

ARE THEY READY?: ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION  
AND POST-SECONDARY READINESS

by

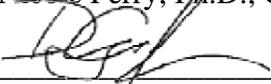
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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and to the countless individuals who supported this research. My deepest appreciation to the educators and students who inspired me to take on this endeavor.

## **ABSTRACT**

Student success is influenced by accessibility and educational experience. These two factors shape academic rigor, teacher support, and post-secondary preparation, all essential elements for the growing number of disenfranchised youth attending alternative schools. In a study by Convertino and Graboski-Bauer (2018) on college readiness versus college worthiness, the authors explored the access and preparedness of students attending alternative settings, the viewpoints of the adults who educate them, and the effects of possible institutional inequities. The qualitative phenomenological method used helped the researcher evaluate the effectiveness of Alternative Education (AE) schools and their responsibility to disenfranchised students for post-secondary readiness.

Random, purposeful sampling identified persons experienced with alternative high school students and utilized their individual interviews to gather data and explore educator expectations and their effects on disenfranchised youth motivation toward post-secondary readiness. Research results identified specific issues for educators and policymakers to consider in establishing accountability standards and AE student readiness for post-secondary access. These factors included inadequate resources, absence of professional development, reliance on traditional standards, and lack of meaningful learning experiences. The research recommendations included establishing a positive school culture, redefining readiness, and understanding the numerous barriers students deal with daily such as social, emotional, and psychological problems.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Alternative Education (AE) is responsible for ensuring all students receive quality educational experiences which lead to academic success and post-secondary choices. Washington State defines AE as a non-traditional education which provides opportunities for students to meet their educational needs outside a traditional educational setting (Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2005). Alternative Education in the 21st century plays a significant role in supporting non-traditional students and providing a sense of belonging in the educational system. In a study by Hemmer et al. (2012) on the learning environment for the 21st century, the authors discussed a needed shift in teaching methodology for students in AE school environments to address their readiness for post-secondary options. The authors noted that without this shift, students would miss the opportunity to gain critical thinking skills needed to compete in an evolving job market.

Lange and Sletten (2002), in an article on the history of AE, found little mention of how AE schools prepare or ready students for further education leading to an academic degree or professional certification. Lange and Sletten (2002) maintained that AE should be a learning environment that provides students with flexibility different from traditional education and should promote a school culture and climate designed to re-engage students and impact their sense of community. Domina (2009), in a study on AE, argued that the alternative school curriculum should encompass a non-traditional approach which supports students in their educational process and transforms the educational experience for disenfranchised youth living below the government-mandated poverty line. However,

the preparation of disenfranchised youth which would allow them to take advantage of post-secondary opportunities has not been a significant component of AE schools.

In an article on the accountability policy of AE schools, Hemmer et al. (2012) specified that the educational setting must support prospects for students after high school and ensure quality access for all students regardless of where they live. These measures would narrow the gap between traditional and disenfranchised access. However, because student grades and graduation rates have remained the main measures in traditional AE programs, success statistics for AE schools are often far below those of traditional schools (Gable et al., 2006). These lower success rates reinforce the need to study the teaching methodology, programs, and traditional measures of success considered for AE schools and their impact on post-secondary readiness for its students.

Non-traditional curricula, increased resources, and the re-definition of success and readiness may shift the negative statistics and perceptions associated with AE schools and student post-secondary aspirations. Convertino and Graboski-Bauer (2018), in their study on college preparation, defined readiness as the ability to do well in post-secondary education or career not based on grades or test scores, but in the context of character, honor, and responsibility.

When studying readiness in the context of college goals, Bryan et al. (2017) noted that most students identified further education as a natural progression after high school. Their research showed no notable gap between traditional and disenfranchised students expressing a desire to attend a college or technical institute. Yet a persistent disparity exists between these two categories of youth and their preparation for post-secondary education. Exploring the student

preparedness of AE students who wish to pursue post-secondary education will provide direction toward understanding the level of education they receive and which attributes and values are stressed in their AE schools. A degree or certificate is considered an economic pathway in the United States for all students; thus, it is essential that all students have access to a post-secondary opportunity and that AE schools accept responsibility for preparing students for this prospect (Bryan et al., 2017).

In a study by Kim and Taylor (2008) on rethinking AE and the cycle of inequity, the authors discussed obstacles to academic success. They noted that AE schools are often located in poor urban communities and mainly enroll students with behavior, attendance, and academic problems, all of which can be barriers to equitable programs. Many studies have researched the importance of college experience for disenfranchised students, but Pitre and Pitre (2009) found college readiness in alternative school settings has unforeseen barriers which are often neglected, impacting students and limiting their exposure to post-secondary preparedness. Barriers may include poverty, homelessness, emotional difficulties, abuse, and poor attendance. AE schools must learn to recognize these barriers and accept responsibility for helping students overcome their difficulties so they may succeed. According to an article on evaluating school culture by Roach and Kratochwill (2004), many AE schools are in the process of institutional and student demographic change. But the authors question whether AE teaching is moving to the right place and in the right direction, noting that older teachers view disenfranchised students as difficult to teach due to their impatience with certain subjects and their weak critical thinking skills.

AE educators attribute their students' challenges to poverty, low academic

confidence, and limited access to post-secondary studies. In an article on AE schools and the pathway to prison, Horsford and Powell (2016) discussed how access may be an obstacle to college for disenfranchised students noting entry to high-quality education is linked to post-secondary readiness. They discussed the connection between readiness and access, leading to this study's examination on the preparation of students attending AE schools. Bragg and Durham (2012) suggest that AE curricula should be a mechanism for working with known challenges to help disenfranchised students prepare for their post-secondary goals. This supports the discussions of Kim and Taylor (2008) and Hemmer et al. (2012) on broadening the purpose and accountability of AE programs to include meaningful learning experiences for disenfranchised youth and staff. These studies propose rethinking AE schools as not only places to retrieve failed credits but as institutions which provide academic readiness.

This research explored staff and leadership views on AE's responsibility to prepare students for post-secondary choice and examines belief systems, behaviors, thought processes, and standards to determine what support disenfranchised youth receive academically. It used the adult learning principles of self-directed learning, personal experience, practicality in the curriculum, and self-motivation to address the shift from teacher-oriented curriculum to student-oriented education (Lee, 1998). The exploration of student-centered learning practices may support AE educators in their use of effective instructional strategies and beliefs to prepare disenfranchised youth for post-secondary education (Harper & Ross, 2011).

### **Historical Background**

Alternative Education took root during the Civil Rights movement with

disenchanted parents seeking an option to traditional education in the late 1950's and early 1960's. The result was the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act which provided federal funding for equal educational access for all students, including the support of alternative learning settings for struggling youth (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Since then, AE has suffered in reputation and been described as programming created for students considered unsuccessful in a traditional school setting. The AE schools are thought to be less rigorous than traditional programs, thus questioning student readiness for post-secondary choice (Aron, 2006). Alternative Education success has been measured historically by improved grades, credit attainment, and graduation rates with no measurement of disenfranchised youth continuing toward post-secondary opportunities, and because AE schools lag far behind on these criteria, they are often considered “less than” traditional schools. In an article by Hemmer et al. (2012) on alternative school accountability, the authors noted that AE schools must be responsible for providing sound classroom instruction and allocating effective and supportive educational resources to students for post-secondary choices related to college options. However, AE schools operate under a weak accountability system, and often these responsibilities are unmet, leading to the reputation of AE schools as inferior to traditional schools.

### **Deficiencies in the Evidence**

Some studies speak to the importance of college experience for disenfranchised youth, but few studies have explored the college access process and the limited exposure students attending AE schools face (Kim & Taylor, 2008). The studies do not consider how alternative school settings shape the experiences and preparation of disenfranchised youth in accessing post-secondary choice and whether adult skepticism impacts their

decisions. By exploring how environmental factors within an AE setting may contribute to or take away from students' ability to access post-secondary opportunities, understanding and insight can be gained around post-secondary readiness. This study explored how the beliefs of adults teaching in AE schools can impact the readiness of disenfranchised youth and limit their post-secondary opportunities.

Means et al. (2016) maintained that school environment, adult mindset, beliefs, and support play an important role in guiding students toward college access and choice. Kim and Taylor (2008) spoke to the importance of college experience for disenfranchised students, AE's neglect to explore college readiness, student lack of access, and the multiple barriers which limit student learning. The researchers identified the importance of post-secondary choice so students who recognize the need for educational preparation may obtain adult economic opportunity and stability.

In an article on the personal transformation in alternative school settings, Wisner and Starzee (2015) discussed the various challenges of AE students, including poor attendance, poverty, lack of engagement, and absence of academic confidence. However, they noted that students are receptive to participating in innovative and creative programming which helps to shift their thinking from distrust to interest. The research of Cooper and Davis (2015) on student aspiration and motivation to excel suggested that disenfranchised youth who were provided academic and emotional support did indeed dream and aspire toward personal career goals. They found that students attending alternative schools that value respect, staff participation, and institutional collaboration in the learning process do thrive.

Means et al. (2016) noted the need for additional research and observation to determine the impact of the school environment and its role in impeding or facilitating college access. They observed how school staff beliefs and perceptions play a role in determining the ways post-secondary value is communicated to students from disenfranchised populations and how school culture and climate in alternative school settings should be designed to re-engage students in education and impart a sense of belonging.

According to Griffin and Allen (2006) in their article on high achieving Black high school student experiences, low post-secondary attainment for disenfranchised students is due to fewer school resources and a dearth of preparatory courses. The act of promoting college access for disenfranchised students requires all educators to plan and advocate for student preparation and success (Cholewa et al., 2016).

### **Problem Statement**

The problem for disenfranchised students engaged in AE programs is that studies lack high standards and are designed for students who have had limited success in traditional high schools and lack academic readiness. The bar for success in the classes is often quite low which leaves AE students unprepared for post-secondary opportunities in the workforce (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Le et al. (2016) studied the improvement of readiness for disenfranchised youth and determined the lack of post-secondary opportunities is associated with numerous barriers such as poverty, homelessness, absence of support, disengagement, and low expectations. These barriers all impact the social and economic advantages for young people in specific communities. The possible

cause of this problem may be the lack of staff accountability in supporting the readiness of students in alternative programs and the lack of high standards (Hemmer et al., 2012).

In an article by Cooper and Davis (2015) on disenfranchised students and college aspirations, the authors asserted that many students in AE excel when provided with academic expectations and emotional support needed to pursue personal career goals. They determined it was essential to allow youth to develop the necessary attitude and preparation necessary to explore educational goals in post-secondary. Le et al. (2016) explored outreach strategies in an article on improving college readiness for disenfranchised students and found many practices lack preparation and support in their institutions. Based on previous research, this study explored AE program readiness in supporting the needs of disenfranchised youth and was designed to help identify elements that need revision to increase post-secondary readiness for students attending AE schools.

Staff perception of disenfranchised students and their abilities may expose unidentified barriers which contribute to the lack of preparation. Studies of staff views and leadership's role and responsibility in the readiness of AE students is limited. However, furthering the exploration of teacher, staff, and administrative beliefs may uncover barriers to success which unintentionally impact disenfranchised youth. Understanding the environmental factors of an alternative school setting that may or may not contribute to a student's ability to access post-secondary options may help gain new insight into the best strategies and practices which most effectively support post-secondary readiness.

In an article on the aspirations of high school students and college access, Means et al. (2016) discussed reciprocal management and how transformational leadership lends

itself to the identification and motivation of post-secondary choice for disenfranchised students and the communities they serve. The study identified opportunities associated with post-secondary preparation that impact the social and economic advantages for communities of disenfranchised youth. With lower participation in post-secondary prospects, disenfranchised youth remain underrepresented across many areas of job placement and employment, limiting future advantages and perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Although AE has been studied, limited research has been conducted longitudinally on the successful facilitation of alternative schools that lead students to post-secondary choice (Mills & McGregor, 2016).

The proposed research was designed to explore AE student preparation for post-secondary choice, to identify elements for change, and to support a shift in staff views on alternative schools' responsibility to prepare students for post-secondary choice. Alternative Education has been studied, but there is limited research that explores the link of AE programming to post-secondary readiness, the beliefs of school leaders and staff concerning disenfranchised students' potential, and post-secondary choice (Le et al., 2016).

### **Specific Leadership Problem**

Convertino and Graboski-Bauer (2018) noted a lack of research on the importance of leadership's role and its impact on the belief and view of college readiness for disenfranchised students. Salfi (2010) and Ylimaki & Jacobson (2012) observed how the quality of leadership plays a significant role in the instructional expectations of teachers and in setting the program pathways which guide students toward post-secondary readiness. Malos (2012), in an article on leadership, discussed the impact leadership has

on behavior and how it effectively brings about a favorable change in performance, skill development, commitment in staff, and positive outcomes for students. Malos (2012) found that students look to teachers as models toward learning engagement and rely on teacher support to help make post-secondary choices. The study indicated that staff instructional actions and leadership are linked to teacher commitment, conduct, leadership development, and student outcomes.

Leadership and teacher conduct in an alternative school can have positive effects on the academic readiness of youth and help guide students to post-secondary opportunities. Both are integral in the planning and implementation of strategies and help determine successful student outcomes (Ibrahim et al., 2014). Ylimaki and Jacobson (2012), in an article on school leadership, showed a clear correlation between leader and staff belief and student expectations for success. While multiple factors contribute to improving student and school performance, effective, committed leaders and supportive teachers remain the main ingredients in readying all students academically for post-secondary education (Reyes & Garcia, 2014).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the post-secondary readiness of students from disenfranchised backgrounds and investigate whether AE students are being prepared for post-secondary education. The exploration of the readiness of disenfranchised youth versus non-AE students has relevance for alternative education as well as traditional educational settings. The lack of AE academic standards for post-secondary readiness negatively impacts disenfranchised student educational attainment and matriculation. The elements associated with disenfranchised youth and

readiness for post-secondary work include preparedness and eligibility (Welton & Williams, 2015).

The impact of readiness for a college degree and other post-secondary opportunities are explored within this study. The beliefs and expectations of teachers and leaders in AE settings and the level of readiness for guiding students toward post-secondary aspirations are analyzed. Through research on academic fundamentals at AE schools, the behavior, beliefs, and attitudes of leaders and teachers give insight into readiness for students. Knowles' theory of Andragogy concerning adult education and the principles of self-perception, personal experience in learning, ownership of learning, self-motivation to learn, and application to everyday situations, may help provide new and more effective strategies (Lee, 1998).

