational support, ability to focus, one-on-one instruction, and on-site institutional support that they received on location.

Although a few participants in this study graduated in 2020, they had already met the requirements for graduation before their alternative high schools literally closed their doors for the 2019-2020 academic year. This study reported the experiences 13 participants. Future research needs to be conducted to broaden the scope of the relevance of the six themes by including the success stories of greater numbers of schools and participants. Research also needs to be conducted to verify the impact of the six themes on schools following implementation of the themes in changing school operations.

### **Summary**

My prior experiences of personally witnessing at-risk students not being successful in an alternative high school environment, or by using online learning, gave me the motivation and desire to discover exactly how some at-risk students were able to thrive in both an alternative high school setting and with an online curriculum. The participants were able to eloquently

describe, in their own words, their experiences with their alternative high schools and using an online curriculum. The participants were able to describe what worked, and what did not work, with their alternative high schools and with using an online curriculum.

What the participants made clear in this study, is that there must be plenty of onsite support available at all times in order for both alternative high schools to function properly, and for an online curriculum to be effective. Academics cannot be the only focus by educators for any student, but especially not for at-risk students. Alternative high schools must strive to take care of the whole person when educating at-risk students. It is vital that alternative high schools have a supportive environment, with guidance counselors, nurses, tutors, sports, clubs, and other on-site institutional support available. When using an online curriculum, alternative high schools must have teachers and staff members onsite to assist their students with their online curriculum, and not just rely on the virtual instructor of the online courses. Alternative high schools using an online curriculum need to be housed in modern new buildings, specifically designed to be the proper size and layout, and with the latest technology and best equipment available, in order to properly educate this important population of students.

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**APPENDIX A: LETTER TO ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS**

Courtland “Dwayne” Coffey

Wednesday, June 19, 2019

Dear Alternative High School Principal,

I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in educational leadership at Liberty University. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of graduates of alternative high schools in North Carolina who took most of their classes online. While there have been both studies which show students not being successful in alternative schools and studies of “at-risk” students having difficulty with online learning, there is a gap in the literature regarding the qualitative lived experiences of students who successfully graduated from alternative high schools while using an online curriculum. I am seeking participants who have graduated within the past three years from your alternative high school who took most of their classes online. The research questions that will guide this study are as follows:

1. How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences at the traditional high schools prior to being sent to the alternative high schools?

2. How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences in transitioning from the traditional high schools to the alternative high schools?
3. How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences while being a student at the alternative high schools?
4. How do graduates of alternative high schools which exclusively use an online curriculum in North Carolina describe their experiences since graduating from the alternative high schools?

I am writing to seek your assistance in locating students who have graduated from your alternative high school in the past three years and took most of their classes online, who will be willing to participate in this study. Your role in this process would be to provide me a list of graduates who meet the requirements of graduating from your alternative high school within the past three years, took most of their classes online while at your alternative high school, and are now at least 18 years old. If you prefer to not provide a list of possible candidates and would prefer to send a letter of invitation that I would provide, that would be perfectly acceptable. I just seek your help in getting my invitations to potential candidates. My goal is to obtain at least a total of 15 graduates from three different alternative high schools in North Carolina (at least five from your school), so that my participants represent a cross section of alternative high schools in North Carolina. The study will consist of a one-on-one interview, maintaining a brief journal, and participating in a focus group discussion. Participants will be presented with

informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in the study is completely voluntary and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to help me locate possible participants, please provide a signed statement on official school letterhead indicating your approval. Please call me if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Courtland "Dwayne" Coffey  
Doctoral Student, Liberty University



**APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER**

Thursday, June 20, 2019

Dear Alternative High School Graduate:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of graduates of alternative high schools in North Carolina which used an online curriculum. The research questions will focus on how alternative high school graduates, who took the majority of their classes online, describe their experiences at the traditional high schools prior to being sent to the alternative high schools, transitioning from the traditional high schools to the alternative high schools, being students at the alternative high schools, and life since graduating from the alternative high schools.

If you have graduated from an alternative high school in North Carolina within the past three years, took the majority of your classes online, are at least the age of 18 years old, and you are willing, I ask that you participate in this study. You will be asked to maintain a brief online journal, participate in a one-on-one interview, and participate in a focus group discussion. You may also submit any relevant documents, pictures, or any other information that you feel would be beneficial to the study. It should take a total of approximately 3 to 4 hours to complete all of the procedures listed in this paragraph. Your name and/or other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will be kept confidential. Pseudonyms (“fake names”) will be used in the final written research document to keep you, and your former alternative high school, anonymous in an effort to maintain confidentiality.

To participate in this study, please read the consent form that is attached to this letter, complete the consent form by signing that you would like to take part in the study, and scan the consent form and email it to [REDACTED] or mail it to Dwayne Coffer, [REDACTED]. Please feel free to call me at [REDACTED] if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Courtland “Dwayne” Coffer  
Doctoral Candidate/Researcher

## **APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM WITH INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL STAMP**

The Liberty University Institutional  
Review Board has approved  
this document for use from  
10/29/2019 to --  
Protocol # 4016.102919

### **CONSENT FORM**

A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION OF EXPERIENCES OF GRADUATES OF ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOLS USING AN EXCLUSIVELY ONLINE CURRICULUM IN NORTH CAROLINA

Courtland “Dwayne” Coffey  
Liberty University  
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study that is designed to describe the experiences of graduates of alternative high schools using an online curriculum in North Carolina. You were selected as a possible participant because you are 18 years of age or older, a graduate of an alternative high school using online learning, and you have graduated within the past three years. Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in this study.

Courtland “Dwayne” Coffey, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** There have been several studies on the failures of alternative high schools and the inability of students who may attend alternative high schools to be successful with online learning. The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences graduates of alternative high schools in North Carolina that used an online curriculum in an effort to understand how these graduates made the successful transition from traditional high schools to alternative high schools using online learning and became high school graduates.

