

VANCOUVER ISLAND UNIVERSITY

Alternative Education: Success for All

by

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Abstract

Alternate education programs are created in school districts to meet the needs of at-risk, high-risk, vulnerable youth who are not connected to their homeschools or communities. This descriptive multiple case study explores the research question: What are the underlying philosophies and models of two BC school district alternate education programs and how are they being upheld? Four alternate school staff members and one administrator from one central Vancouver Island district were interviewed about the models and philosophies in their alternate programs. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews about the experiences, perceptions and interpretations of the participants working in the alternate programs. Program 1 is a junior and senior alternate program for grades 7 to 12, that is modelled on the Circle of Courage. Program 2 is a grade 8 to 12 alternate program for students with social-emotional and mental health challenges. It is modelled on four wellness areas recognized in the program: stress and anxiety management, active living, healthy eating and building social connections. According to the participant it also focuses on safety, inclusivity and community building. The findings reveal that the key features of these programs are a clear mission, goal and model, cohesion, pedagogical relationships, flexible and positive environment and inclusion.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Students spend the majority of their young lives in school. According to the School Regulation Calendar (2018), a student will spend a total of 11759 hours receiving instruction from kindergarten to grade 12. They will spend approximately 188 days in school each year, and countless more hours doing homework, riding the bus and having lunch and recess. Most students will make friends, pass classes, learn academic and social skills, make plans for their future, apply for scholarships, and graduate. For the vast majority of school aged students, mainstream school will work for them and they will find success, but for a minority, it will not. These students need different types of programs and supports. They may have had success in the past or they may have never known academic success. Alternative education programs were designed for these students (Government of British Columbia, 2018).

In a central Vancouver Island school district, two alternate programs were created to meet the needs of at-risk, high-risk and vulnerable youth who were not finding success or connections within their own catchment area mainstream schools. The school district has mission, vision and value statements that promote healthy, diverse, connected, ethical and successful students, but for a growingly large number, they are not finding what they need in their home schools. The number of students attending these alternate programs have increased by over one hundred students in the past five years (Government of British Columbia, 2019). The alternate programs have a total of 299 students, 135 of whom are recognized as aboriginal, and 73 who are designated as having a special need (Government of British Columbia, 2019). The graduation rates for the school district for BC residents in the last five years ranges from 78% to 80%, compared to the typical range from 80% to 91%, with an average of 79% graduation completion

rate (Government of British Columbia, 2018). The district had a 62% graduation completion rate for aboriginal students, and a 61% graduation rate for special need students in 2017/18 (Government of British Columbia, 2018). It is worth noting that students leaving with a school completion certificate or Evergreen are not counted in the graduation completion rate.

It is common for districts throughout BC to have alternative education programs for their students. Many districts have more than one program, typically separated by grades, ages, needs and cultures. With the implementation of the new curriculum design and Ministry of Education's focus on inclusion and reconciliation, the number of students needing alternate programs should be decreasing but all but one program in the central Vancouver Island area has been increasing in numbers over the last five years (Government of British Columbia, 2019).

Background

According to The BC Alternate Education Association (Shaw, 2018), there are approximately 283 alternative programs in the province of British Columbia. The Ministry of Education's Alternate Education School Program Policy (2009) gives a school board the right to establish schools or programs that will act as alternatives to those that serve the general population. Alternative programs have been a part of the public education system since the early 1970s, when upheaval and civil rights movements brought about a need for change to the educational system. They are designed to meet the needs of at-risk, high-risk and vulnerable youth who are not connected to their communities or mainstream public school.

Historically, alternate education programs were originally called free schools or academic drop-in centres in the 1960s. These schools were located in storefronts, community centres, and church basements (Campbell, 2018). They were created and staffed by volunteers, parents, friends, and supporters of the schools. They were funded by private donations, tuition,

community grants and government grants (Campbell, 2018). In the early 1970s, the free schools or academic drop-in centres were recognized by the public education system as a viable option for students who were dropping out of mainstream schools. Slowly alternative schools were becoming part of the public education sector and funded by the government (Campbell, 2018).

The British Columbia Ministry of Education (2009), has recognized the needs of at-risk, high-risk and vulnerable youth through the Rationale or purpose of policy section of the alternate education policy. It states that:

Students who attend alternate education programs are often the most vulnerable population in the school system. Alternate education programs have disproportionate numbers of children and youth in care, Aboriginal students, children and youth living in poverty or the street, gifted children who have difficulty in social situations, children and youth involved in drugs, alcohol and the sex trade, and youth with mental health concerns. Alternate education programs offer an opportunity for these vulnerable and at-risk students to experience success (rationale section, para 2).

Alternate Education in British Columbia

Alternate education programs in British Columbia are type three facilities that must meet the policy standards of the Ministry of Education. The British Columbia Ministry of Education (2009) policy on type three facilities states that in order to meet the criteria each “Alternate education programs must focus on the educational, social and emotional issues for students whose needs are not being met in a traditional school program. These education programs provide support to students through differentiated instruction, specialized program delivery and enhanced counselling services based on students’ needs” (Policy in full section, para 2). The alternate education programs also must have:

1. An intake process to facilitate district referrals or self referral.
2. An annually reviewed learning plan for each student, either an official Individual Education Plan (IEP) or a Student Learning Plan that clearly defines the objectives for the student, additional services provided as required, progress made, and any transition plans.
3. An exit strategy to facilitate the student's transition back into the regular school system, continuing education centre, graduation or to work or post secondary training and education.
4. Evidence of additional services as required by the student population (i.e. youth workers, drug and alcohol counsellors and/or sessions, etc...). (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2009, Procedures related to policy section).

For the purpose of this study, mainstream schools are defined as public education schools divided into grades and governed by school districts according to the School Act (2018). They traditionally focus on curriculum outcomes, objective student evaluation, core competencies, and direct instruction.

At risk youth are defined in the McCreary report as youth who have been marginalized “for example as a result of abuse, sexual exploitation, substance use, bullying, discrimination, mental health problems or street involvement (Smith et al., 2007, p.7). High risk youth are defined as “‘at risk’ youth who have disconnected from school, family and community, compounding the risks and challenges in their lives” (Smith et al., 2007, p.7). Vulnerable youth attend school but have experienced abuse and/or have a challenging, unstable home life (May et al., 2006). They are at a greater risk for dropping out of school, struggling with addictions and violence, or attempting suicide (May et al., 2006).

Rationale for the Study

Alternative education programs are extremely important for at risk and vulnerable youth because they can provide a positive, flexible, and nurturing environment for their students. The schools that provide these programs have a unique understanding of the needs of students in their communities. The alternate programs in a Central Vancouver Island district provide real-world understanding into the challenges facing youth and how the school district, administrators, staff members, and community members are trying to meet their needs. The models and philosophies of these alternate programs can provide valuable insights into the key themes in the development and implementation of alternate schools as well as contributing to research in alternate education in British Columbia.

Purpose of the Study

Students enrolled in alternate education programs are on the rise in Canada. In central Vancouver Island, two alternate education programs were created to meet the needs of the increasingly high numbers of students in one district. The first program is for all students, the second is for students who need social-emotional and mental health support. The purpose of this study is to describe the models, philosophies, and practices of each alternate education program. The researcher will specifically be looking at what factors make each program unique, and the models and philosophies of each program through the lens of the alternate school staff members.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher will call the program created for all students, Program 1, and the program for students with mental health needs, Program 2 in order to protect the identity of the participants.

Research Question.

The research question is as follows:

What are the underlying philosophies and models of two BC school district alternate education programs and how are they being upheld?

Research Design

The researcher chose to do a descriptive multiple case study of two alternative programs in one central Vancouver Island school district using a qualitative case study approach. The researcher chose to do a semi-structured qualitative interview method with staff recruited from the programs in order to understand the perceptions and experiences of those running the programs. This study will provide information about the beliefs, structures, and educational philosophies of the staff in the programs. The researcher chose the descriptive case study methodology because she wished to describe a real-life phenomenon in context without the manipulation of variables (Yin, 2009). The case study approach will allow the researcher to look in-depth at the alternate education programs in order to gain a greater knowledge of the programs in real-life.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The literature surrounding alternate schools in Canada is limited, possibly due to the variety of structures that exist within alternate education (Smith et al., 2007). In the United States, there is more literature to review, with national statistics, schoolboard reports and research. To bridge the knowledge in both the United States and Canada this literature review will focus on three common themes: the disengagement of youth in traditional schools, student voice, and characteristics of effective alternative schools. The chapter will first explain the role of alternative education programs in public education and the inclusion policy in British Columbia in order to lay the theoretical groundwork for the current thematic research discussed above.