### **Methodology Overview**

The three methods for research: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method would possibly prove best for this research. However, a qualitative study using a phenomenological research design was identified as best suited due to the purpose, sample size, research questions, and duration of the study. Phenomenology provided an opportunity to explore participant beliefs developed through their lived experiences (Patton, 2015; Vagle 2018). A closed-ended interview process indicated the experiences of school administrators, students, and teachers who work in or attend an alternative school. Through these interview questions, the researcher investigated the impact an AE school has on student preparation toward post-secondary choice and constructed meaning from patterns which emerged (Wilde et al., 2015).

Phenomenology helped the researcher study the academic readiness of disenfranchised youth attending alternative school programs and helped explore whether the programs adequately prepared students for post-secondary education. Qualitative research allowed a method to understand the beliefs, perceptions, and actions of educators working with disenfranchised students in an alternative school setting and, through interviews and phenomenological strategies, to conceptualize, develop, and align more effective approaches (Budd, 2005).

In an article by Cefai et al. (2016) concerning the use of phenomenology to broaden access to post-secondary education, the authors discussed a phenomenological approach relevant to identifying the readiness of youth and a resilient system to support disenfranchised youth. They further investigated the need for educators to tap into the experiences of students to understand the impact their decisions have on disenfranchised youth and their post-secondary readiness. This research explored the experiences of staff attached to the needs of AE students and the encouragement the students needed to make a choice for post-secondary education. According to Moustakas (1994), the phenomenological research design provided analysis through the reflection of various described experiences. In Vagle (2018), staff connectedness to students impacted their beliefs and intentionality and allowed exploration into the ways staff beliefs manifested into actions which impacted disenfranchised students.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions are designed to bring to the forefront adult lived experiences and ways those experiences shaped educator perceptions concerning the academic readiness of disenfranchised youth. The first question explored the level of

instructional rigor in preparation for post-secondary. The second question allowed for the examination of an educator's beliefs and responsibility for post-secondary readiness for students. The third question explored the impact of adult expectations on student readiness. The following are the research questions for this study:

- How are alternative schools preparing disenfranchised students for post-secondary readiness?
- How do administrators and teachers influence student expectations and impact their readiness?
- How does the lack of student preparation limit post-secondary for disenfranchised students?

Responses to the research questions supported the alignment of academic readiness and post-secondary opportunities for disenfranchised youth.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research study explored staff and leadership views on AE's responsibility in preparing students for post-secondary choice and examined educator belief systems which may influence student behavior, thought processes, and academic planning. This research was guided by the educational ideology developed by Knowles which focused on strategies to effectively engage adult learners: self-perception, personal learning experiences and ownership, academic motivation, and practical applications (Lee, 1998). Knowles theorized that these principles helped support adult learning and improved instructional planning, engagement, and methods to bridge educational deficiencies. According to Knowles et al. (2005) Knowles' 1970 theory on adult learning concepts noted that adults need different pedagogical approaches than those for young students,

and these differences impacted instruction for students attending traditional and AE schools.

According to Harper and Ross (2011), the exploration of adult learning theory provided insight into teacher learned behavior related to expectations and readiness. Kim and Taylor (2008), in their article on AE, maintained that the study of staff beliefs in AE helped educators decide whether there is a need to rethink AE as a credit retrieval process or instead focus on supporting youth toward post-secondary readiness. In an article by Lemley et al. (2014) on learning environments for the 21st century, the authors noted the learning environments for AE students improved if staff perceptions and motivations were examined for their impact on student readiness and student goals.

### **Significance of the Study**

Educators recognize the lost potential and long-term economic loss of disenfranchised youth if a post-secondary choice is not provided. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) notes a significantly reduced economic future for individuals without post-secondary attainment, a difference in weekly earnings of roughly \$900 versus \$1200 (BLS, 2018). Researching the post-secondary readiness of disenfranchised students attending alternative high schools provided an understanding on the ways educators engage in conversations which address students' future needs, self-worth, and personal fulfillment. This research may help educators identify strategies which would aid in developing a deeper understanding of disenfranchised youth and effective ways to prepare them for post-secondary choices. Lemley et al. (2014) asserted that researched approaches supported improved instruction and identified the need for additional resources, thus alleviating the barriers most disenfranchised youth face.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

*Access.* Defined as high-quality learning experiences and resources (Horsford & Powell, 2016).

*Alternative Education.* It is defined by Washington State as non-traditional education, which provides an opportunity for students to have their educational needs met outside a traditional educational setting (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2015).

*Disenfranchised youth.* Families or students living below the government-mandated poverty line (Domina, 2009).

*Readiness.* The student's ability to enroll and succeed in post-secondary education or job training without remediation (Convertino & Graboski-Bauer, 2018).

*Teacher Commitment.* The energy and willingness of staff to work toward a school improvement process (Ibrahim et al., 2014).

*Post-secondary choice.* The offering, of course, pre-requisites to prepare students for higher levels of rigor (Flores & Gomez, 2011).

*Teacher mindset.* Teacher beliefs and attitudes and the relationship to students' instruction (Reyes & Garcia, 2014).

*Phenomenology.* A qualitative study design, which explores shared experiences to gain understanding (Moustakas, 1994).

*School culture.* A set of beliefs, attitudes, and core values which define the school operations (Roach & Kratochwill, 2004).

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study concerned investigative validity since the researcher is the primary instrument for gathering data, and the researcher's familiarity with the topic could demonstrate subconscious bias through behaviors, attitudes, or responses. To counteract this possibility, other educators ensured that the data aligned with the responses provided by the participants (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2006). However, due to the physical restrictions for this research, the findings may not directly apply to other alternative programs, and the results of this research may not necessarily generalize to other subjects, locations, or future periods of time (Punch, 2006).

### **Delimitations**

The delimitation boundaries for this qualitative study are tied to the identification of participants and access to specific alternative high school programs. The proposed research was conducted in two alternative schools in one district, and due to the limited access to participants working with disenfranchised students, the findings may not directly apply to other alternative programs.

### **Summary**

For students from disenfranchised backgrounds, the environmental and educational barriers to post-secondary opportunities can be insurmountable. The lack of post-secondary access and choice contributes to the disparities in college attendance and post-secondary job attainment. Prior studies have identified the importance of post-secondary access; however, further research into the relationship of school preparation and college access is needed to understand effective program enhancement and success in serving disenfranchised youth (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). While there have been studies into

the achievement of AE students, there is a need to explore student readiness and support in AE settings servicing disenfranchised youth. There is a need for research which examines the relationship between readiness and perception in AE settings (Lemley et al., 2014). In Chapter 2, the researcher highlighted the instructional limits of AE settings to prepare disenfranchised youth for post-secondary options.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Kim and Taylor's (2008) research on whether AE is beneficial or helpful in breaking the cycle of educational inequality found that AE schools were predominantly located in urban districts with high populations of marginalized students. This environment often contributed to the creation and maintenance of stigmatizing the potential abilities of the students. The authors noted the strategic placement of AE schools in these urban districts and found a negative perception attached to their environment. The perception of low-income, high minority, urban neighborhoods, and the students who attended AE schools often allowed educators to think adversely of the students. This view limited critical elements such as support and a rigorous curriculum curbing paths to student success and readiness for post-secondary work. In addition to teacher perception, AE student success had been measured through the traditional criteria of standardized tests, improved grades, credit attainment, and graduation rates rather than the potential and ambitions of disenfranchised youth in continuing toward post-secondary opportunities.

This measurement of student success was further illustrated with over 45,000 students in 2014-2015 either attending public or private alternative schools in Washington State, and according to the Washington State Office of Public Instruction, achieving a graduation rate ranging from 42% to 68%. However, reasons for the low percentages and data on preparation or readiness for graduation were not readily available (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2015).

In an article on student outcomes and aspirations, Means et al. (2016) found that school environment played an important role in guiding students toward college access

and corresponded to adult mindset, academic readiness, and adult beliefs supporting student goals. The literature review of this study explored AE school readiness in preparing disenfranchised students for post-secondary work and the ways in which the beliefs of leaders and teachers influenced readiness outcomes. This research examined how these elements affected disenfranchised students' abilities to access post-secondary opportunities.

### **Alternative Education**

The rationale for AE began in the late 1950's and 1960's during the height of the Civil Rights movement and general dissatisfaction with traditional school settings. Dialogues resulted in the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act which supported federal funding for alternative learning settings for struggling youth (Kim & Taylor, 2008). The AE approach was designed to transform the educational experiences of disenfranchised students by re-engaging them in the academic process and supporting their career goals to become contributing community members. In an article describing multiple facets of AE, Lange & Sletten (2002) described three characteristics of AE schools which formed what is meant by an alternative learning setting. The first represented readiness and specific program offerings designed to attract students with a desire to pursue a particular program. Models of AE in this category were considered "magnet" or "charter schools," job-readiness focused to provide support for dropout prevention. The second type was designed for remediation of behavior or academics, commonly described as a "last chance" for students who struggled in traditional educational settings. The programs focused on supporting students with behavioral issues, and typically students attended for a set amount of time. The third AE model was

based on addressing the social-emotional needs of students or students with disabilities. The programs utilized a therapeutic approach and offered a less rigorous curriculum. All three models were meant to offer opportunities for students to attain self-fulfillment and a quality education. And although these programs were well-intentioned, a major path to self-fulfillment and quality education was only achieved through access to good AE schools with effective and ample resources to ensure student readiness for post-secondary.

In an article by Bragg and Durham (2012) on educational access and equity, the authors maintained that access and equity affected post-secondary completion and were considered an important mechanism for disenfranchised student success. They noted that many students in traditional settings disconnected from the learning process and put aside their aspirations, leading to a lack of educational preparation. This detachment created a persistent gap in post-secondary enrollment and completion between students in traditional settings and students attending AE schools. Aron (2006) studied this lack of educational preparation and lack of rigor in many AE programs and identified limited school and staff accountability for youth academic preparation. Wisner and Starzee (2015) in their article on mindfulness in an AE setting, suggested that the persistent discrepancy in college attendance for disenfranchised youth was not attached to students' expectations for attending college, but whether access and preparation were offered and available in their school. They further stated that the low expectations of educators for AE students, coupled with the lack of preparation for high stakes college entrance tests, undermined students' abilities to gain post-secondary admission.

The effectiveness of AE schools in the readiness of students for post-secondary was discussed in Lange & Sletten (2002) in their article on AE. The authors synthesized information from the 1960's to 2002 and examined the effectiveness of alternative schools and their role in improving outcomes for youth. They concluded that although AE education was intended to support students who did not do well in traditional education, there was little evidence that the AE school curriculum and goals truly were relevant and effectively supported academic readiness needed for disenfranchised students to re-engage academically.

Kennedy-Lewis (2015) found several AE schools neglected to uphold standards, allocate adequate educational resources, or support students for readiness in obtaining post-secondary opportunities. In their article on alternative education, it was determined that AE schools were often a second chance for disenfranchised youth but failed to embed responsible systems to adequately measure their success. The research discovered little evidence on effective strategies or resources for preventing disenfranchised youth from dropping out of school, further arguing the need to increase support to eliminate the barriers which impacted academic readiness. A study by Welton and Williams (2015) discussed ways teaching methodology, curriculum, standards, and resources in AE schools often differed substantially from affluent or traditional high schools, and how these disparities led to overall inequalities and negative impact.

Hemmer et al. (2012) examined accountability policies for AE schools and determined that AE was responsible for ensuring access and opportunity for all students regardless of where they live. The authors identified the lack of accountability for educators in AE schools and maintained that AE had the responsibility to reduce the gap

between non-minority and minority student access to quality education. Traditional and affluent schools emphasized a college culture saturated with resources, personnel to help eliminate barriers, and collaborations that consistently focused on supporting students' academic readiness and success. A strategy proposed by the authors involved the use of creative ways to establish beliefs, motivation, and positive perceptions for disenfranchised youth. The researchers found that emphasis in AE schools communicated an imperfect culture where teachers anticipated low potential based on negative beliefs of poor abilities and behavior, rather than student aspirations. In an article on AE responsibility, Hemmer et al. (2012) discussed the inadequate accountability system in place for AE schools which were often structured around compliance and not academic readiness. Mills and McGregor (2016) discussed the need for AE schools to change their image to a unique education with a curriculum and content delivery that supported the needs of its diverse student body.

### **Disenfranchised Youth and Readiness**

Disenfranchised youth face additional barriers in addressing the area of post-secondary readiness. In an article by Butterworth-Heinemann et al. (2016) on AE and student voices, it was noted that disenfranchised youth expressed a sense of disadvantage, marginalization, and isolation from education but did possess a desire to belong. Disenfranchised youth often felt ignored by the educational system with no real awareness of post-secondary readiness, thus affirming the need for these students to receive a quality education and academic opportunities for post-secondary work. Lange and Sletten (2002), in their synthesis of AE, discussed the student population of AE schools and the limited curriculum offerings. They found that most students who were

considered disruptive or needing remedial supports were sent to AE schools lacking in poor academic preparation, and these students were increasingly from disenfranchised backgrounds.

Several studies of AE schools acknowledged personal and academic barriers disenfranchised students face while attending school. The personal barriers included low income, poor attendance, and disengagement. The academic obstacles included the lack of academic readiness and support needed to move forward to post-secondary readiness. In an article on equity in college and career readiness, Castro (2013) argued that readiness needed to be addressed to decrease the inequity in the educational level of disenfranchised youth preparation. He noted two major changes were needed: one was to increase the educational equity of disenfranchised youth through educational practices; and the second was to measure academic readiness by broadening its definition through the use of rubrics.

In an article by Aron (2016), it was noted that youth attending AE schools were led to focus on low-level employment, with a basic certificate and GED completion as their primary goals. There was little emphasis on academic skills for post-secondary options. In an article on the achievements of marginalized youth, Pitre and Pitre (2009) underscored the benefit of underrepresented youth being held to high standards and attending college as a means to educational and economic equity. Higher education resulted in decreasing the segregation and disparities in disenfranchised communities.

In a study conducted by Mills and McGregor (2016), the authors asserted the responsibility of AE schools was to offer a pathway to future opportunities and provide an education different but not inferior. They asserted the need for staff to operate with a

rich curriculum and a high level of pedagogy to ensure meaningful educational experiences for AE youth. They found disenfranchised students were successful in an alternative setting that supported the development of authentic relationships, educational training, and employment.