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete a one-on-one interview that will take an hour to an hour a half and will be audio recorded for transcription purposes.
2. Complete a journal article which will consist of writing a letter to your younger self. This will take approximately one hour to complete.
3. Participate in a focus group discussion that will take approximately one hour and will be audio recorded for transcription purposes.
4. Review your transcripts for accuracy of words and intent. This should take approximately 30 minutes to complete.
5. Provide any relevant documents, photos, etc., which are relevant to the study. This should take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

The Liberty University Institutional  
Review Board has approved  
this document for use from  
10/29/2019 to --  
Protocol # 4016.102919

**Risks and Benefits of Participation:** The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from participating in this study.  
Benefits

to society include a qualitative examination of both alternative high schools and online learning. It is hopeful that this study will add to the current literature concerning both of these topics.

**Compensation:** Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Participants will be given a \$25 Wal-Mart gift card upon completion of the study.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report that I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher and the researcher's faculty chair will have access to the records.

- Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym, and each interview will be held at a public location of the participant's choice where others cannot easily overhear.

- All data will be maintained in a locked safe or on a computer that is password protected. Data may be used in future presentations pertaining to this study. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and hard copy data will be shredded.
- One-on-one interviews and focus group discussions will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher and the professional transcriptionist will have access to these recordings.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Courtland “Dwayne” Coffey. You may ask any questions you may have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged**

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this document for use from  
10/29/2019 to --  
Protocol # 4016.102919

to contact him [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty advisor, Dr. Harvey Klamm, [REDACTED].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone

other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, Virginia 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understand the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understand the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio record me as part of my participation in this study.

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Signature of Participant Date

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Signature of Investigator Date



**APPENDIX D: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

October 29, 2019

Courtland "Dwayne" Coffey

IRB Exemption 4016.102919: A Transcendental Phenomenological Description of Experiences of Graduates of Alternative High Schools Using an Exclusively Online Curriculum in North Carolina

Dear Courtland "Dwayne" Coffey,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

(iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or

a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**

*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*

**Research Ethics Office**



*Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*

**APPENDIX E: CODES AND THEMES**

Table 3

*Table of Codes and Themes*

<b>Codes</b> (Frequency used by participants listed in parenthesis)	<b>Themes</b>
Helped (43), Nice (14), Pushed (8), Family (7), Face-to-face (4), Kind (4), Cared (3), Coach (3), Motivation from teachers (3), Supportive (3), Welcoming (2), Enlighten (1)	On-Site Relational Support
Focus (24), Concentrate (7), Less people (5), Distractions (2), Zoning in (1)	Ability to Focus
One-On-One (7), Hands-on (6), Participate (1), Walk me through it (1)	One-On-One Instruction
Smaller school building (15), Anxiety (9), Smaller class sizes (9), Confident (7), Smaller number of students (5)	Reduction of Social Anxiety
Self-paced (27), Independent (10), Discipline (4), Control (2), Pay attention (2), Self-motivation (2), How fast you move (1), Do as many as you can (1), You are your own teacher (1)	Self-Pacing and Personal Responsibility
Guidance Counselors (7), Nurses (6), Feelings (6), Sports (4), Incentives (2), Family Issues (1), Extracurricular activities (1)	On-Site Institutional Support

**APPENDIX F: QUESTIONS FOR ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS****QUESTIONS FOR ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS**

1. Describe your experiences as a student at the traditional high school.
2. Describe your thoughts and feelings when you were told that you were being sent to the alternative high school.
3. Describe any experiences you had with online learning prior to attending the alternative high school.
4. Describe your experiences of the actual transition from the traditional high school to the alternative high school.
5. Describe your experiences at the alternative high school.
6. Describe your thoughts and feelings of being a student at the alternative high school.
7. Describe how you were treated as a student at the alternative high school.
8. Describe your beliefs on the quality of education that you received at the alternative high school.
9. Describe the quality of the site (the alternative high school building and classrooms) and the services (meals, availability of guidance counselors, transportation, medical) of the alternative high school.
10. Describe exactly what made you successful at the alternative high school in order to become a high school graduate.
11. Describe what made you successful at online learning while at the alternative high school in order to become a high school graduate.
12. Describe your experiences of transitioning from an alternative high school student

and having to work totally independent online, to now being a high school graduate and going back to working with others.

13. Describe what ways in which your time at the alternative high school and/or online learning has or has not prepared you for living life as an adult.

**APPENDIX G: QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUP****QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUP**

1. Since the time that your one-on-one interview and journal were completed, describe any additional thoughts or reactions you have had regarding your time at the traditional high schools and the alternative high school.
2. Describe anything else that made you successful by being an alternative high school student and/or using online learning.
3. What advice would you offer to students who are being sent to the alternative high schools?
4. What advice would you give to traditional and online alternative school administrators that would help them help students remain in school and avoid dropping out?
5. What about your experiences did you think I would cover, but I did not touch on?
6. Describe anything else that you would like this researcher to know that has not been discussed in this study.

## APPENDIX H: INSTRUCTIONS FOR JOURNAL ENTRY

### INSTRUCTIONS FOR JOURNAL ENTRY

Write a letter to your younger self, during the time that you were at the traditional high school and at the alternative high school. What advice would you give to your younger self? In what situations would you have handled things differently or the same? You can include descriptions of experiences that were specific to you (because of family members, friends, situations in the school, church, community, etc.). **You can write about anything! Relationships, sports, work, school...anything!**

Watch “Note to self: Duke’s Coach K” on YouTube to better understand this assignment. **It’s less than five minutes long.** You can search “Coach K letter to himself” on YouTube and it will take you right to it.