Rationale

The alternate education policy in British Columbia was created in response to students whose needs were not being met in a traditional public-school program. Alternate education programs focus on the educational, social and emotional issues of our most vulnerable and high-risk students. The programs provide “differentiated instruction, specialized program delivery and enhanced counselling services based on students’ needs” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2009, policy statement). According to the British Columbia School Act (2018), every school board in B.C. may establish alternate programs or schools in order to meet the educational, behavioural, emotional, and social needs of students who require a “learning situation not provided in existing schools and district programs” (Nanaimo Ladysmith Schoolboard, 1995, para 1). This essentially means that every school district in B.C. can have alternate programs and schools based on the needs of their students. This also means that each of

these programs will be different and unique depending on the students, demographics, culture, needs, and space available.

Framework

John Rawls (1971) Theory of Justice states that all citizens have a right to an equal education. His Theory of Justice is based on two principles, which are commonly called the principle of equal liberty and the difference principle (Rawls, 1971). These principles give all people in a democratic society the same opportunities and rights regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, and special needs. Rawls (1971), states:

More specifically, assuming that there is a distribution of natural assets, those who are at the same level of talent and ability, and have the same willingness to use them, should have the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in the social system, that is, irrespective of the income class into which they are born. (p. 73)

The difference principle would also support giving more educational resources to the least advantaged students (Rawls, 1971, p. 101). Since alternate education was created for our most vulnerable and high-risk students, it would be reasonable to assume that these programs and schools would follow Rawls' Theory of Justice, especially regarding his second principle of justice.

The School Act, (BC Ministry of Education Governance and Legislation Branch, 2018), follows the democratic principles of education and states that all people in society shall receive an education that “enables them to become literate, personally fulfilled and publicly useful, thereby increasing the strength and contributions to the health and stability of that society” (chapter 412, preamble). The School Act, (BC Ministry of Education Governance and Legislation Branch, 2018), further clarifies the role of the British Columbia school system and

states that “the purpose is to enable all learners to become literate, to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society and a prosperous and sustainable economy” (chapter 412, preamble). This means that in British Columbia every student has a right to an education and to be educated.

The belief in the right to an education for all democratic citizens in society is also upheld by the United Nations in The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), article 26, underlines the right to an education for everyone. It also states that education should grow a person’s personality as well as strengthening their “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” (United Nations General Assembly, 1948, article 26 (2)). It also includes education for the purpose of maintaining peace through the understanding of diversity. This means that for human beings to be fully developed they must be educated in the teachings of tolerance, diversity, understanding, freedoms, and rights of all people. This is also illustrated by Aristotle’s teachings on intellectual and moral virtues, through which education is seen as essential to leading a happy and fulfilled life (Curran, 2000).

Inclusive Education

Inclusive education has been widely adopted in school districts in Canada since the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on March 11, 2010 (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, 2014). Inclusive education means that all students have an equal right to an education without discrimination; diversity is welcome, and accommodations are supported. The British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) has a policy on inclusion which was created to show its commitment to inclusive education in the public

education system (2019). This policy outlines the federation's stance on inclusion and includes policies on funding, administration, staffing, assessment, student rights, accommodations, facilities and in-service. The third regulation states that "some students require differentiated or adapted programs, placements, and/or supports; full-time placement in a regular classroom may not best meet the needs of some students" (BCTF, 2019, no. 3). This means the BCTF's inclusion policy would support alternative education in the public education system for our most vulnerable and high-risk students if they required accommodations that would warrant a different educational environment.

Student Needs

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs is a motivational theory in psychology. It originally had five tiers, but was later expanded to eight tiers of human needs. It proposes that in order to learn and grow as human beings, basic needs must first be met. Maslow (1943) explains that basic needs lower on the hierarchy must be satisfied first before individuals can attend higher needs. The needs from the bottom of the hierarchy up are: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, cognitive needs, aesthetic needs, self-actualization, and transcendence needs (Maslow, 1987). The first four needs are identified as deficit needs, and if they are not met to at least some degree, they will make an individual uncomfortable, and they will be increasingly motivated towards fulfilling these needs (Maslow, 1987). The other four needs are identified as growth needs and are not from a lack of something, but as a desire to grow as a person (Maslow, 1987). These needs provide continuous motivation depending on individual growth, development, and interests (Maslow, 1987). In education, Maslow's theory is seen as a holistic approach and pertains to a student's complete physical, emotional, social, and intellectual needs and how they impact on learning. "Before a student's cognitive needs can be met, they must first

fulfill their basic physiological needs” (McLeod, 2020, Educational applications). This means that for students that are identified as at-risk, high risk and vulnerable, schools need to meet their basic needs before they will be able to grow and learn as individuals. If their basic needs are not met, they cannot be motivated by any of the growth needs on the hierarchy. Therefore, if a student is hungry, they will only be able to think of satisfying that hunger, they will be driven to fulfill this need. “Freedom, love, community feeling, respect, philosophy may all be waved aside as fripperies which are useless since they fail to fill the stomach” (Maslow, 1943, p. 374). Education programs that follow Maslow’s hierarchy of needs would first try to fulfill the deficit needs before moving towards the growth needs.

The Circle of Courage is a Native American model of positive youth development that addresses the “universal growth needs” of children (Brendtro et al., 2005, p. 131). The Circle of Courage was created in 1988 by Dr. Larry Brendtro, Dr. Steve Van Bockern, and Dr. Martin Brokenleg. It was depicted by Lakota artist George Bluebird. It consists of a medicine wheel which represents balance and harmony, four coloured quadrants, which represent the different races, their equality and a cross. The four points on the cross are belonging, independence, generosity, and mastery (Brendtro et al., 2013). According to Brendtro et al., (2005) when these needs are met, children grow and thrive, but when these needs are frustrated, multiple problems follow (p. 130). The needs addressed by Brendtro, Bockern and Brokenleg are motivations similar to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Brendtro et al. (2005) explains, “You do not have to fight with kids to convince them they should belong, master, be independent, and contribute to others. We are endowed with these motivations; they are programmed into human genetics and they are the reason the human race has survived” (p.131). The Circle of Courage model supports strength-based interventions that use strategies to enhance belonging, mastery, independence, and

generosity (Brendtro et al., 2005 p.134). It does not support deficit-based interventions. This means that schools can use the Circle of Courage as a unifying theme or basis for recognizing the needs of students and providing interventions that support and strengthen student growth.

Current Research

Disengagement

Students disengage from school for a variety of reasons; the challenge is to re-engage them. Smith, Peled, Albert, Mackay, Stewart, Saewyc, and the McCreary Center Society (2007), researched British Columbia alternate schools. The researchers used a mixed-method approach with both qualitative and quantitative data to explore the disengagement of youth from education. Zweig (2003) analyzed the extent to which alternate education can meet the needs of vulnerable disengaged youth. Her study was funded by the Urban Institute and used by the U.S. Department of Education. Boylan and Renzulli (2017) used the Education Longitudinal Study (ELS) of 2002 to examine the reasons why students disengage and reengage in school through a conceptualized ‘pushed’ or ‘pulled’ out of school model.

Smith et al. (2007) study, ‘Making the grade: A review of alternative education programs in British Columbia’ focused on eight school districts with a high prevalence of youth street involvement and sexual exploitation. The districts were identified from those that participated in the McCreary marginalized and street-involved youth study (2007). The mixed-methods study gathered data from a survey of youth attending alternative programs, interviews with key adult community stakeholders, and further analyses from the data from the McCreary Centre Society’s survey of marginalized and street-involved youth (2007). They used the interviews from stakeholders to help strengthen the reliability and validity of the responses from the youth surveyed. The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of youth who are disengaged

from education. The results of the study are broken down into challenges and educational engagement. The challenges or barriers to attending school were: housing, challenging family situations, pregnancy and parenting, poverty, hunger, transportation, employment, physical health and fitness, mental and emotional health, abuse and sexual exploitation, substance use, and criminal involvement. The reasons for disengagement in education were: other commitments, did not fit in, was bullied, moved a lot, family problems, other personal problems, became pregnant, illness, and cognitive/emotional disengagement. The most common reason youth reported leaving school was because they had disengaged on a cognitive or emotional level; this included those that “felt it was boring, they did not care about school, and/or felt it was irrelevant to their lives” (Smith et al., 2007, p.37). The reasons for re-engagement were: to get a Dogwood diploma, wanting to make changes in their lives, wanting a career or a better job, to go to college/university, and as a condition of youth agreement or probation. The limitations of the study were: it is not generalizable, it relies on the self-reported experiences and perceptions of the participants, and the literacy of the participants could have impacted the comprehension of the survey, although the questions were read aloud (Smith et al., 2007, p.11). It is significant in that it gives insight into the lives of youth attending alternate programs and the alternate programs they attend (Smith et al., 2007).