Horsford and Powell (2016) examined the role of traditional education in the identification of disenfranchised youth and noted school climates in AE schools were a contributing factor to poor readiness when adults lacked effective academic instruction and inadequate resources. The authors concluded that schools which engaged in eliciting respect and supporting collaboration of students and staff in the learning process, helped students succeed.

Palaiologou and Male (2016), in their article on urban secondary schools and poverty, reported the need for disenfranchised students to be provided with an environment that highlighted expectations of success, hope, and belief in themselves. The lack of academic standards and guidance for AE students toward attainment and matriculation negatively impacted their own success and that of their society. Although they noted that while school culture and climate in alternative school settings was designed to re-engage students in the educational process and impact a sense of belonging, their findings did not address how access was provided to these students for post-secondary.

In their research on school reform and accountability, Welton and Williams (2015) discussed three elements associated with disenfranchised students and a college-ready culture: preparedness, readiness, and eligibility. They ascertained that relationships had a major influence on learning, but teacher skepticism regarding student abilities

impacted the development of strong relationships and contributed to the failure of a culture which encouraged college. Educators' negative assessments of students and institutional inequities allowed alternative schools to lower standards and thus not be held accountable for poor student preparation, lack of readiness, and ineligibility for post-secondary work.

Increasing academic opportunities for disenfranchised youth improved the outcomes of their own lives and that of their communities. Hemmer et al. (2012) noted youth from disenfranchised environments who gained educational access could shift negative perspectives associated with their education by achieving successful goals and gaining support as contributing members of society.

### **Post-secondary Access and Readiness**

Braggs and Durham (2012) emphasized the importance of access and equity to college completion. They discussed the differences that existed between AE schools and many traditional schools including sufficient resources. They maintained that access alone was not enough for AE student success, but resources to support student academics were essential. Resource equity for AE students must be addressed, so students have the tools for post-secondary readiness and successful completion.

Braggs and Durham (2012) identified a persistent gap in disenfranchised youth attending college, although there was no notable gap in the number of students expressing a desire to attend college. They determined the problem was connected to inadequate student preparation and a lack of resources. Cholewa et al. (2016) discussed this gap in an article on the impact of school counselors for underrepresented students. They noted 31% more upper-income youth enrolled in college compared to disenfranchised youth, and

White students enrolled in 62% of all undergraduate programs while Black and Hispanic students confined themselves to 12% to 15% of programs. This enrollment disparity suggested the need to better prepare AE students for the transition to the post-secondary curriculum through better counseling and standards (Bragg & Durham, 2012).

Bryan et al. (2017) noted high school students identified attending college as a natural progression after high school. Their aspirations and goals spoke to access, preparation, resources, and belief in their own personal fulfillment. Providing disenfranchised youth with essential educational tools shifted the negative perception associated with AE education and increased student opportunities to become contributing members of society.

In an article on student aspiration and college access, Means et al. (2016) suggested the school environment played a role in guiding students toward college access and readiness with adults who supported their college aspirations. In an article on personal transformation of youth attending an AE school, Wisner and Starzee (2015) observed how disenfranchised youth harbored feelings of alienation from post-secondary readiness and how this negative state of mind contributed to the persistent gap in their college attendance. Cooper and Davis (2015), in their research on disenfranchised youth, assessed how academic and emotional support influenced a student to pursue opportunities, allowing them to dream and aspire toward personal career goals. Griffin and Allen (2006) maintained that the lower rates of college enrollment of disenfranchised youth indicated barriers such as fewer school resources, fewer or no counselors, lower standards for student academic performance, and the lack of preparatory courses which impacted access and success.

Khalifa (2011), in a study on teacher expectations, discussed how low student self-confidence influenced the expectations and hopes of post-secondary readiness and allowed students to disengage from the learning process in both traditional and AE settings. Bryan et al. (2017) studied the effect of staff expectations and beliefs on students from disenfranchised areas and the limited supports provided to assist students in accessing higher education. The authors found that increasing the supports for students attending alternative schools helped eliminate barriers and improved student opportunities to access post-secondary options. Encouragement and assistance deepened students' views in seeing education as meaningful for their role in mainstream society. The act of promoting college access for disenfranchised students required all educators to plan and advocate for them. Students indicated that positive reassurance and support were needed to influence their level of engagement in accessing post-secondary readiness (Cholewa et al., 2016).

### **Leadership Skills and Mindset**

In AE schools, teachers identified leadership performance as an essential factor for success when working with students (Reyes & Garcia, 2014). In an article on social justice and leadership, Diem and Carpenter (2012) discussed the inequities facing disenfranchised youth in education and the critical role leadership had in facilitating and engaging in social justice conversations of race and rigor. A positive leadership style in an alternative school setting supported and guided students to college readiness. Leadership that focused on connections between students and staff inspired a belief in student abilities and was a tenet of transformational leadership. In an article on the most important leadership theories, Malos (2012) discussed leadership styles designed to

motivate and inspire staff and students to fulfill their potential through knowledge of their personal strengths and goals. Transformational leadership and staff motivation were linked to teacher commitment and the importance of the leader's role in developing future administrators, addressing and identifying teacher attitudes, and assuring successful student outcomes (Ibrahim et al., 2014). Transformational leadership and its effect on the school environment supported the identification and motivation of studying alternative schools' roles in providing post-secondary readiness for disenfranchised students in the communities they serve (Means et al., 2016).

Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has a responsibility to support disenfranchised youth in readiness for post-secondary, noted in an article by Jean-Marie (2008). The author maintained that leadership must create a positive educational experience and guide teacher practices in differentiating the educational needs of all youth. Teacher attitudes toward student learning and student outcomes directly correlated to teacher influence in guiding students toward post-secondary readiness and instructional commitment.

Convertino and Grabowski-Bauer (2018) in their article on college readiness and beliefs of leadership, contended that leadership viewpoints limited or increased the belief that all students be made ready for post-secondary opportunities and identified a clear correlation between leadership, instruction, and readiness for post-secondary opportunities.

In an article by Ibrahim et al. (2014), the authors discussed the influence leadership had on staff commitment. They determined a link between staff motivation and transformational leadership in developing school leaders, addressing and identifying teacher attitudes, and ensuring student outcomes. A teacher's attitude toward student learning and student outcomes directly correlated to teacher influence in guiding students

toward post-secondary readiness and instructional commitment. In the article by Garcia-Morales et al. (2008) the authors evaluated transformational leadership's influence on teacher practices and determined that the transformational leadership style supported the instructional motivation needed for teachers to shift their mindset to curriculum that met the educational needs of disenfranchised students and helped them realize their self-worth.

### **Teacher Mindset and Adult Education**

It is not only necessary to change the mindset of teachers from negative to positive, but the mindset of AE students must also be an intentional shift from disengaged to engaged. The educational needs of disenfranchised youth correlated to those of adults and the research conducted by Knowles et al. (2005) on adult learners. The authors discussed how educators must shift to educational outcomes shown to be effective strategies for supporting student success.

The theory on adult learners explored the process of how adults learned and the effectiveness of an andragogical approach rather than a pedagogical one. Knowles acknowledged that adults learned in different ways from children and used the word andragogy to refer to the education of adult learners rather than pedagogy. In an article on the adult learner and building foundations, Lee (1998) identified effective strategies for adult learning: the curriculum must address the adults' psychological need to be self-directing in their learning; the learners must be provided opportunities to use prior knowledge as the basis for their new learning; there must be appropriate time for the learners to reflect on the information; the students must be ready to receive the learning

and see its usefulness; the learning must be beneficial with a purpose; and opportunities for external growth must be provided.

These identified tactics afforded conditions to explore and examine the educational programs in AE schools and study teacher commitment and mindset. Commitment referred to the energy and willingness of the staff to pledge themselves to the school and the improvement of processes which impact youth. The teacher mindset referred to the personal beliefs and attitudes of a teacher and how these beliefs related to students instructionally (Reyes & Garcia, 2014). In an article by Flores and Gomez (2011) on strategies for increased advance placement of disenfranchised students, the authors encouraged a needed paradigm shift which gave disenfranchised students access to a rigorous curriculum with teachers willing and able to develop higher expectations. The authors recommended that determined staff must address the barriers for students and shift their thinking from viewing students as unmotivated to seeing them as successful learners. Strategies for adult learners and applicable course pre-requisites would prepare students for higher standards and lead to a reduction in the achievement disparities for AE students.

Instructional commitment examined effective pedagogy and ways its methodology resulted in successful student outcomes. This charge required teachers to utilize a relevant and purposeful curriculum that increased student engagement and decreased levels of frustration for teachers and students. Increasing teacher commitment to engage students in learning regardless of academic, social, or emotional challenges was a key to addressing the academic needs of disenfranchised students and creating the

conditions and support needed for their success (Evans & Combs, 2008; Ibrahim et al., 2014).

Palaiologou and Male (2016) in their article on instructional practices, suggested engaging in and developing academic procedures which demonstrated a genuine belief in students. The strategies contributed to an increased sense of belonging for students and increased their sense of ownership within the community. Creating an environment of support for student academic success that is woven into successful practices that exceed expectations of struggling learners reduced barriers and opened access to post-secondary readiness. Means et al. (2016) found that the school environment played a role in guiding students toward college access and readiness and corresponded with adult mindset and beliefs which supported students and their aspirations for attending college. Teacher attitudes toward student learning and student outcomes directly correlated to teacher influence in guiding students toward post-secondary readiness and instructional commitment.

### **Perceptions of Disenfranchised Students Readiness**

Khalifa (2011) in the study on teacher and leadership behavior, discussed the impact of low teacher and leader expectations on disenfranchised youth, noting low expectations for achievement and lower levels of academic rigor left disenfranchised students unprepared for post-secondary readiness. The leadership and teacher beliefs that some students were not capable of high standards led to a fear of conflict and allowed disenfranchised students to disengage from the learning process, especially in an alternative school setting. For disenfranchised youth, the environmental and educational barriers coupled with negative staff perception could be insurmountable.

The lack of post-secondary access and readiness contributed to the disparities in college attendance and access to post-secondary job attainment. In a study conducted by Mills and McGregor (2016), they affirmed that disenfranchised students did thrive in an alternative setting that developed authentic relationships and included educational training and employment preparation. Students attending alternative schools succeeded in a setting that engaged and elicited respect with both students and staff collaborating in the learning process. This change in focus meant AE schools needed to operate differently but not in an inferior way to traditional education.

Additionally, school staff expectations of students from disenfranchised areas impacted what supports were provided to assist students in accessing higher education (Bryan et al., 2017). Increasing assistance for students attending alternative schools by eliminating the barriers which impacted their opportunities to post-secondary options deepened their views on education as a meaningful and essential element in gaining a role in mainstream society. The low expectations of educators for disenfranchised students, coupled with student lack of preparation, undermined student access (Bragg & Durham, 2012).

According to Ward et al. (2013), in their article on increased educational attainment of urban youth, the lack of poor academic performance of disenfranchised students negatively impacted student ability to effectively transition to employment and affected their skill development. Alternative school settings commonly dealt with low student engagement and teacher deficit thinking. In the article on teacher and leader performance, Khalifa (2011) stated that leadership and teacher behavior affected student achievement and many educational leaders were ill prepared for understanding the most

successful ways to educate disenfranchised students. This lack of knowledge resulted in a failure to develop differentiated programming for post-secondary preparation.

According to Flores and Gomez (2011) in their article on academic readiness and strategies for increasing participation of underrepresented youth, characterizations of disenfranchised youth as unmotivated was damaging to providing readiness for post-secondary preparation. Knowledgeable leadership, teacher positivity, and practical strategies were effective tools for increasing AE student academic expectations and gave students a personal sense of purpose.

### **Conclusions and Findings**

Prior studies have identified the importance of post-secondary access for disenfranchised students; however, further research into the relationship of school preparation and post-secondary readiness is needed to examine the approach for program enhancement and effectiveness in serving disenfranchised youth (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). Mills and McGregor (2016) in their research on AE, concluded that although alternative schools have been studied, research that examined readiness to post-secondary opportunities for disenfranchised youth and the perceptions of those guiding their education was limited. They found that the longitudinal research on the successful facilitation of alternative schools leading students to post-secondary access and readiness was inadequate.

Lemley et al. (2014) suggested exploring alternative school programs and the preparation of students for post-secondary. They believed that studying areas of programmatic change would identify elements for increasing post-secondary readiness and access for students in AE programs. The examination into whether disenfranchised

youth attending alternative high schools lacked preparation, readiness, and access would provide educators an opportunity to engage in conversations to address AE students' needs during and after high school. Investigation into academic standards would provide disenfranchised youth opportunities to see themselves as individuals who matter and would improve the opportunities for change.

Furthermore, Bryan et al. (2017) ascertained that while school culture and climate in alternative school settings was designed to re-engage students in the educational process and impact a sense of belonging, findings did not address how access was being provided to these students for post-secondary readiness. Kim and Taylor (2008) discussed the limited data on the effectiveness of AE and educators' ability to support student readiness toward post-secondary readiness. Means et al. (2016) pointed out the need for additional research and observation to determine the impact of the role of a school environment in impeding or facilitating college access.

Previous research also suggested additional study was needed to determine the role beliefs and perceptions played in deciding ways post-secondary readiness was communicated to underrepresented students. Convertino and Graboski-Bauer (2018) identified a gap in the research which explored the role leadership played in college readiness for underrepresented students and the responsibility of AE schools in student preparation. Research also showed that communication to AE students concerning racism, diversity, and restorative justice was greatly lacking and discussions between staff and students on these subjects was essential in post-secondary preparation.

The National Alternative Education Association (NAEA), aware of the lack of research and acknowledgement of racism in education and alternative schools, published

their Statement on Anti-Racism in 2018 which addressed anti-racism, diversity, and inclusion. It called for “Transformative alternative education to empower learners to see the social world differently and through an ethical and diversity lens” (NAEA, 2018). Following the lead of the NAEA, numerous school districts called for transformative educational steps to be taken to counter racism within the educational system. These steps included: initiation of education and change among educational leaders, establishment of restorative justice, involvement of students in leading anti-racism efforts, and engagement of parents in conversations on race.

### **Summary**

The attainment of post-secondary opportunities and the limited research on AE programs for youth failing in traditional settings was identified in the literature review. Hemmer et al. (2012) discussed the need for better school accountability and support in the readiness of disenfranchised youth to access post-secondary opportunities. The review of the literature in this chapter identified the correlation between readiness, adult expectations, and AE responsibility to ensure prospects for post-secondary work. These prior research studies also identified the need to uncover ways adult perceptions impacted student educational readiness. Chapter 3 will discuss the use of a phenomenological approach to explore the views of educators and the ways their insights shaped the post-secondary readiness outcomes for disenfranchised youth.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This qualitative phenomenological study of participant experiences helped the researcher understand occurrences and perceptions which influenced participant actions (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). Phenomenology provided insight into the participants' world to construct meaning and further the discussion on the needs of disenfranchised students to access post-secondary readiness (Wilde et al., 2015). The experiences of AE staff gave insight into the needs of alternative schools to encourage student post-secondary readiness.

Phenomenology used key questions and an inquiry process which helped guide the study:

- How are alternative schools preparing disenfranchised students for post-secondary readiness?
- How do administrators and teachers influence student expectations and impact their readiness?
- How does the lack of student preparation limit post-secondary options for disenfranchised students?

These questions were designed to explore, uncover, and gain an understanding of the impact made by educators working in AE schools and their effect on academic readiness for disenfranchised youth post-secondary opportunities. The research used the questions to uncover the views of educators in alternative school settings and their belief in post-secondary readiness for disenfranchised youth.

The phenomenological approach used essential questions to gather data to align with the research study (Punch, 2006). The method provided insight into the participants'

world to construct meaning and further the discussion about the needs of disenfranchised students and their access to post-secondary readiness (Wilde et al., 2015).

Through the grouped responses, participant perceptions, experiences, and adult actions emerged (Budd, 2005). This research incorporated an inquiry-based questionnaire to gather the data to explore the beliefs, perceptions, and actions of educators working with disenfranchised students in an AE school. Through exploring the conscious behaviors of educators, their intentionality and impact on AE students was examined. The phenomenological approach enabled researcher investigation and allowed for reflection on participant perceived ideas and experiences (Budd, 2005).

### **Research Method**

Qualitative methodology was chosen over quantitative and mixed methods because of the appropriateness of the research design. The qualitative methodology of phenomenology lent itself to the research design, the instruments used, the focus of the research questions, and the study scope and size. A quantitative research study was not chosen as it utilizes descriptive and control variables which did not align with this study's scope (Creswell, 2014).

The phenomenological study of the experiences of participants helped the researcher understand participants' perceptions and ways their perceptions affected their actions (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). The research results identified the shared experiences of both administrators and teachers and provided an understanding of this specific group of AE educators and leaders. The process allowed the researcher to gather historical information from the participants on-site and use additional data in the form of a questionnaire relevant to the research study (Patton, 2015; Punch, 2006). The

exploration of everyday occurrences and experiences helped identify and uncover shared characteristics and trends (Moustakas, 1994).

The responses to the interview questions were written verbatim and recorded. After the interview process was completed, participant responses were collected and examined for similarities. The data provided a context to interpret and analyze the collective experiences and gain insight into the decision-making processes related to disenfranchised youth and post-secondary readiness (Patton, 2015). The researcher determined the trends in the data and formulated any conclusions attached to the participant views and impact on post-secondary readiness for disenfranchised youth (Broussard, 2006; Ma, 2015).

The focus of the study was to explain the beliefs, perceptions, and actions of educators working with disenfranchised students in an AE school. It allowed the educators an opportunity for personal reflection based on their perceptions, derived meaning from their interactions, and identified their past and present experiences. It provided time for participants to think about their instructional practices and decision-making strategies which impacted disenfranchised youth (Budd, 2005). Through exploring the conscious actions of educators, intentionality and impact was uncovered. The experiences of staff and leaders were constructed into common themes and provided relevance for extending the conversation on the needs of AE schools and ways to support and encourage student post-secondary readiness (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Research Design**

This study used a qualitative process complemented by a phenomenological research design. In searching through the various qualitative study methodologies, several

were considered, but upon further inquiry, involved elements outside the scope of this study. Factors such as a defined period of time, multiple stages for data collection, the incorporation of quantitative methodologies, and the embedding of the researcher's own learning were not suitable (Creswell, 2009; Patton 2015). It was decided that the developed research questions aligned well with a phenomenological research design that best revealed the participant experiences, beliefs, and perceptions. The goal of this research was to derive some understanding of AE schools and explore the significance of participant views (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2015).

A closed-ended interview was developed with 8 to 12 participants. In phenomenological research, it is encouraged to have 10 to 15 participants to allow the researcher to clearly articulate questions and increase research validity (Vagle, 2018). The participants were school administrators and teachers from two different alternative schools. One participating AE school served a diverse population of students with a graduation rate of over 80%, and the second participating school identified a graduation rate lower than 80%. Both schools were in the Seattle School district and served a diverse population of 50% or above. Both schools had the state AE designation and served fewer than 350 students.

The questions asked of the participants included the following:

- Do you feel the school program is designed to prepare students for post-secondary options?
- How would you define post-secondary readiness?
- What is attractive about working with this population?
- What do you feel is your main instructional responsibility in preparing

students for post-secondary options?

The interview questions elicited specific opinions and experiences related to the instructional needs of students attending AE schools and the level of responsibility the participants believed they shared to provide student access to post-secondary readiness. To increase the validity of the study, the responses were recorded along with written notes to ensure accuracy (Punch, 2006). The gathered data were transcribed, coded, and sub-coded into categories and guided the process for establishing themes and trends.

### **Instruments**

Since this researcher was the main instrument, it was important to pay attention to the credibility, dependability, and transferability of the data (Chenail, 2011; Cope, 2014). Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was needed to allow participation in the study, and not put participants at risk in any way. Bias is also considered in research and can impact the study if there is a question about the mental state of the researcher, the consistency of the questions, or the use of inappropriate questioning techniques. To safeguard against any bias, the questions were consistent, and appropriate questioning techniques were used (Evans & Combs, 2008).

This researcher took steps to ensure the interview questions were conducted in the same manner with each participant eliminating questions that could be considered ambiguous. The researcher developed protocols for the participants to increase the validity of the research and reduce potential bias. Additionally, to mitigate the possibility of bias, this researcher maintained a reflective journal with notes to bracket perceptions and address subjectivity. Establishing protocols for the participants in the study strengthened the validity of the research and the study's trustworthiness. These

precautions increased the study's integrity, validity, and rigor (Chenail, 2011). This process was important when analyzing the findings of the study and determining the study's meaning in additional settings (Cope, 2014).

In exploring the limitations of a qualitative study, it is important to remember that qualitative studies may have a potential for bias by the size of the sample and ways the researcher describes the information in the observations (Frisch & Huppenbauer, 2014). For this reason, the closed-ended interviews consisted of limited responses and required participant specificity to provide validity (McLaughlin et al., 2013).

The closed-ended interviews used a writing protocol to provide consistency and prevent deviation from the questions. This written protocol supported a process to bracket and code the responses based on the beliefs and experiences of the participants. For the research study, two AE schools were used with voluntary participation with participant control to discontinue upon request. Participation included confirmation of current educational assignment related to AE schools, acknowledgment, acceptance to participate, and agreement to participation conditions.

### **Population and Sample**

One of the significant benefits of purposeful sampling in qualitative research design is in credibility sampling, a technique that provides a collection of the data in a systematic process. While purposeful random sampling is small, it is designed to provide insight into a specific area of study with the intent of increasing research in that area. Using purposeful random sampling offered insight into 15 or fewer participants and increased credibility while reducing bias. This is especially important when the sample size is small, and the area of focus is larger than the researcher's access, such as the

exploration of readiness of disenfranchised youth in AE.

Minimum sample size for volunteer participants included teachers and staff who worked in an AE school located in the Seattle area for a minimum of two years. Their content area of expertise included math, language arts, science, and counseling. Administrators participating in the study needed a minimum of two years leadership experience. Instructional assistants were included provided they had a key role in supporting the instructional programs of the AE schools. Once participants were chosen, their personal information was categorized according to their experience (Creswell, 2014; Patton 2015).

The interview questionnaire was designed to uncover a correlation to beliefs, experiences, and expectations of academic readiness. The interview questions guided the study to understand adult experiences and perceptions which impacted instructional beliefs specifically concerning disenfranchised youth attending the two AE schools. Participant responses were written verbatim and recorded to ensure accuracy. The interviews used a writing protocol to provide consistency and prevent deviation. This process allowed the answers to be reviewed verbatim and aligned to the research questions. The responses supplied clarification and identification of themes and categories needed for the coding process. The written protocol supported coding the responses based on the beliefs and experiences of the participants.

### **Participants**

The school communities were selected based on the level of socioeconomics and involved all genders teaching in an alternative program in the Seattle area. Identified schools were either struggling or successful in addressing the diverse needs of students,

but the criteria for participation was based on several characteristics: the percentage of free and reduced meals, student population, and levels of diversity including background, lifestyle, and ethnicity.

One alternative school resided in an urban district of Seattle which has a 50% non-white student population with over 50% of students eligible for free or reduced meals. The school is demographically identified as a low socioeconomic area within the Seattle school district. The second school has fewer than 50% of its students eligible for free or reduced meals and under 50% students of color. This school is demographically identified as higher socioeconomically and located in a middle-class area. Both schools align with the criteria of serving disenfranchised learners, and the contrast between schools helped determine whether the study would have meaning in additional settings (Cope, 2014).

After the two schools were identified, the administration of each school chose five to eight staff members to be approached for participation in the study. This process was repeated until ten to twelve participants were secured. The final participants included 12 staff members from the two identified alternative schools with an average of two or more years of instruction in an AE school. The participants had a minimum of two years working with disenfranchised youth. Race and ethnicity of the participants was not considered for participation; however, all were required to have Washington State approved teacher certification. This study size aligned to purposeful random sampling, which is small, but designed to provide insight into a specific area of study with the intent of increasing research in the area of focus (Patton, 2015).

Each identified participant was sent an email and asked to acknowledge his or her interest and agreement to join in the study. Within the email, a consent form (see Appendix A) was attached outlining the interview process. Once the form was signed and returned, the participant was offered various interview times and access to the study's questions prior to the interview (see Appendix B). Participants completed a consent form before taking part in the interview. The consent form gathered preliminary information to ensure they met the identified criteria. Participation included confirmation of current educational assignment related to AE schools, acknowledgment, and acceptance to take part. The consent form allowed participants to choose either an in-person interview or one by phone. If the desired number of participants was not reached as planned, the interviewees could help gather additional volunteers to support "snowball sampling," which is described as utilizing contacts already made who can refer the researcher to other people who could potentially participate in or contribute to the study (Patton, 2015).

An initial pilot to support validity of the interview questions was developed and field-tested with several volunteers who worked within the area of study. Once the validation process was completed, the closed-ended interviews were scheduled, and participants were given designated times and allowed to choose the location.

### **Human Study Ethical Considerations**

In qualitative research, the researcher is seen as the main instrument for the data collection. This gathering is done through a closed-ended interview developed with open-ended questions. In this study, participants were interviewed using questions designed to employ writing protocols, a designated timeline, and readiness on location and time.

Before conducting the interviews, permissions were acquired from the district and participants (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

City University in Seattle provided in-depth and specific training designed to protect the researcher, participants, and cooperating district used in the study. The training outlined procedures and documentation concerning confidentiality, unforeseen risk, benefits, and the process for withdrawing from the study.

Qualitative studies can be impacted based on the sample size and whether the researcher identified any confidential information. This study posed no risk to participants and did not include any identifiable information (Frisch & Huppenbauer, 2014). Data and documentation collected for the study were required to be retained for five years. After this required time, the information will be destroyed.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

The research qualitative data was gathered in-person during closed-ended interviews using audio recording for accuracy. Once the interviews were completed, the information was coded and analyzed into bracketed themes and patterns. The coding was then categorized based on the words, terms, themes, or trends that emerged (Adams et al., 2007), and a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program (CAQDAS) was used to increase its reliability and categorize the information into sub-codes, codes, and themes so the primary elements of the study could be revealed (Kawulich, 2017; Patton, 2015).

The data analysis and interpretation identified categories and themes of the established practices of teachers and administrators and the views and beliefs of participant experiences. The qualitative approach distinguished domains, including sub-

themes to provide additional insight into understanding participant occurrences (Broussard, 2006; Ma, 2015), and provided specificity and meaning of personal perceptions and individual actions (Budd, 2005).

This deductive approach provided the researcher with an avenue for ascertaining themes without preconceived ideas, thus supporting the elimination of any bias and increasing the trustworthiness of the study. The deductive approach supported the theoretical framework briefly described in Chapter 1. The coding process of analyzing data and classifying sub-codes and codes was used to identify patterns and create themes to make meaning and understand the data (Kawulich, 2017). This process was important for analyzing the findings of the study and determining whether the study could be applied to additional settings (Cope, 2014).

### **Limitations**

Phenomenology concerns ideas and a single interpretation of the world which leaves the researcher tasked with ensuring the interpretation of actual participant experiences. It is essential that validity not be tainted by the personal experiences of the researcher who must abstain from making suppositions or speculations related to the data (Moustakas, 1994). The potential limitations of this study could be investigative validity which depends on the ethics of the researcher and the assurance that the data are aligned to the responses provided by the participants. Additionally, since the researcher is the primary instrument for data gathering, researcher bias could occur subconsciously through the researcher's behaviors, attitudes, or familiarity (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2006). The limited access to participants working with disenfranchised youth outside the parameters of this research was addressed in the study. Therefore, the findings and the

results of this research may not necessarily generalize to other subjects, locations, or future time periods (Punch, 2006).

### **Delimitations**

Delimitation boundaries for the qualitative study are tied to the identification of participants and access to alternative high school programs. The study was conducted in two alternative schools in one district. Due to the limited boundaries for this study, the findings may not directly relate to other AE programs or generalize to other subjects, locations, or future time periods (Punch, 2006).

### **Summary**

In studies that utilize human subjects, the researcher must be aware of potential ethical risks related to bias. Bias comes into play if there is a question about the mental state of the researcher, the consistency of the questions, or inappropriate questioning techniques. These factors could lead to questioning the integrity of the study and determine if it lacks the validity or rigor expected. To reduce this possibility, the procedures and consistency were confirmed and verified by staff not participating in the study (Chenail, 2011).