Zweig’s (2003) study, “Vulnerable Youth: Identifying their Need for Alternative Education Settings” examined the degree alternate education can meet the needs of disengaged youth in the United States. The researcher broke down the factors relating to how youth disconnect into four categories: school completion and dropping out, teen pregnancy and parenting, involvement in the juvenile justice system, and leaving the foster care system. The researcher also noted that vulnerable youth are those that are “socially, educationally, and

economically disadvantaged relative to their peers” (Zweig, 2003, p. 4). The barriers that affect educational success are both within and outside of the school system. The researcher used the “The Coalition for Juvenile Justice (2001)” annual report to list the barriers: school discipline policies, poverty, poor educational start, community stress, racial/ethnic/language barriers, lack of adult supervision, mentors, and community supports, family stress and responsibility, learning disabilities and related conditions (Zweig, 2003, p. 7). The researcher, through reviews of other studies, found that there are alternate programs that are meeting the needs of our most vulnerable youth, while there are other alternate programs that are used as a place to send disruptive or problematic youth (Zweig, 2003, p.19). The research does note the importance of alternate education as a means “for youth to reconnect to their education to improve their chances of [a] successful transition to adulthood” (Zweig, 2003, p.19). The limitations are that the study relies on other researchers’ findings, it is from the United States, it was funded by the Urban Institute to be used by the U.S. education department and it does not have a strong conclusion. The significance of the study is that it provides an overview of the strengths and weakness in alternate education in the United States and could lead to policy change.

Boylan and Renzulli’s (2017) study, “Routes and Reasons Out, Paths Back: The Influence of Push and Pull Reasons for Leaving School on Students’ School Reengagement” used the Education Longitudinal Study (ELS) of 2002 to find a sample size of 680 students who had dropped out of high school. The ELS tracks grade 10 students through high school and on to postsecondary achievement or work using two 2-year follow-up surveys. The researchers used multiple imputation techniques to find those grade 10 students with missing survey data in order to determine those that had dropped out (Boylan & Renzulli, 2017, p. 51). The researchers had three hypotheses for their research, the first was; “compared with students who have been pulled

out of school, those who were pushed out will be less likely to return to schooling” (Boylan & Renzulli, 2017, p. 48) The second hypothesis was “students who are pushed out of school should be more likely to return via the GED pathway than pulled out students” (Boylan & Renzulli, 2017, p.49). The third hypothesis was “compared with those who were pushed out of school, we expect those who were pulled out to be more likely to return to schooling, particularly by the traditional path of earning a diploma” (Boylan & Renzulli, 2017, p. 49). The students in the sample were grouped into two categories, those that had returned to school and those that had not. The students were then asked to indicate if their reasons for leaving were because of push or pull out factors. The results on the effects on reengagement from either being pushed or pulled out of school used a logistic model of analysis. The results examining the different paths students took after dropout was analyzed using a multinomial logistic model. The analysis found that being pushed or pulled had little difference on the reengagement process, but the reasons within the categories did. They also found that there was “no significant difference between those who were pulled and those who were pushed in their likelihood of earning a diploma” (Boylan & Renzulli, 2017, p. 58). They did find their second hypothesis correct in that those students who were pushed out of school were more likely to return via the GED pathway compared to those that were pulled out. The limitations of the study were from the grouping of the students into either pushed or pulled out categories because it did not consider other lifestyle factors that would contribute to reengagement. The study is also based in the U.S. and not generalizable to other countries. The survey also only had close-ended questions and did not consider other potential answers. The significance is that it provides information about the dropout and reengagement of students and the potential reasons for dropout which could lead to qualitative research about the process of reengagement.

When high-risk and vulnerable youth disengage from education it can lead to a life of both economic and social hardships (Zweig, 2003; Smith et al., 2007). The role of alternate education is to meet the needs of students that are not engaged in school through “differentiated instruction, specialized program delivery and enhanced counselling services based on students’ needs” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2009). The most common barriers that affect a youth’s success in British Columbia were noted in Smith et al (2007) study, which were: housing, challenging family situations, pregnancy and parenting, poverty, hunger, transportation, employment, physical health and fitness, mental and emotional health, abuse and sexual exploitation, substance use, and criminal involvement. Similar barriers were also found in the two American studies by Zweig (2003) and Boylan and Renzulli (2017). They were: school policies, academic challenges, family responsibility, and poverty. Zweig (2003) also mentions racial barriers as a reason for disengagement. Boylan and Renzulli (2017) used seven references in their research that examine race/ethnic issues. Future research should focus on the path of reengagement for youth that have dropped out of school and the process of reengagement once they have decided to return to school. Additional Canadian research should focus on establishing results from all over the country in order to give insight into what each of the provinces and territories are doing to meet the needs of their disengaged at-risk and high-risk youth.

Student Voice in Alternative Education

The thoughts and stories of students from alternative education programs provide a wealth of knowledge to policymakers, principals, the public and other researchers. Morrissette (2011) explored Canadian alternative graduate students’ experiences within one alternative program. The researcher used a phenomenological research orientation and discovered five predominant themes. Zolkoski, Lyndal, and Gable (2016) used semi-structured interviews and

surveys in an interpretive and descriptive qualitative study in order to discover the factors of resilience in graduated alternative education students with a diagnosis of an emotional and behavioural disorder (p.231). Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) used a qualitative case study design and semi-structured interviews to discover students' perspectives of traditional and alternative education.

Morrisette's (2011) study, "Exploring Student Experiences Within the Alternative High School Context," used a phenomenological research orientation because the researcher wanted to "provide co-researchers an opportunity to share and expound on their experience" (p.171). In phenomenological research, participants are described as co-researchers because they are joint contributors and investigators to the findings of a research project. It does not test a hypothesis but instead asks a question through a re-spiraling process of a "recursive pattern of data gathering, interpretation, dependability, modification, and further data gathering (Morrisette, 2011, p.172). The research question asked was: "what was your experience within the alternative high school program?" (Morrisette, 2011, p. 177). The purpose of the study was to provide learners with an opportunity to share their academic experiences; provide preliminary information; and to encourage research in the area of alternative education (Morrisette, 2011, p.170). The participants were chosen randomly and contacted via telephone from the school counselor. They were comprised of twenty graduates, fourteen males, and six females, four of whom were of First Nation or Aboriginal descent. The narrative collection of data lasted six months and began with an indeterminate number of interviews and stopped after redundancy occurred (Morrisette, 2011, p. 173). The interviews were minimally structured, open-ended and did not have time limits. Through data analysis five predominant themes were uncovered: a sense of belonging, ambience, program flexibility, pedagogical expertise, and self-awareness.

The limitations of the study were: personal subjectivity, small sample size, basing findings on a single interview format, and no claim to universal generalizability. The significance is twofold, the first is for the co-researchers who got a sense of empowerment and a sense of purpose from participating in the study (Morrissette, 2011, p.184). The second is from the information itself; it provided administrators, educators, and society in general with some of the advantages of alternate education as well as adding to the body of knowledge of alternative education in Canada (Morrissette, 2011, p.186).

Zolkoski, Lyndal, and Gable (2016)'s study, "Factors Associated with Student Resilience: Perspectives of Graduates of Alternative Education Programs," explored the factors of resilience in graduated students from alternative programs who were diagnosed with an emotional and behavioural disorder (EBD). Zolkoski et al. (2016) used two research questions in their qualitative study: "(a) what elements, specific to alternative education settings, have contributed to resilience in young adulthood after graduation? and (b) in what ways have alternative education placements contributed to the participants' current life status?" (p. 232). The researchers used the Resilience Scale (Wagnild & Young, 1993 as cited in Zolkoski et al., 2016, p. 233) and semi-structured interviews for their data collection. Participants were contacted through administrators of two alternate programs in the Northwestern United States. There were 13 participants in the study, 12 males and 1 female. They each completed the Resilience Scale and received a \$10 gift card. Five participants were asked follow-up telephone interview questions and received an additional \$25 gift card (Zolkoski et al., 2016, p.234). The results of the study showed that the contributing factors of resilience were: having a caring teacher, a small teacher to student ratio, and a positive and supportive learning environment (Zolkoski et al., 2016, p.239). The limitations of the study were the small sample size, accuracy

of responses and passage of time (Zolkoski et al., 2016, p.241). The study contributes to the current body of knowledge on the resilience of students with EBD in alternative programs. It also gives potential reasons why some individuals with EBD overcome adversity and become successful in adulthood (Zolkoski et al., 2016, p.241).

Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) study, "At-Risk Students' Perceptions of Traditional Schools and a Solution-Focused Public Alternative School," used a qualitative case study design and semi-structured interviews. Participants were selected from the Austin Independent School District student database from those that were attending the Solution-Focused Public Alternative School (SFAS) and ranged in age from 16 to 19 years of age. The study consisted of 33 participants. The interviews consisted of 36 semi-structured questions and lasted 45-60mins (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011, p.107). The researchers wanted to discover how and why alternative schools have helped at-risk youth succeed academically when traditional schools were unable to do so (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011, p.106). The results from the study indicate that "traditional schools are lacking the personal relationships with teachers, schoolwide focus on maturity and responsibility, understanding about social issues, and positive peer relationships that alternative schools often provide" (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011, p. 105). The common themes about traditional school experiences were: poor teacher relationships, lack of safety, overly rigid authority, and problems with peer relationships. The common themes about the solution-focused alternative high school were: positive teacher relationships, improving maturity and responsibility, understanding about social issues, better peer relationships, and a supportive atmosphere. The limitations are from the case study design; it is a single school within a single geographic location and has a small sample size (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011, p.113). The traditional schools discussed are all from one school district and the benefits from the SFAS

could be specific to that school (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). The significance of the study is that it added to the body of knowledge about solution-focused alternative schools and the problems with traditional schools. It also provided “possible solutions offered by a solution-focused alternative school” (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011, p. 113).

The stories and experiences of alternative education students in both in the United States and in Canada have commonalities that can be used to help our at-risk and vulnerable youth find educational success both in traditional and alternative school settings. The common themes that emerged from all three studies are the importance of positive teacher relationships and a supportive atmosphere. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) and Morrissette (2011) both have themes regarding the responsibilities of the students themselves, through “improving maturity and responsibility” (Lagana-Riordan et al. 2011 p. 241) and “self awareness” (Morrissette, 2011, p. 177). Zolkoski et al. (2016) and Morrissette (2011) have themes about school structure and the value of “small student-teacher ratio” (Zolkoski et al., 2016, p. 240) and “program flexibility” (Morrissette, 2011, p. 177). All three studies gave students a voice and a chance to provide insight into future educational programs. Future research still needs to be done with larger samples sizes, demographics, and geographical areas in order to get a more thorough understanding of alternative education.

Characteristics of Effective Alternate Schools

There are many studies from both Canada and the United States that research the characteristics of effective alternate schools. In British Columbia, alternate education programs are established by school boards to meet the specific needs of the students in their demographic and geographic area (British Columbia School Act, 2018). In the United States, the school districts within each State are responsible for their own alternate education if they choose to

create such programs (Lehr, Lanners, & Lange, 2003). The policies and practices of both the United States and Canada make each alternate program and school unique to each school district. The effectiveness of each alternate program can therefore only be measured within the framework of each school district. The characteristics of highly regarded alternate programs can be discussed in terms of common themes.

Research conducted by Smith et al. (2007) of eight school districts in British Columbia found that effective alternate programs had seven themes: low teacher-to-student ratios, additional supports of teaching assistants and youth care workers, positive relationships, flexibility in their delivery, similar peers, and a supportive atmosphere (p. 40). Four studies from the United States, Zolkoski et al (2016), Morrissette (2011), Boylan and Renzulli (2017), and Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) found two common themes of effective alternate programs: the importance of supportive teachers and a caring and positive learning environment. Zolkoski (2016) also noted the significance of a “small student-teacher ratio” (p. 240), while Morrissette (2011) found that “program flexibility” was important (p. 177).

Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, and Tonelson, (2006)’s study, “An Examination of School Climate in Effective Alternative Programs,” used the Effective School Battery (ESB) survey on students and teachers in three alternate programs in the United States. The ESB was created by Gottfredson (1999) and is a “scientifically developed instrument that is used to assess school climate and identify school strengths and areas for improvement” (Quinn et al, 2006, p. 14). The researchers sent the survey results to Gottfredson Associates Inc. to produce interpretative reports, which summarized the findings by scale compared to an ESB norm group (Quinn et al, 2006, p.14). The purpose was to discover what characteristics contribute to an effective alternate program climate. The results found that positive teacher, support staff and administrative

relationships, personalized environments, flexibility, fair rules, and a nonauthoritarian approach resulted in effective alternate programs (Quinn et al, 2006. p.16). The limitations of the study were that it is not generalizable because it only looked at three programs. Also, the ESB used norms from students attending traditional public high schools so the results should be considered from that lens when comparing the alternate participants to the norm group (Quinn et al, 2006, p.15). The findings from the research are significant in laying a foundation for more research into the characteristics of effective alternate programs. Furthermore, additional research should investigate whether the characteristics examined caused positive student outcomes or if they were a correlation (Quinn et al, 2006, p.16).

Effective alternate programs are designed to meet the needs of students that are struggling, challenging, disengaged, and disconnected from their communities and schools. The educational programs are designed to address the “complex social and educational needs of at-risk and high-risk students ... to ensure they have the appropriate tools and social supports to navigate a smooth transition into adulthood (Smith et al, 2007, p. 6). Although each alternate program investigated was unique and created for that school district’s students’ it is important to note the commonalities in all studies regarding effective practice. These common themes within alternate education research can provide a foundation for school districts looking to create an alternate program or school.

Significance of Research

The current research on alternate education gives students a voice, discusses disengagement and reengagement and finds themes amongst effective alternate programs. It also illustrates the different experiences of youth and the unique programs that try to meet their needs educationally, emotionally, and socially. These “differences in factors such as population size,

and ethnic background mean that each school district has developed programs to meet the unique needs of youth in their community” (Smith et al, 2007, p. 63). Consequently, all alternate programs are diverse and should be recognized as separate parts when researching them either together or separately. The alternative education programs in one central Vancouver Island school district were created based on the needs of the student population in that district and cannot be replicated elsewhere. This means that in order to fully understand the programs, they must be studied as distinct parts that comprise alternate education in British Columbia. The mission statement for the learning alternatives programs confirms this distinction. It states: “We develop programs to support youth not only to attend school, but to be participants in their learning, school and community. Learning Alternatives is ever changing each year depending on the needs of the learners” (Hancock, 2018, p.1). The researcher hopes by studying these two programs they will be able to provide more knowledge of alternate education in British Columbia as well as adding to the current research in the field.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

Alternate education is a product of public education's desire to support students whose needs are not being met in a traditional education program (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2009). This case study of two alternate programs in one central Vancouver Island district will use staff interviews to answer the research question: What are the underlying philosophies and models of two BC school district alternate education programs and how are they being upheld?

Methodology

In order to answer the research question, the researcher decided to do a descriptive case study in order to describe a phenomenon within a real-life contemporary context and setting (Yinn, 1994). By examining two alternate programs through the lens of the alternate school staff members and administrator, the researcher hoped to develop a clear understanding of the programs and their unique models and philosophies. The researcher did not want to manipulate any variables, but rather find 'what is' happening at both alternate schools and how it is being upheld (Rumrill, Cook, & Wiley, 2011). Descriptive research has "no other purpose than to describe phenomena and is not intended to explain, predict, or control them" (Colman, 2015, section, descriptive research). Researching a school requires a huge amount of flexibility because although it is an institution with structures and rules, it is impossible to predict or control the people who comprise it. The environment and variables in a school change continuously and a descriptive case study gives a glimpse into that world.