For students from disenfranchised backgrounds, the environmental and educational barriers to post-secondary readiness can seem insurmountable. The lack of post-secondary access and preparation contributes to the disparities in college attendance, completion, and job attainment. The data collected in this qualitative study should help identify the barriers AE students encounter toward their educational aspirations and contribute to the implementation of effective strategies which reinforce the goal of AE schools to support their students' potential for self-worth, personal fulfillment, and a sense

of purpose. The findings in Chapter 4 outline communicated beliefs and teacher experiences which impact disenfranchised youth and their readiness for post-secondary work.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter describes the qualitative phenomenological findings used to evaluate the lived experiences of educators working in alternative schools in one urban school district. The researcher examined the post-secondary preparation of students from disenfranchised backgrounds to assess whether the AE students were being equipped for post-secondary education. Structured interviews of lived experiences with ten AE educators allowed an evaluation of their on-going work to support and prepare disenfranchised youth for post-secondary options.

This study's goal was to highlight AE educators' understanding of educational preparation as it related to disenfranchised youth and their readiness for post-secondary options. However, due to the varied explanations, the research findings highlighted the broad interpretation of what constitutes readiness for these students and where the responsibility and accountability in preparing them for post-secondary education lies. The following three Research Questions guided this study:

- How are alternative schools preparing disenfranchised students for post-secondary readiness?
- How do administrators and teachers influence student expectations and impact their readiness?
- How does the lack of student preparation limit post-secondary for disenfranchised students?

A phenomenological process was used to gather the data and allow the researcher to explore and gain entry into AE educators' conceptual world (Cefai et al., 2015) so as to examine their approach in guiding disenfranchised students toward post-secondary work.

Alternative Education schools from one district in Washington State were chosen to participate. Once the AE schools within the district were ascertained, requests were processed through district leadership to obtain permission and help identify ten school leaders for participation. An email was sent to these AE educators asking them to partake in the research with the hope of obtaining the appropriate number of participants.

Of the ten who agreed to join, six were female and four were male. All had teaching experience ranging from four to thirty-four years, with two working as administrators. Through the structured interview questions, the study focused on the educators' experiences and perceptions which impacted their educational beliefs concerning their students. The interview questions elicited specific opinions and practices related to the learning needs of the AE students and the level of responsibility the educators shared in providing academic readiness. Table 4.1 below characterizes the participants' varied educational information. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality.

**Table 4.1 Participant Information**

Pseudonym	Gender	Years in Education	AE Teaching Experience
Jared	Male	20	20
Linda	Female	6	2
Sue	Female	16	10
Mary	Female	14	10
Ted	Male	34	25
Carol	Female	24	8
John	Male	8	3
Zelda	Female	10	2
Mimi	Female	6	6
Josh	Male	22	1

The researcher met with each volunteer educator through an arranged conference call. A consent form which included a synopsis of the study (see Appendices C & D), was sent to each person before interviews began. Volunteers were also provided with confidentiality forms that included their rights and the contact information for the researcher and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in case questions or issues occurred during the process.

Participants were asked to respond to closed-ended questions during each interview. To ensure accuracy, each interview was recorded to safeguard participant transcript exactitude. Once the interviews were completed, a recorded copy of each interview was sent to a professional transcription service, and all information, questions, interview notes, transcriptions, and consent forms will be retained in a secure file for the prescribed time of five years, after which they will be destroyed.

The next steps involved thoroughly reading each transcript to process the content and create a spreadsheet to support the identification of key phrases. Once these phrases were identified, the coding program for qualitative research, Delve CAQDAS, analyzed the transcripts and organized the phrases into response patterns based on the information from written notes. These patterns were entered into the spreadsheet to link the meanings to conceptual categories and themes, enabling the researcher to refine and fine tune the data (Saldana, 2016).

Three themes emerged from the data analysis: reflective perspectives, positive relationships, and perceived limitations. These themes included the conceptual categories of soft skills, self-advocacy/communication, trust/belief, commitment, passion for

students, collective responsibility, leadership, communication, support/ training limitations, and lack of preparation.

Table 4.2 represents the key themes and conceptual categories revealed through the data analysis of the participants' lived experiences.

**Table 4.2 Themes and Conceptual Categories**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Conceptual Categories</b>
<b>Reflective Perspectives</b>	Soft Skills: Building Communication/Self-Advocacy Characteristics of Readiness Lack of Post- Secondary Readiness
<b>Positive Relationship</b>	Beliefs/Commitment Passion for Students Collective Responsibility Leadership
<b>Perceived Limitations</b>	Support Limitations/Resources Training Lack of Preparation

### **Findings**

The research findings were based on the participant responses to the research questions (see Appendix B), which were transcribed and reviewed multiple times before being coded for themes and conceptual categories. Data analysis helped clarify the narratives and provided additional credibility to the analysis process. The validity and reliability were supported by allowing several district administrators to ask questions and review identified themes and categories (Creswell, 2018).

### **Theme 1: Reflective Perspectives**

Participant responses provided a diversity of answers concerning the characteristics and readiness for disenfranchised students. Questions linking the definition of readiness and post-secondary options caused the research participants to pause and reflect on the substance of post-secondary readiness and the role it plays in AE schools. The responses brought forth various views on post-secondary readiness and the important characteristics essential to its definition. The conceptual category of soft skills emerged as being extremely important to the activities and expectations of the staff. Soft skills included communication, self-confidence, and self-advocacy, skills needed for engaging successfully in the interactions with others (Azim et al., 2010). Participants discussed the development of soft skills as necessary in readiness and essential for preparing disenfranchised youth for their next steps in life. They discussed readiness and preparedness as more than academics, but as an incorporation of life skills which would enable students to move forward and find their place in society.

#### **Soft Skills/Communication/Self Advocacy**

The soft skills of communication and self-advocacy surfaced as critical elements in how the participants viewed and defined readiness. Readiness was seen as more than academic; it was viewed as helping students understand and build life skills while supporting them through the process of developing the next steps. Participants stressed on-going communication, both written and verbal, goal and timeline setting, reflection, and questioning as proficiencies to help students consider resources such as family, finances, and mental health. Participants spoke of contemplation and collaboration as means to succeed not only in post-secondary life but in society. They voiced the need for

students to build their confidence by defining what readiness means to them personally and develop self-motivation to hone, practice, and reinforce those skills. By having conversations with students to understand and improve their abilities, they believed disenfranchised students would learn from mistakes and come to rely on their own capacity to complete tasks and communicate, advocate, and build their personal readiness goals. Readiness was not so much about academics but included soft skills that students could nurture and practice in life, not just in academia. Self-knowledge and self-advocacy would prepare them to be successful as adults in post-secondary options and in life. The following are participant quotations concerning readiness and self-confidence:

Teaching them the responsibility of continuing to communicate. From the beginning of the year, these are the goals we made, these are the timelines we set, and, so, at the end of the year, we can reflect on all of that, you know. Teaching them to communicate, readiness is being able to utilize what you've learned – the skills that you have been reinforcing (John).

Can you write? What are the resources that you have that you can draw upon in order to go to college? Do you have a family that supports you? Do you have the financial means that support you, that can support you to go to college? Do you have the wherewithal and the mental health support that can help you to sustain yourself while you're at college? (Jared).

That it's not just about the engagement in academic content, it's about the engagement in life. How are they able to be collaborative? How are they able to communicate, and how are we preparing them to integrate into that socially? (Carol).

The goal is to teach students to advocate for themselves to be able to code-switch, to understand that they need to be self-motivated in order to be successful academically, right? (Zelda).

They need to know how to ask the questions to get support if they need it. Know how to advocate for themselves. Are they able to learn from

mistakes, to make choices within the whole teaching and learning system? (Ted).

Advocacy in asking for help, advocacy in feeling you can say no, the power to expect consent for what they need. They need to learn to advocate; self-advocacy, 100% across the board (Mimi).

Participant responses gave a broad idea of readiness, seeing it as more than confined to academics or post-secondary preparation. Participants saw readiness as meeting the individualized needs of the students, helping them understand and develop the skills which would emphasize communication and self-advocacy to support them throughout their lives. The idea of teaching students to advocate for themselves included developing their own readiness plan and ensuring they had the means to make it happen. The staff saw preparation for students as a personal understanding of their own needs and a plan with goals to make sure those needs would be met. This definition of readiness relies on life-ready and self-motivated abilities with educators there to guide and mentor. Participants defined readiness as preparation for life, not for academia.

### **Characteristics of Readiness/Post-Secondary**

When asked to reflect on whether they and their school support post-secondary readiness of disenfranchised youth, participants said they support it, but kept returning to the importance of soft skills rather than post-secondary academics. Their actions and ideas of readiness focused on the students' abilities to question and think things through rather than concentrate on expectations of academic success. Concrete examples of courses and academic goals were not part of their responses, but race and equality, restorative justice, negotiation, and conflict resolution were topics deemed essential to student preparation. The spotlight was on processes and critical thinking rather than

classes. The expectations of the educators targeted the preparation of the disenfranchised students to recognize who they were and where they were in their lives rather than moving them forward to where society thought they should be. The following are personal participant quotations about self-knowledge:

I think first of college readiness means you can get help when you need it. You know how to ask for help and reach out. I don't always think that college readiness is directly aligned with academic success. Our goal is to help them actualize into self-sustaining, thriving adults (Mary).

I think a lot of times with traditional schools, readiness is often just funneling students into college, and if the student doesn't fit in college, then maybe they funnel into work. So, what we do is sit down with the students and ask them what readiness means to them as individual students and what their goals are as adults in society (Linda).

I would define the post-secondary readiness as providing the opportunity for students to realize their own direction, the ability to come to an educational setting and adapt (Jared).

When they're coming into the school, questions are asked about, can I get into college? What happens after high school? I tell our goal and my belief is that when you graduate, you will have the tools and you will have the understanding to be able to ask questions. To be able to learn from your mistake and be ready for what comes next (Ted).

We teach them how to enter into a conversation and ask for what you need academically. We provide social-emotional readiness (Mimi).

Teachers spent a great deal of time talking with students and building skills which would prepare them for life and not just for academics. Self-questioning and self-knowledge were seen as essential tools for student success.

### **Lack of Post-Secondary Readiness**

One of the key questions in the research asked if a lack of preparation limited the AE students for post-secondary options. Participant responses reflected a level of acknowledgement around the lack of preparedness for post-secondary readiness, confessing how difficult and time-consuming it was to individualize support. Consequently, some courses and programs only involved the basic requirements and standards allowing curriculum without much depth. They also revealed that the school was not set up to support struggling students, so boxes were checked without a standard level of student achievement. The following are quotations from participants reflecting on post-secondary preparedness:

To be very honest with you, I'm not doing a whole lot in terms of preparing kids beyond the basic requirements of my course. Our school is simply not set up to serve the students who are not being successful now. We are not serving everyone particularly well; it's a matter of checking boxes that are pretty abstract for kids (Josh).

We're looking at the individual student, and we already know that that's more difficult. It takes more time. It takes more effort to look at the individual student and say, "What are this student doing and that student?" (John)

Teachers admitted their schools were not adequately equipped to deal with students and the many problems, both personal and academic, students dealt with daily.

### **Post-Secondary Readiness**

When asked to define the school's post-secondary readiness, the participants discussed individualized plans and preparation for life. They mentioned few classes and

programs with no allusion to post-secondary curricula. The emphasis was definitely on life skills and supporting students as they moved on to meet their own goals rather than preparing them for post-secondary options. The following are participant quotations which demonstrate how teachers work to see students as individuals with specific needs:

I think that at best, we are preparing the student to have the next steps towards creating that goal for their future (Mimi).

Truly meet them where they are and individualize it. If plan A doesn't work, go to Plan B. You know, it's like, have the conversation. I feel like everything preparatory; is preparing them to engage in academic content and the engagement in life (Carol).

I think that there are some things that we do really well because we're an alternative school, so we're able to have really individualized plans for them (Zelda).

We help facilitate their educational life, to have the support they need to move on to do whatever it is that they want to do. Whether that is college or whether it is something else, whatever else, working with them on what it means to become a really great human being (Jared).

In summary, the participants expressed a desire to prime disenfranchised students for post-secondary options, but their main focus was on the student as an individual who first needed certain soft skills to meet that goal. The staff discussed the importance of communication, self-advocacy, and self-motivation which students must understand and develop so they can achieve their personal goals. There was not an agreed-upon process for working with disenfranchised students and very few resources at the school to help struggling students and staff. Participants recognized the importance of academic readiness for post-secondary options but with few resources and training, and students

lacking in self-confidence and self-esteem, it was more important for them to help the students develop as mature adults capable of creating and meeting personal goals, which may not include academics. Participants reflected on how to ready students for life after high school, but they did not voice the idea of readiness being defined as academic preparation.

### **Theme 2: Relationships**

Relationships between educators and AE students emerged as a key theme in developing and accomplishing student goals and success. Participants recognized the difficulty of working with alternative students. They accepted the fact that many students had emotional and psychological problems, so the need to have a passion for working with disenfranchised youth and establishing positive relationships demonstrated their belief in the students' abilities to develop and complete goals. They expressed how critical trust and a commitment to recognizing each student as an individual was to work with students as they struggled to envision their place in society and the path to get them there. Participants were very aware that laboring with disenfranchised youth was more than a job; it was an emotional connection or even a calling. It was a shared collective responsibility with all school staff to support the students as they made their life decisions. The participants knew they were the ones with the power, but they needed to truly listen to the students and give them practical information which they could apply to their daily lives. The following are participant quotations on the need for positive relationships:

It's just this; you can't bottle that, you have the adult in the room who's able to hold the bait in an environment of inclusivity so that voices are heard, and that trust is built (Mimi).

There's just so much about building a relationship with students who come from different backgrounds than myself, going beyond what a textbook. I'm supposed to teach them, but really trying to dig within the student and teach them where they're at rather than where I'm told they should be (Linda).

It's an expectation for teachers to get beyond your subject, to what's real, what's applicable about what you're teaching them? How are they going to apply it, because that's what they're asking? (Carol).

Teachers are quite aware the students come from varied backgrounds and their lives are very different from their own. However, they realize how important it is to understand the students and see them as individuals who need practical, lifelong skills. The teachers demonstrated again and again how committed they are to the students and how important it is to believe they can succeed.

### **Belief and Commitment**

Working with disenfranchised youth requires a deep commitment to service and a belief in the abilities of the students to work toward readiness and next steps. The participants' responses expressed how belief and commitment operate in their day-to-day work and how multi-faceted and challenging the teaching role can be in an AE environment. They recognized that what they were able to provide students instructionally was limited, and the idea of readying them for the next steps was imperfect and demanding. They knew passion was essential, but they also admitted it was often difficult to build trust with students whose backgrounds were so different from theirs and who received negative feedback most of their lives.