Participants

The participants for this case study were chosen using purposeful sampling based on

select criteria in order to get in-depth data. “This is a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices” (Rog & Bickman, 2009 p. 235). Staff members at the two alternative programs, including administrators, teachers and counselors that have worked in the school for at least five months (1/2 school year) were recruited for semi-structured interviews. The participants had worked in at least one of the two alternate programs for over a year.

Recruitment

After approval from the VIU Research Ethics Board, Schoolboard and administration, the researcher introduced her study through the weekly email memo after speaking with the administrator and sending a letter of introduction for approval. The email memo permitted the researcher to introduce themselves, the research, risks/benefits, consent and answer any questions from the potential participants privately. Gillham (2000) noted that in order to interview someone you need to get to know them and their environment in order to be seen as credible and trustworthy. The memo included attachments for potential participants to review which included an overview of the study, research question, potential ethical issues, and contact information. All potential ethical issues were also described in detail in the consent form. The researcher recruited five staff members in total. The participants for this study consisted of four males and one female.

Ethical Issues

The ethical risk for this descriptive case study is based on privacy and the potential identifiability of participants because of the size and scope of the study. The learning alternative programs in the school district are small and share one principal. The likelihood of issues with

identifiability and privacy based on the questions and answers of participants are high and are addressed in the consent form. To address some of the issues with privacy the researcher scheduled interviews privately with participants once they had submitted their consent forms. The researcher had a professional relationship with one participant prior to the interview, which was due to the fact that they work in the same school district and had attended the same schoolboard meeting. The internal records of audio recordings from Otter Voice Notes were stored on the researcher's password-protected phone. All electronic data was kept on the researcher's private laptop, which included transcripts and copies of recordings. Paper data were stored in a locked filing cabinet. All participants were given pseudonyms in all documents in order to protect their identity.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to answer the research question and gain insight into the two alternate programs. The purpose of a semi-structured interview is to "obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale, 1996, p.5-6). Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to follow a script to guide the interviews but also allow for flexibility if a participant would like to add anything else. "Expert interviewers always have a structure, which they use flexibly according to what emerges" (Gillham, 2000, p. 3). Each interview followed a framework of a briefing before and a debriefing afterward so that a context can first be established and later so the interviewee had a chance to ask any questions or comment (Kvale, 1996). Participants were given their transcripts so they could review, approve or withdraw any information before coding began; this improved the trustworthiness and helped establish validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

The researcher also wrote field notes before and after each interview in order to provide a valuable framework for later analysis of the transcripts (Kvale, 1996).

Interview protocol questions for this study emerged from examining research of alternate education programs in Canada and the United States as well as British Columbia government reports and other dissertations. The questions followed four categories: program environment, school goals (reconciliation, inclusion), academic instruction and behavioral training. Three of the interviews were conducted over the phone and two were conducted in person at a location of the participant's choice. All interviews were recorded using Otter Voice Notes application on the researcher's cellphone. The interviews were transcribed using the same application as well as by hand in order to ensure accuracy. The participants had two weeks to edit or change anything from their transcribed interview before coding began.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The transcribed semi-structured interviews were analyzed using coding. Coding is the "translation of question responses and respondent information to specific categories for the purpose analysis" (Kerlinger, 1970 as cited in Cohen Manion & Morrison, 2011, p.559). The purpose of coding in a case study "involve[s] a detailed description of the setting or individuals, followed by analysis of the data for themes or issues" (Creswell, 2014, p. 246). For this multiple case study, the transcribed interviews were separated into their program and coded based on their alignment to the specific mission, goal and models of their program. Quotes from the transcribed interviews were chosen based on their richness, depth and alignment with the research question. This process was used in order to provide rich and detailed descriptions of the two alternate programs. Triangulation was used between the program descriptions and data from multiple participants from the same program which helped to strengthen the validity of the findings. This

was accomplished by gathering online public documents about the two programs researched and comparing them to the interview data of multiple participants to find common themes. This helped to provide substantiating evidence collected through interviews and documents.

According to Creswell & Miller (2000), “a popular practice is for qualitative inquirers to provide corroborating evidence collected through multiple methods, such as observations, interviews, and documents to locate major and minor themes” (p.127). The interviews were then coded to describe the emerging themes discovered through the process of meaning condensation data analysis. Meaning condensation is an approach to thematic analysis from Kvale (1996). It follows five steps: first the whole interview is read entirely; then the natural “meaning units” that are expressed by the subjects are determined by the researcher; next the meaning units are made into central themes; and then the themes are analyzed in terms of the specific purpose of the study (p.194). The final step involves tying together the essential themes into a descriptive statement (Kvale, 1996, p.194). Meaning condensation is an approach to empirical phenomenological analysis. Phenomenology “studies the subjects’ perspectives on their world” (Kvale, 1996, p. 53). The themes discovered were used to describe the key features of these alternate programs and compare them to current research.

Limitations

The limitations for this case study was that it relied on the experiences, interpretations, and perceptions of the participants that are specific to them and their geographic location. The data from researching these alternate programs is not transferable to other alternate schools, nor is it repeatable. The intent of a case study “is not to generalize findings to individuals, sites, or places outside of those under study” (Creswell, 2014, p. 253). There are also limitations based on the honesty and bias of the participants in the study. Another factor was the issue with timing

since the interviews are just one moment in an interviewee's life. There were also the biases of the researcher who is currently in the field of education and has worked previously at an alternative secondary school in a different district. They also created and asked the semi-structured interview questions which could impact the objectivity of the representation of the participants. Another limitation is that the validity of the triangulation could have been improved upon if the study involved student and parent or guardian data as well as staff data.

Significance

The significance of this case study in the field of alternate education was in the design of a case study itself. Case studies are a thorough description and analysis of a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, due to the rich detail and descriptions in the case study, the models and concepts addressed could be compared with other alternate sites to further understanding in the field. Also interviewing staff members with different roles from within the same program and gathering data from the program descriptions allowed for triangulation of data for a more comprehensive picture. "Triangulation is a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p.126). Using triangulation helped to strengthen the results from the case study and lead to stronger validity.

Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter describes the findings of a descriptive multiple case study involving two alternate programs in a central Vancouver Island district. The qualitative semi-structured interview questions were designed to answer the research question: What are the underlying philosophies and models of two BC school district alternate education programs and how are they being upheld? The findings for this chapter are presented descriptively by alternate program “emphasizing the study of a phenomenon within its real-world context” (Yin, 2009, p.5). The interviews were coded using Kvale’s (1996), meaning condensation approach to empirical phenomenological analysis (p.194). This approach enabled the researcher to look in-depth at the alternate education programs in order to gain a greater knowledge of the programs in real-life. Although each interview was unique and the experiences of the participants varied, common themes were discovered throughout all interviews that facilitated the description of the two alternate programs.

The two alternate programs that were investigated were in a central Vancouver Island school district and are supervised and directed by one principal. Program 2 is in partnership with another school but is still considered part of the district’s learning alternatives umbrella. Both programs follow the same goal and mission statement. Program 1 is modelled on the Circle of Courage. The Circle of Courage, which the program describes, is based on the principles of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity (Hancock, 2020, p. 1). Program 2 is modelled on four main wellness areas identified by the program: stress and anxiety management, active living, healthy eating, and building social connections (“Island Connect,” 2020). The goal for learning alternatives is as follows: “our goal is to guide our students to discover personal success and help them become productive members of our community” (Hancock, 2020, p. 1). The

mission of both programs is “to improve life chances” (Hancock, 2020, p. 1). They strive to accomplish both their goal and mission by developing programs to support their students in being active participants in their learning through “forward thinking education and personalized programming” (Hancock, 2020, p.1). The administrator, Paul (pseudonym), was interviewed, and his thoughts, experiences, and perceptions of the two programs are interwoven through Program 1 and Program 2.

Program 1

Program 1 was created to meet the needs of both junior and senior secondary students from grades 7 to 12. This program is located on the same site as a traditional secondary school and offers students the chance to participate in mainstream athletic opportunities. The program has continued to grow exponentially for the last four years. Program 1 senior program aims to achieve the goal of guiding students to discover personal success and become productive members of their community by “inspir[ing] students to create a vision for their future while teachers offer supports to help translate that vision into reality” (Hancock, 2018, p.2). “At our core, we believe in building trusting student-teacher relationships that are built on mutual respect” (Hancock, 2018, p.2). Whereas the junior program “fosters a sense of belonging through a variety of creative projects and hands-on learning experiences” (Hancock, 2018, p.2). It is “aimed at building the students’ self-confidence and self-worth while instilling responsibility and independence” (Hancock, 2018, p.2). John, Dean, and Tom (pseudonyms) were interviewed for program 1. The information they provided focused on how the program met the needs of their students through the vision, goals, and mission of the program. Each participant provided a unique point of view into the program through their own experiences, interpretations, and perceptions.

When students register for the program, they must sign a contract of commitment as well as fill out a booklet that outlines their personal goals and what they want to accomplish. The booklet is about reflection and self-assessment. As John explains, it is *like an assignment because it is quite in-depth. There is a lot of self-assessing and reflection on what they want to accomplish and the goals that they would like to reach.* The students also get a tour before they start the program, *even a month in advance sometimes.* At which time the staff who do the tour go over the Circle of Courage and *talk about having a safe environment, which means treating everybody with respect* (John).

Circle of Courage

Program 1 has personalized programming and flexibility within a structured timetable which is modelled on the Circle of Courage's four quadrants; belonging, generosity, independence and mastery. The students have lessons and electives every day and on Fridays there are fieldtrips. Every day of the week is based on a different learning outcome that the students are working on. Each day begins with the opportunity to have breakfast together, which helps strengthen their sense of belonging and connection to the staff. Dean explains; *We have breakfast set up in the kitchen area and so I join them, and I eat my breakfast with them, and we chat about what's going on.* Announcements are next, at which point *we talk about what's going on in the school, we talk about things for the week, we talk about plans for future activities* (Tom). Each day lessons are led by a different teacher in the senior program depending on the subject and the other staff members support the students through the lesson and activity. Tom explains how this works; *The lesson is typically between 45 minutes to an hour and a half, where kids are working, they're listening to the lesson and then they break off and do an activity related to the lesson until lunchtime.* In the junior program, the classroom teacher provides a standalone

lesson each day. After lunch, it is elective time as well as an opportunity to work one-on-one with staff members or work on their inquiry projects in the junior program. Tom explains;

If kids are going to be at school in the afternoon either they need to be participating in an elective or can be working on what we call flex learning time so whatever subject they want to be working on, they can have the support of the staff members because typically it is a lot quieter in the afternoon from 12:00 to 3:00.

John explains the inquiry projects: *Inquiry projects are another thing that they always work on, it is something that they want to come to school to work on, they are excited to work on something that they really love and are interested in.* Having this flex time and inquiry projects promote independence because it gives students the opportunity to make decisions and solve problems. It also gives students the chance to develop mastery in an area that they are passionate about.

Belonging. The Circle of Courage is an integral part of program 1. The first quadrant, belonging, is what the program strives towards first. Tom explains how they accomplish this, beginning in the morning each day.

We greet them by name, every single day when they sign in. We've got one central location, they all kind of funnel through. It makes them feel welcome, so they'll hear from staff 3,4,5 times as they walk through the door: How are things? How was your day? Just showing genuine interest in their lives before getting into any kind of schoolwork at all.

Tom goes on to explain that acknowledging students is *our number one priority as a school.*

Dean further explains the sense of belonging their students have:

They'll be sick as a dog and still show up because they know they'll be looked after and feel welcome. They will come and talk about things that they wouldn't anywhere else.

They will share personal problems, stuff that happens, all sorts of things they share with us. It's such a welcoming place for them, they feel really at home.

John explains why they work on belonging first: *It's very important for them to feel that sense of belonging. [When] they feel like they belong they can work towards independence and mastery.*

You can't have those other things without a sense of belonging. Paul echoed John's beliefs on the importance of belonging: *September is belonging, that is our number one goal, reconnecting some kids that are returning to our programs, but often [creating a sense of belonging] with new kids.* Paul went on to reiterate John's thoughts on creating a sense of belonging before focusing on mastery, independence, and generosity, but he also spoke about how to accomplish belonging. He explained that with new students and those returning,

you need to work on different ways of holding one another tight, being vulnerable and sharing stories. Our staff is very open, very truthful with the life they've lived and the choices they made and through their stories and honesty, kids feel that they belong and at that point, they are starting to take risks. Before we have anything, we need to have belonging, and the most important thing in any program is relationships.

Students in program 1 also have input into the decoration and layout of the spaces in the program. Tom explains: *we encourage student participation in the layout and the decorations. We try and keep things fresh in the classrooms as well; it is constantly evolving. We try and keep things neutral on the walls, though. Just to kind of give that calming space.* Paul also explains that classrooms can be restructured to meet the needs of the students. *We ask them for their feedback and work with them. [We] have an open dialogue as to what works most. Kids can help us restructure the classroom in the drop of a hat.* This creates a sense of belonging in the space the students occupy in the program.

The other quadrants of the Circle of Courage: independence, generosity and mastery are part of the framework for the school as well but are not focused on in the same way as belonging.

The other quadrants are modelled in the school daily, but more indirectly. Tom explains:

we lean on [them] somewhat indirectly, where we are emphasizing the four quadrants on a regular basis throughout the year. It's also in our framework for the actual school.

Something that we lean on for our PLC questions, for our school philosophy as a whole and also is a strong value of our principal and so from there, a lot of our staff absorb it through a lot of his teachings.

Dean also uses the Circle of Courage indirectly, *When I look at the Circle of Courage, I do that all the time.* John also references the Circle of Courage throughout the year and will point out the different quadrants when he sees them in the program.

Generosity. Generosity, according to the Circle of Courage, is about being unselfish and generous to others, which in turn gives proof of their own worthiness (Brendtro et al., 2007).

John explains that he makes a point of recognizing when students are generous. *Another aspect of the Circle of Courage is generosity, so I ask them how they show generosity and I often point out when someone is very generous* (John). By regularly talking to his class about generosity, he is encouraging this aspect of the Circle of Courage.

Independence. Independence according to the Circle of Courage is about making decisions, solving problems, and showing personal responsibility (Brendtro et al., 2007).

Independence is part of the student commitment to the program. Even before they begin, students must sign a commitment contract that outlines personal responsibility and a commitment to continuing their education (Handcock, 2018, p. 6). Program 1 has a variety of flexible seating arrangements and classrooms. This flexible environment lets students choose where they are

most comfortable and will be the most successful, which is part of the independence quadrant.

John explains:

we have different classrooms, we have one, known as a quieter room. One is a junior room and there's three other senior rooms as well as a couple of smaller boardrooms. We have flexible seating; we have a couch in my room and about four comfortable chairs. There's preferential seating for any student when something isn't working for them, we just let them figure out a spot that they like.

Paul also explains the flexibility in the environment at Program 1. *When the weather is nice, being able to get outside and learn in the lacrosse box, in the community garden, on the playground, is alternate, it's a little different and you know, the kids love it.* After lunch students have flex time. This is when students can choose to work on inquiry projects or go to an elective.

Dean explains: *The afternoon tends to be a little bit quieter. So, there's a lot more individual work happening.* During this time students must be able to take personal responsibility for getting their work completed and solving any problems that arise. This helps promote and develop their independence.

Mastery. Mastery, according to the Circle of Courage, is competence and taking pride in your accomplishments, it is not about competing with others (Brendtro et al., 2007). The mastery quadrant is shown through how program 1 measures success. Students strive for mastery for personal growth, and it is not a competition (Brendtro et al., 2007). “A person with greater ability was seen as a model for learning, not as a rival” (Brendtro et al., 2007, p. 2). Dean explained this when he answered the question: how does your school measure success? He responded; *I think mainly through growth. How have they grown as a person? I personally emphasize that [and] I think most of my colleagues would agree. I don't really give a shit about marks, marks don't*

really matter, it's that they grow. Students can also show mastery through academics, inquiry projects and through different electives. Paul explains: *we've got some talented artists up here and they've done some beautiful work through what started off as being a social justice lesson.*

Program 1 is flexible in how academics are given, which lets students demonstrate their strengths and passions. Paul explains: *We let some of our senior students guide what their learning journey looks like. Our staff are exceptional at developing projects that pull curricular competencies and big ideas from a wide range of subject areas.* This means that if a student is good at art, they can do an art project within the social studies curriculum.