## Passion for Students

Participants expressed their love/hate emotions working in a school that allowed them to somehow counteract the difficult experiences the AE students faced in traditional settings. These students were invisible to many adults and underserved in their past schools. As a result, their frustration grew and their self-worth plummeted. Participants knew their job included lifting them up, loving them, and giving them at least one adult they could trust and count on. The words of the participants revealed their commitment and fervor for their students and their belief in their futures. The following are personal quotations demonstrating how teachers advocate for the students and see themselves as essential supports:

You have to be attracted to the kids and the kind of kids that they are. They're going to be quirky or have intense problems. You have to be willing to really love them. There's something about my personality that I think is kind of attracted to those kinds of kids (Jared).

Many of our kids don't have supports in place for them. Their lives are full of people telling them that they have screwed up one more time. We have to have love for kids and have faith in kids. You hold them accountable and help to believe themselves to be worthy of what they will get with hard work (Sue).

How am I actually like uplifting kids of color and like being a good teacher? I want to catch those students that have slipped through the cracks of their comprehensive high schools. I wanted to put my beliefs and my faith in my career into action with students (Zelda).

Students need to have a trusted adult as an alternative school, actually probably do a better job than comprehensive schools do. Programs don't do anything if kids don't have relationships to guide them through (Sue).

Many students come to the school with no support and with histories of failure and low expectations. The teachers become their supports and their cheerleaders in many ways and strive to be the adult the students can trust.

### **Collective Responsibility**

When asked about their responsibility to educate disenfranchised youth in an AE school, participants reflected on individual responsibility, but also the importance of having a shared responsibility as a school community. They spoke of giving students the tools and opportunities to become independent learners so they could succeed. One educator was very clear that a failure to make ready a student was not the failure of the student, but of the entire school. Preparing the AE students for post-secondary options was a shared responsibility of the entire staff and everyone needed to believe in them and support them. Some of the participants' quotation included the importance of student independence and visualizing a future for themselves:

It's incumbent upon the educator to understand what it is the students are going to need based on what you're seeing. It's giving them the tools to be independent learners so that they're able to continue their education. I'm just the ramp, the ramp for them to take off on, until they can fly on their own (Mimi).

There are a lot of questions about who actually is going to catch them up to for all the years that they've missed. That's my job to help kids see an expanded future for themselves. It's also my job to give them an opportunity (Sue).

I think it's our responsibility to help them grow into the best version of themselves possible (Mary).

My main responsibility is getting my students to a place where they are comfortable working independently, self-advocating, and being good

effective readers and writers. A lot of kids that come to us have gotten kicked out for behavior things, issues related to like truancy, unsurprising to many of us. We measure levels of academic success in an inherently biased system. (Zelda).

Our failure to educate them is our failure as a school; it isn't a student's failure (Linda).

It is apparent that teachers feel responsible for the success of their students and realize the difficulty of educating and supporting them. They realize that many have never fitted in traditional schools, and their job is to tailor the conversations and mentoring to the needs of the students.

### **Leadership**

School leadership and its role in the education of AE students was a responsibility to set the tone and standards for the staff. Participants held the leadership accountable for the creation of a shared vision and communicating that vision to the rest of the school. They believed leadership should strive to have all staff collaborate and work together to prepare and educate students. They agreed that leadership must build a community of educators and a culture of belief in students and their abilities. All must work together to ready students for post-secondary options, but the emphasis is not as much on academics as it is on building confidence, self-worth, and independence as learners. The following are quotations from participants and their belief that students come first and all at the school must work together:

I think that it's an outcome, it's a hoped-for outcome of the learning process, but it is not a specific specificity (Carol).

They communicated a standard, around expectations to engage kids. Guidance in helping kids get there is to help them to be deeper thinkers (John).

We are defining readiness all together. I think doing things together as a unit helps us create what we feel is the best way to get students towards readiness (Linda).

It has been communicated that we have high expectations of our students, tailoring things to our students' individual needs. There is no reason why our students can't have the same depth and breadth of experience of educational experience as you would at a comprehensive school. (Zelda).

A shared belief in kids is a great part of leadership. You do your part to support kids. You think about readiness and what leadership communicates as an innovative piece (Sue).

In summary, the views expressed by the participants uncovered the importance of relationship-building with students. Educators in AE schools must deliberately establish communication, trust, confidence, and independence. Staff must have the desire to work with disenfranchised students, understanding their problems, and supporting their personal goals. A positive note surfaced when participants recognized that their teaching of AE students allowed for innovation and individualization, more so than in traditional schools even though they had fewer resources. For AE schools which have a small population of students, the culture of the school created by the educators is paramount. Holland & Farmer-Hinton (2009) discussed the importance of providing positive outcomes for students and developing high levels of staff cohesiveness. Participants believed AE staff must be dedicated to teaching disenfranchised youth and their primary job was treating each student as an individual who can succeed. Their goal was to create

a positive environment where students build their self-confidence, independence, and learn self-advocacy. Academics were secondary.

### **Theme 3: Perceived Limitations**

All volunteers recognized that AE school resources were limited and described the biggest shortcoming as insufficient trained counselors and social workers to serve the needs of students and their families. They felt their own preparation for teaching disenfranchised students was inadequate and on-going professional training was essential. Participants were aware of the importance of staff experts and discussed how a lack of on-site expertise limited their own abilities to be effective. Having counselors, social workers, and mental health experts on-site would allow them to better understand and deal with student needs and problems. There surfaced a great deal of frustration with the district for not understanding the various demands associated with educating disenfranchised students and the diverse barriers which must be overcome to help them succeed:

I wish there were instructional supports provided to help me to understand my student population. We use the word "differentiation," there is none. It's the same – it's like, here it is here's the platter, you put a platter out, but how accessible is the platter? (Carol).

We need resources specific to what's needed for the populations we're working with. A mental health counselor that understands what these kids are going through or have been through (Ted).

I wish we had a social worker at our school. I've learned a lot about affiliations through my students, but I kind of wish I knew more about it from other resources (Zelda).

I feel like there are never enough resources to serve the needs of our population of students (Mimi).

The lack of sufficient resources surfaced again and again. Teachers wanted professional development, training to help students deal with their problems, and experts like social workers and psychologists to work with them and with students so they could feel better equipped to support students through their education and life.

### **Training**

The educators agreed they needed additional training, and those training needs were many. Priorities included resources to identify and address the unique problems of the students including poverty, behavioral and anger issues, homelessness, encounters with the law, limited English, and developmental barriers. These students were in the AE school because there were no places for them in the traditional school, or they were unable to follow the rules of the traditional school, or they had learning and mental problems which traditional schools could not help. Some students had been expelled from other schools and the AE school was the last placement. Participants needed initial training as well as on-going training specific to these many needs of the AE students they served. They needed experts on staff who could help them learn how to work more effectively with these various students. Isolation was voiced as an overwhelming feeling for the educators since most believed district administrators had no understanding of the types of situations they encountered daily. The educators required instructional support, mental health experts, trauma experts, and strategies for useful and successful emotional teaching and learning. They desired opportunities to talk among themselves and form groups to discuss successful strategies and coping techniques so students would not feel

forgotten or ignored by the system. The following personal quotations represent identified resources for addressing disenfranchised youth:

The three big areas of training needs are race and equity, and trauma, and restorative justice. Those are my three big training needs. They're all interconnected, collectively be open to learn, be vulnerable, and continue to grow; as we grow, as we learn more things, to better serve the kids. (Sue).

Need to have space for conversations with like-minded colleagues. Entry points on teams, committees, groups, etc. to align with the groups to have, a clear pathway to how we're going to do social, emotional learning. Self-appraisal of the different necessities a leader needs in an AE school. Training to improve understanding of youth and improve my lack of understanding of systems thinking and systems processing for AE schools (Mimi).

I wish that there was more of a like a playbook of resources and strategies of things that kids needed in order to transition to college (Zelda).

Teachers need to meet together and help each other deal with student problems. They need training and expert help in areas such as race and justice. Racism has been a factor in public education for a very long time, and these teachers want training to discuss these issues among themselves and with their students.

### **Summary**

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of ten participants in AE schools working with disenfranchised students. The study focused on exploring their thoughts and beliefs on the ways they prepare disenfranchised students for post-secondary options. It assessed the educational responsibility of the school and staff to effectively prepare the students for their future options. By using personal interviews

to gather their perspectives, this research study realized the idea of readiness had various definitions which did not put academics first but emphasized the individuality of each student and the needs of each to succeed in life.

The research questions were designed to elicit responses from the participants which would provide insight into their views, expectations, and responsibilities for preparing disenfranchised youth; however, the responses centered on the educators' frustrations with the traditional definition of readiness as being linked to academics rather than to mental health and emotional stability. The traditional definition of readiness is the student's ability to enroll and succeed in post-secondary education or job training without remediation (Convertino & Graboski-Bauer, 2018). The interviews made plain that post-secondary readiness looks different for disenfranchised youth who must overcome negativity and lack of support before they can take advantage of academic opportunities. The educators had the passion and desire to serve the disenfranchised youth to meet academic standards; however, the obstacles to reach that goal were fraught with mental and emotional barriers, which made that outcome secondary.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the post-secondary readiness of Alternative Education (AE) students who come from disenfranchised backgrounds. The study results provided information for teachers, administrators, and state decision-makers who work with the students and determine policies which impact their education. The findings may aid a deeper understanding of the behavior, beliefs, and attitudes of both leaders and teachers regarding the students, the standards, and the accountability of the schools.

This qualitative phenomenological study was designed to explore AE student preparation for post-secondary choice, to identify elements for change, and to support a shift in staff views regarding the school's responsibility in preparing students. Ten educators with various years of teaching experience in AE schools in one Washington State urban district were interviewed regarding their lived experiences. The questions asked of the participants included the following:

- Do you feel the school program is designed to prepare students for post-secondary options?
- How would you define post-secondary readiness?
- What is attractive about working with this population?
- What do you feel is your main instructional responsibility in preparing students for post-secondary options?

From these questions and from participant answers, the following research questions were formed:

1. How are alternative schools preparing disenfranchised students for post-

secondary readiness?

2. How do administrators and teachers influence student expectations and impact their readiness?
3. How does the lack of student preparation limit post-secondary options for disenfranchised students?

The data analysis consisted of multiple readings and detailed reviews of the transcripts to uncover conceptual categories and key themes within the participant responses. The coding process revealed three key themes: reflective perspectives, positive relationships, and perceived limitations. Chapter 5 discusses the findings and conclusions of the study as they apply to leadership and further research. The results may provide awareness into the ways inconsistent academic standards and limited availability and dissemination of post-secondary information affects disenfranchised students' educational attainment and matriculation.

### **Research Findings**

Three research questions were developed to guide the data collection process for exploring the lived experiences of the participants' educational perspectives on post-secondary readiness in AE schools. The literature review from Chapter 2 generated the research questions, and the findings from Chapter 4 provided responses. Data analysis of the responses and the coding process from the research questions uncovered the importance of the following conceptual categories: soft skills, communication/self-advocacy, readiness, belief/commitment, passion for students, collective responsibility, leadership, limitations/resources, training, and preparation. From these categories, three themes emerged which guided the research: reflective perspectives, positive

relationships, and perceived limitations.

**Research Question 1: How are alternative schools preparing disenfranchised students for post-secondary readiness?**

This research question aligns to Questions 1 and 2 posed to the participants. They were asked if AE schools prepared students for post-secondary options and specifically, if their school prepared students for college. Participants responded with various answers using no consistent definition of readiness for post-secondary students. They stated they had conversations with students involving post-secondary options, but those conversations did not necessarily include readiness, meaning college. All thought they were actively preparing students for post-secondary by simply having the conversations, but the various classifications and views on post-secondary readiness revealed an understanding inconsistent with academic readiness. Most defined readiness as it pertains to life after high school noting academics was not the most crucial component for their students. They believed other skills such as soft skills and self-advocacy were essential as good life choices and vital for disenfranchised youth readiness.

**Conversations of postsecondary readiness for disenfranchised AE students**

All participants indicated students benefited from having conversations around post-secondary readiness; however, discussions were guided by the students' needs and were not necessarily based on academic preparation. Participants indicated conversations centered on the development of soft skills such as communication and self-advocacy, two skills essential for AE student achievement. They understood the need for disenfranchised students to acquire skills that allowed them to navigate and successfully interact within the

community and future situations. Participants stressed the importance of building student confidence as an essential element for post-secondary readiness.

**Readiness is seen as more than academic preparedness.**

Participants voiced the need for students to define what readiness meant to them personally rather than have it specified by others. They heard students say they wanted to learn how to develop the self-motivation to hone, practice, and reinforce the qualities they deemed most important. Readiness to the educators meant helping students understand and build life skills while supporting them in developing self-knowledge and self-advocacy. These were the attributes that would make them successful adults in post-secondary options and life; college might be a part of that, but not central to readiness for all. Participant responses, based on student input, reflected a broadening of post-secondary readiness to include preparation for a lifelong career or higher education. The importance of self-awareness and understanding their own goals rather than those imposed upon them by school or society were essential to the students. Critical thinking rather than academic thinking was necessary for their self-recognition and preparation. Self-advocacy, communication, self-motivation, and knowing how to ask for help surfaced several times in defining readiness. It became apparent through the many conversations, educators held with students that life readiness was much more on their minds than academic readiness.

**Research Question 2: How do administrators and teachers influence student expectations and impact their readiness?**

This question aligns with interview questions 6, 7, and 12 concerning educators' expectations of disenfranchised students. It explores what an educator's responsibility is

in supporting students and the role leadership plays in sustaining those expectations. The data from the interviews revealed educators had a high level of care and responsibility in working with disenfranchised youth. It further indicated that educators and leaders believed their main responsibility was in the development of authentic, sustained relationships.

**Relationships with students as a means for student success.**

Participants recognized the difficulty of working with disenfranchised students and accepted the fact that many entered the school with emotional, social, and psychological problems. To meet the needs of these students, a passion for working with disenfranchised youth was essential to help establish positive relationships and believe students could develop and complete their goals. Participants were very aware that working with disenfranchised youth was more than a job; it was an emotional connection or even a calling. They recognized that each student must be seen as an individual and trust and commitment are critical as the students struggle to envision their place in society and develop a path to succeed in life after high school.