This study explores the research question: What are the underlying philosophies and models of two BC school district alternate education programs and how are they being upheld? Program 1's underlying philosophy and model are based on the Circle of Courage. "The Circle of Courage identifies four universal needs of all children: Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. When these needs are met, children grow and thrive. But when these growth needs are frustrated, multiple problems follow" (Brendtro et al., 2005, p.130). The model and philosophy are upheld by the principal and staff within the program. Belonging is the first quadrant that program 1 focuses on, belonging begins when students arrive in the morning and are recognized by name by staff members, by the sharing of stories, working together as a community and by fieldtrips. Morrissette (2011) study also suggested that "being immediately welcomed and embraced by the teachers and staff contributed to a sense of acceptance and belonging" (p.178). Belonging is also seen throughout the school by the decorations in the classrooms that they students have created. The other quadrants are modelled in the program daily but are focused on more indirectly. Generosity is recognized in the unselfishness and generous nature of the students in the program when they make a positive contribution. They are

encouraged by their teachers to show generosity. Mastery is seen in the inquiry projects, academic success and personal growth of the students. Independence begins with the commitment contract when students enter the program. It is also shown through the flexible work environment and the students' ability to choose where they will work most effectively. Students also practice independence when they solve problems and take personal responsibility in their classrooms with their academics, the staff members or peers. When they work on their inquiry projects, they must be able to take personal responsibility for getting their work completed and solving any problems that arise.

Program 2

Program 2 was created to meet the needs of students from grade 8 to 12 who require social-emotional and mental health support. According to a study by Smith et al. (2007), mental health is seen as a barrier to education in British Columbia. This program aims to meet the overarching learning alternatives goal of guiding students to discover personal success and become productive members of their community by modelling their program on the four main wellness areas they identified. The four main wellness areas, according to the program, are stress and anxiety management, active living, healthy eating, and building social connections ("Island Connect," 2020). The program is located in a building with a distance learning school and provides a low stimulus environment for their students. It does not have bells or block rotations. The program has a capacity limit of 24 students and a teacher-counsellor to student ratio of 12:1. Currently the program has 21 students, which is the largest number of students since Sam started working at Program 2. The mission for the program is "to improve life chances" (Hancock, 2020, p. 1). Program 2 strives to do this by focusing on wellness. The interview participant for program 2 is a teacher-counselor in the program and will be known as Sam (pseudonym). They

provided their perspective on their experiences working in program 2. According to Sam the focus of the program is safety, inclusivity and community building.

Students wanting to go into Program 2 must go through a registration process that starts with a referral from their home school. The home school will have an Integrated Case Management (ICM) meeting that is followed by a screening meeting with the program 2 staff and members of the community's mental health agencies ("Island Connect," 2020). Once they are accepted into the program, they must sign a contract that outlines the program rules and their obligations for attendance and being school ready. Sam explains:

the success of the program really is the strength of the gatekeeping and making sure that the kids that are ready for the program are the kids that are in the program. They need to be school-ready. [The program] removes a lot of the barriers that caused the anxiety around schooling. We don't have a lot of the stressors and triggers that mainstream high school would have such as, bell changes or crush in the hallways; nothing comes over the intercom during the day, other than the occasional announcement.

The students enrolled in Program 2, according to Sam, are those with internalizing anxiety, depression or other mental health challenges. According to "Island Connect" (2020) a common profile of students that qualify for the program 2 are:

- Diagnosed complex mental health challenges (often anxiety and depression)
- Connection with our local Health Community (typically a Psychiatrist or Child Youth Mental Health)
- Internalizing behaviours rather than externalizing
- A desire to complete academics while working towards school graduation

- Difficulty attending a traditional school setting but a willingness to attend our small group setting on a daily basis
- A willingness of the student's family to be in regular contact with our [program 2] staff

These students have complex needs and they require “different tools and coping skills to help manage daily activities” (Island Connect, 2020). Program 2 was created to help students with the tools and coping skills they need to find personal success. To meet the needs of their students, the staff members work together. Sam explains:

I keep coming back to the strength of the team. We are better together, where we are effecting change and supporting these kids through a [challenging] time. Most of the kids in my program have had suicidal ideation and many [have had] multiple suicide attempts and many are cutters. Some have eating disorders. They are super complex kid. There is a lot of trauma. So being able to support these kids, that makes you feel good.

Students in grade 8 and 9 are taught academics by the teacher-counsellors and students in grade 10-12 are provided their academics through distance education. There is an educational assistant and a child and family community support worker attached to the program. Students in grades 10-12 are given the structure and routine as well as support from the teacher-counsellors and classroom EA to support their academics while in the program (Sam). The program is a half-day therapeutic and half-day academic program that is interwoven throughout the day (“Island Connect,” 2020). One of the requirements of program 2 is that the parents participate in parent night once every two weeks. Sam explains: *we get about 50% of them coming in. Even though it's supposed to be a requirement for the program. The ones that come in tend to be the ones with kids that are doing really well and are feeling really supported.* Students typically are in the

program for one to two years before they either go back to their home school or into the workforce (Sam).

Wellness

The wellness goals: stress and anxiety management, active living, healthy eating, and building social connections, are integrated throughout each day. *We do all the academics and, therapeutic art, careers, foods, and P.E* (Sam). The environment at the program is low stimulus to reduce anxiety and stress. There are no block rotations, bells or daily announcements.

According to Sam, the focus of their program space is to create a safe environment for their students. *We really have many of the kids who were not attending regular school because they didn't feel welcome or safe. So that was one of our primary focuses* (Sam). The day begins with students dropping off their cellphones and putting up their attendance sticker. The students then do a mood check in their duo tangs, which is about how are they are feeling that day and what is one thing that they can do to increase their mood (Sam). This helps promote self-awareness of their stress and anxiety levels. The teacher-counsellors eat lunch with the students and students are taught healthy eating and nutrition in foods class. The program's no cellphone policy is new this year. Sam explains: *we take the phones when they walk through the door in the morning and they get back at 2:30*. Sam further explains how this no-phone policy has helped the students build relationships during lunch: *They talk to each other and they make connections and they have fun and they play. Whereas in the past, it would be lunchtime, and you'd sit there for half an hour and nobody would talk*.

Physical education is a large part of the day in Program 2. Sam explains how P.E. is different than in mainstream schools: *for kids that come from a mainstream school a lot of times*

PE is a very trauma-based experience for them. They have P.E. in the morning and most afternoons. Sam further explains:

At nine o'clock we have them go down to the gym and do warm up. We do a circle of warm up where we stand around and do stretches. We go around the circle and everybody leads a stretch. It's just a way to move the body and it's not terribly P.E., but it is about community building and giving them turns to do active versus passive participation.

Physical education is important for more than just community building; it also helps the students with their mental health. During P.E. Sam will teach a lesson and then the students will have free play for about 20 minutes.

We open it [the gym] up for 20 minutes where they can play with anything. Some of them will grab circus stuff, some will grab a basketball, some will grab a badminton racket, whatever the kids do, it just gives them time to play. I think especially for this client group, they stopped playing because play means joy and connection with other people. And when you have anxiety and depression you withdraw, and you isolate.

The focus of program 2, according to Sam, is safety, inclusivity, and community building. They still want their students to graduate, but it is not the goal of the program. *The general hope is that we can get them graduated. It's not that you have this one path and if you're not on that path, you're a failure. It's okay if they don't graduate. They can go and work and be happy and move forward.* Paul sees graduation as the goal of the alternative programs, but he also explained that *success looks different for each kid, and I think our expectation for each student is different as well.* Sam further explained the focus of the program when they answered

the question ‘What are some of your core values or philosophies as an educator?’ They responded,

It's all about relationship building. The client group we work with are very used to isolating so it's about building community and making not just connections with teachers but peer connections as well. And so, we do a lot of work around building that interconnectivity as well as working on their resiliency and independence. To do any sort of teaching, it's always going to start with relationships.

Paul echoed Sam’s philosophy when he answered the same question. He responded, *I’ll go back to relationships and say that they are the most important thing. That is relationships with students, with families and with staff. I think creating a positive staff culture is something that I pride myself on doing.* Sam’s core values and beliefs have contributed to and built the program itself. When Sam answered the question ‘What makes your program unique?’ Sam explained how they developed the program as a team based on their clientele and their personal strengths.

We had quite a bit of autonomy on how the program developed over the years. It makes it unique because we didn't follow a template at all. We had our experiences, then when we came together as a team, we each brought different strengths and just really worked it out between the four of us. Our principal was really supportive of our decisions. We really were able to design a program from the ground up. That really reflects our individual strengths and talents as teachers and support staff.