The participants clearly spoke of their day-to-day challenges in teaching a diverse, fragile student body. All spoke of the importance of having high expectations and clear standards for all students in their academic work and in their everyday activities. However, they were constantly challenged by maintaining the attention and engagement of students. Many students had sketchy attendance, and many were dealing with difficult home and personal lives. They wanted and needed an education that was real and applicable to their lives now; one which they could use daily to work toward a successful life. Academics were important, but not as important as working through their private

problems. It became clear that an AE school was very unlike schools where preparation for college was the main focus rather than focusing on the difficulties students experience and encounter day-to-day. The participants understood that to retain and engage students, they had to develop relationships which assisted students as they coped with life.

Working with disenfranchised students requires passion, and this quality was mentioned often as a key factor in teaching. Passion drove commitment, responsibility, and accountability for students. Participants knew their job included lifting students up, loving them, and giving them at least one adult they could trust and count on. Participant words revealed their passion and love for their students and their belief in their futures.

#### **Working with disenfranchised students and educators' perceptions.**

This addresses question 13 which discusses staff experience in working with disenfranchised students and the mindset needed to work with them. A few of the participants identified with their students since they themselves had been classified as disenfranchised youth. These teachers felt they were giving back by teaching in an AE school, and worked hard to help their students become leaders as their teachers had worked with them. They felt a special connection to their students and a sense of purpose in their teaching.

Participant mindset went beyond academics; teachers were driven to help students successfully participate in the world. They shared a responsibility for preparing students for life after high school, and when discussing their instructional obligation, several participants revealed their accountability to support student potential not only in academics, but in becoming contributing members of their community. Participants

echoed their collective duty to understand how groundwork for disenfranchised students is tied to academic and social-emotional readiness.

Defining readiness in a broader view encompasses listening to the students themselves and finding out what they want and need. It includes dealing with responsibility and consequences of choices and learning to become independent learners. The teachers were aware that students needed to become the best version of themselves. Many personal factors helped create the mindset needed to teach and support the disenfranchised students.

**Leadership in AE schools is a collective endeavor.**

Participants held the leadership accountable for the creation of a shared vision and the task of communicating that vision to the rest of the school. They wanted leaders to strive to have all staff collaborate and work together to prepare and educate students so they all can build a culture of belief in students and their abilities. Participant responses to interview questions 10 and 14 indicated that preparing AE students needed to be shared by the entire staff who worked together to ready students. They believed the necessity of leaders modeling this mindset and faith while running the school by listening to both teachers and students who best know their own needs. Teachers agreed leadership must commit to and foster the development of academic, social, and emotional curriculum. Based on those values, teachers tried to include academics in the preparation for students; however, academics was just a part of an even stronger emphasis on helping students build confidence, self-worth, and independence as learners and workers. To make that happen, leaders must support and develop teachers as advisors who help students stay on track by maintaining daily contact with each and every student.

**Research Question 3: How does the lack of student preparation limit post-secondary for disenfranchised students?**

Research Questions 9,10, and 11, asked participants to speak to how a lack of student preparation limits students' post-secondary options. Participants felt their preparation for teaching disenfranchised students was inadequate due to few or no essential resources. One notable barrier to good student preparation was on-going, professional training. They expressed a great deal of frustration with the district leaders for not understanding the diverse demands of educating disenfranchised students and the many barriers both students and teachers must overcome to succeed. They believed resources such as mental health experts were vital for student post-secondary options and a lack of these important experts greatly limited the ability to prepare students. Several participants were unable to answer the question specifically because they believed the link between resources and good preparation was fundamental, and since there was such a lack of necessary resources, they were unable to prioritize them or list them all.

They all indicated that on-going teacher training was central to good preparation and voiced the need for in-school experts who could help with the emotional, social, and psychological problems of students. They themselves wanted to learn to identify the various unique problems facing the students so they could address ways to help them strategize solutions or coping techniques. They were discouraged and annoyed that their needs and that of the students were not being met, thus limiting their ability to adequately teach and prepare students for their future. It seemed they felt neglected and of little importance to the district. Without resources like wraparound services and mental health guides, a few participants believed their students would remain marginalized and perhaps

end up in the justice system. They all agreed they needed support in knowing tactics and approaches to help their students transition to post-secondary options and to life, and without this support, they knew their ability to prepare students was greatly lacking.

### **Application of Findings and Conclusion to the Problem Statement**

Alternative Education (AE) is responsible for ensuring all students receive quality educational experiences which lead to academic success and post-secondary choices. Washington State defines AE as a non-traditional education that provides students opportunities to meet their educational needs outside a traditional educational setting (Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2005). This study explored how AE educators' beliefs and expectations impact student aspirations regarding post-secondary options. The results indicated that participants realized that building trust and forming genuine relationships with students was fundamental in meeting their needs and supporting their decisions. Students had to believe the staff sincerely cared about them and saw them as individuals with unique backgrounds and personal goals. Several of the participants identified with their students since they themselves were disenfranchised youth relying on teachers who validated their goals. Based on this personal and professional experience, all participants realized the power of one-on-one conversations in which they truly listened to students and helped them work through the various barriers they encountered daily. Establishing student relationships was basic and the first step in retaining them in the school and developing their post-secondary ambitions. In a study by Henderson et al. (2018), the researchers discussed the need for educators working with the disenfranchised population to center themselves as trusted adults who could be counted on to support the students and help push them to next steps. However, to AE

teachers, those next steps did not necessarily include college, but did provide an endorsement for a sense of purpose.

Passion was a word that surfaced many times as a key characteristic of AE educators. Participants held that an educator who did not have a passion for working with disenfranchised students would be limited in the level of care they could provide to push toward post-secondary aspirations (Means et al. (2016). According to Welton and Williams (2015), the elements associated with disenfranchised youth and readiness for post-secondary options included preparedness and eligibility. Participants acknowledged this research result, but also experienced the fact that preparedness in the academic sense was impossible to disconnect from the emotional and psychological growth of the students. The importance and the impact of the two working together could not be denied (Khalifa, 2011). Educators knew students' academic needs were important; however, they did not feel they had the necessary resources to support the diverse personal and educational needs of disenfranchised students. A review of the participants' responses indicated they trusted that the students they served were capable and deserving of post-secondary options, but without additional resources, their success was limited. Staff discussed the need for additional educational experts in the building consistently to support the students' needs academically, socially, and emotionally.

Finally, participants responded positively when asked about school leadership's role in providing direction for students' post-secondary options. They agreed that leadership's primary role was working collaboratively with staff to support conversations with students, and this shared activity contributed to a positive environment for staff and students. They deliberated on the need for instructional responsibility to shift

methodology and place more emphasis on post-secondary readiness. Domina (2009), in a study on AE, argued that an alternative curriculum would encompass a non-traditional approach which would support students in their educational process and transform the educational experience for disenfranchised youth living below the government-mandated poverty line.

Staff wanted training in current teaching methodology, alternative curricula, and pedagogical research that would enhance everyone's ability to better serve student post-secondary readiness. Hemmer et al. (2012) studied the learning environment for the 21st century and argued for needed modifications in teaching methodology and curriculum policies which would address post-secondary readiness for students in AE schools. According to Welton and Williams, (2015) preparedness and eligibility must be addressed and modified. All participants expressed a strong desire to prepare disenfranchised students for the next steps after high school but revealed those next steps may not be in line with the academic definition of readiness and eligibility. Most students in AE schools had limited success in traditional high schools and therefore often fell behind in their classes leaving them with limited future opportunities (Kim & Taylor, 2008). To judge the success of an AE school and its students mainly by academic readiness could further the misunderstanding of what AE students really need to succeed in life.

Some teachers were familiar with Knowles' theory of adult education and the principles of self-perception, personal experience in learning, ownership of learning, self-motivation, and application to everyday situations (Lee, 1998). In the literature review in Chapter 2, the educational ideology developed by Knowles focused on strategies which

shift adult learners to use the essential principles of self-perception, personal learning experiences, learning ownership, academic motivation, and application to one's life (Lee, 1998). These are the strategies participants believe would apply to AE students and help them succeed rather than the programs in traditional schools where they had limited success and often fell behind in most classes. Their learning deficits often left them unprepared for post-secondary opportunities in the workforce and limited their future options (Kim & Taylor, 2008). AE educators are clearly aware of the sense of urgency needed to support their students and help them engage academically. They must cultivate strong student relationships and build student instructional capacity at the same time. They also need to shift teaching strategies to the ones Knowles put forth for adult education. The teachers know these educational principles would better serve their students and strengthen their chances for academic and personal success.

### **Application to Leadership**

The interviews conducted focused on the lived experiences of both teachers and administrators in AE schools. These AE administrators have a unique leadership responsibility, but many have worked in the world of traditional education and are still subject to traditional education outcomes and expectations. However, leadership in AE schools needs to understand their students come with various personal problems and do not fit the traditional image of the college-bound high schooler. In addition, leaders have the responsibility to identify with and support teachers in understanding the social, psychological, and emotional needs of disenfranchised students and help teachers reduce the barriers that impact student post-secondary opportunities. The added responsibility of leading in an AE school requires leaders to work collaboratively with staff to create a

school culture that recognizes students' academic needs as well as their personal barriers which limit their future options.

Participants recognized that the culture of a school depends to a great extent on its leadership. All staff take their cues from its leaders and an AE school leader must believe in the potential of its disenfranchised students, build authentic relationships, explore post-secondary opportunities, trust their staff, and listen to teachers regarding the resources and training needed to effectively help students realize their post-secondary options. Salfi (2010) and Ylimaki & Jacobson (2012) observed how the quality of leadership plays a significant role in teachers' instructional expectations and the preparation of disenfranchised youth in following program pathways which guide them toward post-secondary readiness. Convertino and Grabowski-Bauer (2018) on college readiness and leadership beliefs contended that leader viewpoints limited or increased the conviction that all students should be made ready for post-secondary options. The researchers identified a clear correlation between leadership, instruction, and opportunities for post-secondary readiness. They stressed that all staff must take ownership in guiding students and in the planning and implementation of strategies which help determine successful student outcomes (Ibrahim et al., 2014). Leaders must be the ones to help all school personnel focus on the connections formed between students, staff, and administrators so everyone is inspired to believe in students. This type of leadership style is designed to motivate and inspire staff in fulfilling their potential (Malos, 2012).

### **Recommendations for Action**

The results of this research suggest the following recommendations: 1) address resource inequity in AE schools, 2) define specific educational outcomes for AE schools

and their disenfranchised populations, 3) explore the definition of readiness for AE schools and students, and 4) implement professional instructional development for leaders and educators in AE schools. These recommendations collectively support the needs of leaders, teachers, and students at AE schools and provide teachers the opportunities to concentrate on improving post-secondary readiness.

Administrators of AE schools must meet with teachers, staff, and parents to engage in conversations which expose the areas needing immediate change. Teachers realize the fragile academic and personal confidence of students, and in order to prepare students for post-secondary work, resources such as counselors, social workers, and psychologists must be available within the school itself. An inventory of resources must be taken, and realistic goals set for daily support and professional training for all personnel. Leaders must understand their impact on the environment of the school and vow to spend more time out of their offices and more time speaking and listening to students, acknowledging their barriers, and involving themselves in outcomes.

Administrators must be visible participants in students' education and active advocates for their essential resources. Students should also be part of the solution, so they must be asked to speak of their concerns and needs, and staff must really listen. Racism and restorative justice must become part of the curriculum with honest conversations and practical ways to recognize, admit, and respond to making the school an environment which fosters equity and respect. The conversations must take place often to create a safe environment. Goals for change must be agreed upon with definite steps and timelines so accountability is transparent. Students must feel empowered and leaders must build a

school which faces the practical problems of everyday life working toward ways to support students, staff, and parents build a community of support for all involved.

### **Resource Inequity in AE schools**

Alternate Education schools tend to serve a smaller population of students than many traditional schools. However, the students they serve often arrive with additional needs having been unsuccessful in completing traditional programs and curriculum. Many have social, emotional, and psychological problems or personal daily barriers that impact their success. Participants all agree vital resources to cope with these situations is sorely lacking in their schools. They specified resources they absolutely needed to meet the essentials of their students, including mental health counselors who can meet with students to understand how best to address their problems because teachers feel inadequate and feel they are unable to do it alone, and mental health training for themselves, so they are better equipped to assist students understand and cope with their problems. They spoke of the daily conversations they have with students, but how they lack the expertise to truly help them. Their teaching would benefit greatly from educational training and continuous learning of effective teaching strategies to retain and maintain their students. Teachers understand how difficult it is to learn when barriers loom every day. They desire the ability to convey strategies to the students which would aid them handle and perhaps solve some of their problems. They know these teaching strategies may look different when educating disenfranchised students, but they know many students often lack academic confidence and self-confidence. They were insistent that the strategies must include ways to develop a high level of listening skills and patience to build trust and authentic relationships with students. Educators are oftentimes

not equipped to address the social, emotional, and psychological problems along with the academic barriers which impact students. They identified the lack of resources in these vital areas as making their ability to support readiness for disenfranchised students an unacceptable disservice to them. Participants indicated that additional and current programs and applicable curricula are needed for school-based supports in AE schools, programs which are pertinent to students' daily lives. Cooper and Davis (2015), in their research on disenfranchised students, indicated that AE schools benefit from instruction which addresses the social and emotional needs of disenfranchised students. They noted that academic and emotional support influence and encourage disenfranchised students to pursue post-secondary opportunities by allowing them to dream and aspire toward personal career goals.

Teachers also spoke of resources to help student access and equity. These are important school-wide components in supporting the entire staff to facilitate readiness of disenfranchised students. In an article by Bragg and Durham (2012) on educational access and equity, the authors maintained that post-secondary completion should be considered by everyone as an important goal for disenfranchised student success. They noted that many students in traditional settings disconnect from the learning process and detach from their aspirations, leading to poor educational preparation and a persistent gap in post-secondary enrollment and completion between students in traditional settings and AE students. Bryan et al. (2017) studied the effects of staff expectations and beliefs on students from disenfranchised areas and the limited supports provided to assist students in accessing higher education. The authors found that increasing the supports for students attending alternative schools would help eliminate barriers and improve student

opportunities to access post-secondary opportunities.

### **Specific Educational Outcomes for AE Schools**

This study explored the expectations around readiness and the ways educators prepare disenfranchised students for post-secondary opportunities. Participant responses indicated that although their school communicated expectations for disenfranchised students, the expectations were not the same as state expectations. They were based on standards for traditional educational institutions and were unrealistic for AE schools. Kennedy-Lewis (2015) found several AE schools neglected to uphold standards due to the lack of adequate educational resources or an understanding of the type of support needed for AE student readiness. The author noted that districts use AE schools as a second chance for disenfranchised youth but fail to understand and embed responsible systems to measure their unique standard of success. Hemmer et al. (2012) examined accountability policies for AE schools and determined that AE schools should be responsible for ensuring access and opportunity for all their students regardless of where they live. The researchers noted the need for accountability and identified how the citing of specific outcomes for AE students could address and help understand the various barriers limiting their post-secondary readiness. Hemmer et al. (2012) discussed the inadequate accountability system in place for AE schools, which are often structured around compliance and not academic readiness.

Participant responses discussed how this lack of specific outcomes for AE schools and their reliance on traditional standards results in a disservice to both students and staff. In an article by Butterworth-Heinemann et al. (2016) on AE student voices, the youth expressed a sense of disadvantage, marginalization, and isolation from education. They

often felt ignored by the educational system and lacked any real awareness of post-secondary readiness. These responses from the disenfranchised youth themselves affirm the need for AE students to receive a quality education with academic opportunities for post-secondary readiness.

### **Defining readiness for AE schools specific to the needs of disenfranchised students**

Readiness has been characteristically defined as a student's ability to enroll and succeed in post-secondary education or job training without remediation (Convertino & Graboski-Bauer, 2018). However, when participants were asked to define readiness, they had no clear idea of what it meant and responded with no consistent definition.

Participants indicated that readiness defined in the traditional term was unrealistic for many of their students who deal with academic deficits. Hemmer et al. (2016) discussed the need for AE education to be seen as different from traditional education rather than inferior. The curriculum and content delivery for AE students should support their unique needs instead of traditional programs. The AE programs must maintain high standards, so students achieve the success they need to reach their goals (Aron, 2006). Castro (2013) on equity in college and career preparation, argued that the definition of readiness in AE schools needs to be studied and addressed in order to decrease the inequity in the educational level of disenfranchised youth and their preparation for post-secondary opportunities. Castro also called for updating educational practices through the use of rubrics to define student readiness and instructional needs.

### **Professional Development for Leaders and Teachers**

Participants were clear that professional development was needed for both leaders and teachers so they could effectively address the academic, social, psychological, and

emotional needs of disenfranchised students. They expressed how inadequate and ill-prepared they felt to fully support student needs. Focused professional development for them and their leaders was vital to address the problems and barriers which impact student lives and education. The entire staff at AE schools must learn strategies to help students cope with the many barriers they deal with daily. Research shows that focused professional development fosters instructional confidence, instructional alignment, teacher commitment, and shared leadership. It is also a mechanism for identifying key supports needed to work successfully with students and the school improvement process (Ainscow, 2005). Participants believed expert training and education would enhance their ability to understand and support their students more effectively.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study posits the need to further research AE accountability and its implications for readiness in AE schools. In Chapter 2, research studies linking AE school limitations and their effects on the attainment of post-secondary opportunities for disenfranchised students were explored. However, it became evident there is scant research investigating the area of AE responsibility and support for student readiness. Further studies need to be conducted which identify accountability measures specific to the needs of disenfranchised students and their influence on post-secondary readiness. These measures must stress the importance of expert training for leaders and teachers vital to the establishment of trusting relationships.

### **Accountability for Readiness in AE Schools**

The responsibility for readiness in AE schools needs more examination as there is limited knowledge on the subject. In an article by Hemmer et al. (2012) on alternative

school accountability, it was noted that AE schools operate under a weak liability system. Their academic responsibilities are often unmet, and their definition of student success is inconsistent and vague. For years these factors have led to the reputation of AE schools as inferior to traditional schools causing student post-secondary opportunities to be limited (Kim & Taylor, 2008). In an article on the accountability policy of AE schools, Hemmer et al. (2012) discussed the importance of the educational setting supporting opportunities for students after high school and ensuring quality access for all students regardless of where they live. Educators' negative assessments of students and institutional inequities allow alternative schools to lower standards and not be held accountable for poor preparation, lack of readiness, and limited post-secondary work opportunities (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). Hemmer et al. (2012) discussed the inadequate accountability system in place for AE schools which are often structured around compliance and not academic readiness and the effect these factors have on students' futures. Henderson et al. (2018) discussed the need for advocacy and accountability in public education and the necessity to challenge the inequalities for disenfranchised youth.

Equity challenges should be part of the agenda for every meeting of the National Alternative Education Association. The NAEA must be at the table with traditional educational associations, working more visibly to raise public opinion of AE schools as not sites where "losers" are placed, but as institutions which define readiness as the achievement of life skills and personal confidence. Broader research should be done which engages community leaders as well as educators, so the public comes to understand the potential of AE students and the support they need to succeed. Statistics concerning race, gender, socioeconomic status, and personal goals should be gathered to

better understand AE students, their concerns regarding equity and restorative justice, and their personal barriers. It is also essential for colleges and industry to involve themselves in the future of AE students to provide pathways for their careers as community citizens.

### **Training to Support Teacher/Leader Efficacy**

Teachers and leaders know that effective on-going training is essential for successfully working in AE schools. The lack of training has been identified as a deterrent in an educator's ability to offer higher instruction levels needed for readying disenfranchised students for post-secondary work. Aron (2006) discussed the impacts of how this lack of educational preparation and lack of rigor in many AE programs limited the responsibility of schools and staff in supporting student goals. Training is often inadequate and sporadic, limiting educators' abilities to stay current and deal with the diverse student problems. Welton and Williams (2015) in their study of AE schools discussed the impact of professional development on teaching methodology, curriculum, standards, and resources. They found these components often differ substantially between AE schools and affluent or traditional high schools. Their study concluded that the disparities often lead to overall inequalities and negatively impact disenfranchised youth readiness. They discussed three elements associated with disenfranchised students and a college-ready culture: preparedness, readiness, and eligibility. Flores and Gomez (2011) noted a rigorous curriculum and teachers willing and able to develop higher expectations would bolster student opportunities for post-secondary options. Acknowledging the importance of professional and on-going training for AE staff, additional research is needed to identify the most effective training programs and their impact on readiness for disenfranchised students.

### **Rethinking Purpose**

Means et al. (2016) noted the need for additional research and observation to determine a school environment's impact on impeding or facilitating college access. Powell (2016) discussed how eligibility is often an obstacle to college for disenfranchised students. They noted how entry to high-quality education and learning experiences are linked to post-secondary readiness and the connection between access and academic completion. The belief that AE schools are not accountable for high academic standards deprives its students from competing in higher education. Kim and Taylor (2008) and Hemmer et al. (2012) discussed broadening AE's purpose and accountability to include meaningful learning experiences for disenfranchised youth. They suggest that because many AE schools lack support, resources, and professional development, it is difficult to break the educational inequity cycle and change the perception of inadequacy in AE schools. These views impact the post-secondary opportunities for disenfranchised students. To support the success of these students, there needs to be a re-evaluation of the purpose of AE education, making the schools accountable for supporting post-secondary preparation. AE schools must revise their curriculum, programs, and strategies, and concentrate on building resources, and providing professional training for its staff so student preparation and success will be a priority.

### **Concluding Statement**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of ten educators in Alternate Education schools in one Washington State urban district. It looked at the post-secondary readiness of the AE students from disenfranchised backgrounds and whether these students were being prepared for post-secondary education. The study focused on

the thoughts and beliefs of the educators, the ways they prepared disenfranchised students for post-secondary options, and the school and staff's educational responsibility to effectively prepare the students for their future opportunities. The findings showed educator belief was not a primary contributor to the lack of post-secondary readiness for disenfranchised students. On the contrary, participants' lived experiences bolstered the sense of urgency they felt to effectively educate the students. They made it clear that building trust and creating authentic relationships with students were top priorities, and a positive school culture could be established through high collegiality between staff and leadership.

Three themes emerged as essential to the post-secondary readiness of disenfranchised students. These themes included reflective perspectives, positive relationships, and perceived limitations, themes which uncovered teacher mindsets and the importance of student perception and care. The data collected from the study will hopefully encourage additional research into AE school accountability and the importance of providing professional training and support for educators. Additionally, the results of this research should emphasize to district leaders, administrators, and teachers the importance of coming together to collaborate on the definition of readiness for AE students and explore the best programs and strategies to support disenfranchised student attainment of post-secondary options. These discussions may lead to establishing standards for AE schools which prepare students personally and academically for completion and post-secondary success.

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## APPENDIX A



**Informed Consent for Participation in Research Study Activities  
School of Applied Leadership**

**Title of Project:** Are They Ready? Alternative Education and Post-Secondary Readiness.

**Name of Researcher:** Laura Davis Brown, Doctoral Student

**Faculty Supervisor:** Dr. Nicole Ferry, School of Applied Leadership

**Contact Info:** [FerryNicole@CityU.edu](mailto:FerryNicole@CityU.edu)/206 239 4764

**CITY UNIVERSITY PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN  
RESEARCH**

**Research Overview:**

The purpose of this qualitative research is to explore post-secondary readiness for students from disenfranchised backgrounds, and whether students attending alternative school programs are being prepared for post-secondary readiness. This research will extend our understanding to the needs of students and staff in Alternative Educational settings in the following ways. 1) how readiness contributes to post-secondary readiness, 2) staff mindset on readiness of students in Alternative School settings, and 3) how supports and expectations impact readiness of students, in order to explore the additional support and resources needed to ensure readiness and post-secondary readiness.

**Participation Process Overview:**

I acknowledge I am being asked to participate in the above study through the process of in-person or phone interview questions. I acknowledge that my participation is voluntary and that I can refuse participation without consequence

**CONSENT**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ agree to participate in the research study to be conducted by Laura Davis Brown, a student in the Ed.D. program at City University of Seattle. I have been informed that this research has been approved the City University of Seattle Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the data gathering process.

I acknowledge I have been provided an overview of the research study and written protocols associated with the research process, participant safeguards, and informed consent process. I further understand that my participation in the research study does not in any way waive my legal rights or release the researcher and/or City University of Seattle from any legal responsibilities connected to this research study.

I further acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form signed, inclusive of all involved parties.

**Confidentiality Statement**

I acknowledge that my participation is confidential. Upon completion the research study will contain no identifiable participant information. If requested will be given access to information to the research study upon completion. All data gathered in the research study through the interview process will be stored and secured for the of duration of six years. I further understand

that once the duration of time has passed the data gather from the research study will be destroyed.

Participate Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Note: If I have any questions in regard to my participation in this study I may reach out to the researcher whose contact information is listed on this form. If I have any additional concerns I may reach out to the City University faculty listed on this form.**

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Questions

#### Alternation Education and Readiness

1. How long have you worked in education? Specifically, in an Alternative Educational Setting.
2. Do you feel that the school program is designed to prepare students for post-secondary after high school?
3. How would you define post-secondary readiness?
4. What guidance have you received to support student post-secondary readiness?
5. What supports do you wish you had before working in an Alternative Educational setting?

#### Perceptions of Disenfranchised Youth and Readiness

6. What was attractive about working with this population?
7. What has been your experience in working with youth in an urban district?
8. Before working with this population of students did you receive training?
9. Do you feel you have been provided the support needed to ready students for post-secondary?
10. Are there any specific instructional supports you wish you had to support your work with the student population in the school?

#### Teacher and Leadership Perceptions and Readiness

11. What do you feel is your main instructional responsibility to preparing students for post-secondary?
12. What has been your experience with working with disenfranchised youth prior to

teaching in your building?

13. What has been communicated to you by leadership regarding post-secondary readiness?
14. Is there a positive experience you can share that you had prior to taking this teaching role with urban youth in an AE school?
15. Can you recall any negative interactions with urban youth before or during your teaching assignments that you would be willing to share?

## APPENDIX C

**INITIAL EMAIL TO PRINCIPALS**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Laura Davis-Brown, and I am a doctoral candidate at City University of Seattle. I will be studying the Post-secondary readiness of Alternative Education. My dissertation topic will be studying the possible impact of school leadership and instructional staff on the disenfranchised youth and the conditions needed for post-secondary readiness and the perceptions of the staff and experiences. I am planning on conducting my research at the end of February and early March. I am emailing you to ask for your participate in my study. The research will involve a detailed interview of approximately 60- 90 minutes. I will utilize a digital recording device during the interview to ensure accuracy my notes and then analyze the content. I will follow up with you after the interview if needed and you will be emailed a transcription of your interview. This is to allow all participants the opportunity to review the transcription and inform me if I captured the interview accurately.

I have already received approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the School of Applied Leadership at City University of Seattle. The total process will be confidential including your name and the name of your district Please do not hesitate to email me if you have any questions [lbbrown@cityuniversity.edu](mailto:lbbrown@cityuniversity.edu)

If you are willing to participate please email back this form with the responses to the questions below. Upon receipt of the form, I will contact you to set up a convenient time and location if you choose to be part of the study.

Again, please do not hesitate to reach out to me if you have additional questions. I look forward to hearing back regarding your decision to participate in my study.

Respectfully,

Laura Davis-Brown

**Recruitment Questions for Principal include:**

1. How long have you been an administrator?
2. How many years have you been in this AE school?
3. Why did you choose to lead an AE school long have they/you been leading or teaching in an AE school and why?

**Teacher Recruitment questions include:**

1. How many years have you been teaching?
2. How long have you been working in the district?
3. What made you want to teach in an AE school?

## APPENDIX D

Interview Date:

Time:

Researcher: Laura Davis Brown

My name is Laura Davis-Brown, and I am a doctoral candidate at City University of Seattle. Thank you for meeting with me today, it is appreciated. This research is studying the Post-secondary readiness of Alternative Education. My dissertation topic is studying the possible impact of school leadership and instructional staff on the disenfranchised youth and the conditions needed for post-secondary readiness and the perceptions of the staff and experiences.

The interview will be approximately 60- 90 minutes. I will utilize a digital recording device during the interview to ensure accuracy my notes and then analyze the content. I will follow up with you after the interview if needed and you will be emailed a transcription of your interview. This is to allow you the opportunity to review the transcription and inform me if I captured the interview accurately.

Do you give permission for me to record this interview? \_\_\_\_\_

Today is \_\_\_\_\_. The participant code number is # \_\_\_\_\_.