Sam explained further about how the program is designed: *We designed this program to fit not only the teachers and their individual skills, but it's designed to teach each cohort because every year you get a different group. We keep some of them for two years but it's a whole new little group, with their own complex issues and their own personality.*

This study asks the research question: What are the underlying philosophies and models of two BC school district alternate education programs and how are they being upheld?

Program 2's underlying philosophy and model are based on four wellness areas recognized by the program: stress and anxiety management, active living, healthy eating, and building social connections. The program strives towards providing their students with social-emotional and mental health support. The staff at the program integrate each wellness area into every aspect of their day with their students. They provide a low stimulus environment and supportive atmosphere to help improve stress and anxiety management. The students participate in non-competitive physical education once or twice a day to help promote active living. The students take food class and eat lunch with their teacher-counsellors every day which encourages healthy eating. The program has a no cellphone policy in addition to eating, playing and learning together which fosters building social connections. Parent night also focuses on working together and the inclusivity of all members of their students' lives to promote cohesion. The goal of the program is for students to discover personal success and become productive members of their community. Program 2 does this by looking at each student as individuals and trying to meet their personal goals. Some students will return to their mainstream school, others will graduate through program 2, and several will enter the workforce. This means that the staff at program 2 work on building community connections and resumes for some, supporting academics for others, and helping some finish up their schooling, all while focusing on inclusivity, safety and community building (Sam).

Summary

The alternative programs in the central Vancouver Island school district have seen continual growth in the last four years. Paul has stated that the alternate programs in the district

have had a record number graduates for the 2018/19 school year. They also had the most indigenous student graduates of any secondary school in the district. Paul explains, *I think that's because we did put truth and reconciliation and indigenous ways of learning on the forefront.* Alternate programs are created for the most vulnerable and high-risk students in a school district. The success of the programs can be measured by graduation rates as well as qualitatively by the experiences, perceptions and interpretations of the staff members, students and parents and guardians within the programs. Paul believes that *what works for alternate students works for all students.*

This descriptive case study was designed to provide a rich description of two alternate programs and to answer the research question: What are the underlying philosophies and models of two BC school district alternate education programs and how are they being upheld? Although each interview was unique and the experiences of the participants varied, common themes were discovered throughout all interviews. The five common themes that arose from the semi-structured interviews were; clear mission, goal and model, staff cohesion, pedagogical relationships, flexible and positive environment and inclusion.

The research question was answered through semi-structured interviews of four staff members and one administrator. Program 1 is modelled on the Circle of Courage, which describes the universal needs for belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity and was created by Dr. Larry Brendtro, Dr. Steve Van Bockern and Dr. Martin Brokenleg (2013). The model is upheld by the staff members and administrator for the program. The administrator plays a significant role in introducing the staff members and continuing the teachings of the Circle of Courage. Program 2 is modeled on four wellness areas recognized by the program. The wellness areas are, stress and anxiety management, active living, healthy eating and building social

connections. The focus of the program, according to Sam, is safety, inclusivity and community building. The staff members, with the support of their administration, created the program from the ground up based on their own strengths and experiences as well as on the complex needs of the students they teach each year.

Themes

The key themes that arose from this case study were: a clear mission, goal and model, cohesion, pedagogical relationships, flexible and positive environment and inclusion.

Models, Mission and Goals

The two alternative programs researched have very clear goals, models and mission statements that reflect current literature in the field of effective alternate programs. The goal for learning alternatives “is to guide our students to discover personal success and help them become productive members of our community” (Hancock, 2020, p. 1). The mission of both programs is “to improve life chances” (Hancock, 2020, p. 1). Zweig’s (2003) study suggested that, “youth without adequate skills will lack the ability to successfully transition to independent adulthood and to maintain secure employment” (p.17). This is reflected in the goal and mission for both programs about finding personal success so they can become productive members of the community and improving life chances. The mission statement and goal are both found in the student handbook and school plan. The commitment contract outlines a new student’s personal responsibility and commitment to continuing their education in the program as well as the goal, mission and model of the program they have chosen. The model, mission and goal of both alternate programs is embedded in all aspects of the programs, from the initial meeting, to registration, instruction and assessment. This alignment between student need is addressed by each program and the program’s model, mission and goal, which is evident in this case study.

Cohesion

Staff involvement and endorsement of the model, mission, and goal of an alternative program is essential to the success of the program. This is reflected in Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011), a study about at-risk student perception of both mainstream and alternate schools, which suggests “the [mainstream] schools...lacked a sense of schoolwide cohesion and purpose” (p.109). Cohesion with the staff and administration that run programs on a daily basis helps strengthen the program. Morrissette’s (2011) study also mentioned the importance of “congruency of these professionals” in creating a welcoming environment (p.180). The staff at both sites can reference the goal, mission and model throughout the year and everyone at the different sites understands what the alternative program is striving towards. This makes celebrating student and program success consistent and meaningful. The researcher noted that every participant interviewed knew their school model, goals and mission statement and referenced them throughout the interviews when answering different questions. When asked about their own personal philosophy as educators, all participants mentioned the importance of relationships and connections with students. This shows the significance of having a clear program goal, mission and model on the cohesion of both programs.

Relationships

The most talked about theme throughout all interviews was the importance of relationships. Every participant mentioned the significance of student relationships during their interview multiple times. Each participant interviewed built relationships differently with their students, some did with humour, others with empathy, others with shared experiences and stories. Regardless of how the relationships were built, all staff members valued the strength of those relationships and viewed them in a positive way. The results of the interviews support the

current literature on alternate education. Quinnet et al. (2006), Smith et al. (2007), Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011), Morrissette (2011 and Zolkoski et al. (2016) all reported on the significance of positive relationships in the effectiveness of alternate schools. The results from Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) indicate that the lack of positive relationships in traditional schools was a contributing negative experience for students that were not successful (p.105). This was reflected in the participants' comments about how relationships with students helped their students feel a sense of belonging and connection to the programs. Gottfredson's (1997) study also suggested that, "relationship building was associated with an increased commitment to school, attachment to school, and belief in rules, along with a reduction in arrest records" (as cited in Quinn et al., 2010, p 15). This was reflected in how the programs use relationships to build resiliency and independence with students with complex behavioural and social-emotional needs.

Three participants explicitly mentioned the building of relationships with their students' parents. Paul explained that he is in regular contact with parents, both when their children are having success and when they are not. This leads to a relationship where both sides are equally involved in making plans and celebrating successes. Both programs also have a parent night once a month to foster relationships and promote transparency between school and home. The importance of relationships with parents is echoed in the current literature. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) argued that "families and schools are overlapping spheres of socialization and that the successful learning and development of children depends, in part, on building productive boundaries between and bridges across them" (p.10). Establishing and fostering pedagogical relationships with students and their families is a central theme both identified and described in both programs.

Inclusion

The program models for both Program 1 and Program 2 are examples of inclusivity because they value diversity, equality and safety while also supporting accommodations. Inclusion has been widely adapted by all public-school districts in British Columbia since 2010 (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, 2014). Program 1 is modelled on the Circle of Courage which is based on the universal needs of all children (Brendtro et al., 2005). The Circle of Courage is widely recognized throughout the world, through the various publications and training programs of the Reclaiming Youth Network (“2020 Reclaiming Youth Seminars,” n.d.). Though it is not widely used in alternate programs, there are other alternate programs that are modelled on the Circle of Courage in Calgary, South Africa, and New Zealand, to name a few. (Espiner & Guild, 2010; “Wildwind School”, 2020; Coetzee, 2005). Program 2 is modelled on four main wellness areas identified by the program (“Island Connect,” 2020). Each program serves a different student need, but each model strives to meet those needs in an inclusive way. Program 1’s model focuses first on belonging, which is part of inclusion, because it means that everyone in the program belongs and is valued. Morrissette (2011) found that a sense of belonging contributed to the students “perception of their new learning environment as a place of their own” (p.178). The other quadrants of the Circle of Courage independence, generosity, and mastery support inclusion as well. Generosity is about being generous and unselfish; this promotes an inclusive environment because it is about caring for others. Independence is about personal responsibility, solving problems and making choices. The ability to have independence in the alternate program is inclusive because it means every student has choices and can solve problems independent from barriers or challenges. Mastery is about personal growth, which promotes inclusion because it is not about equating success to other

students. Program 2 focuses on social-emotional health and creating a community of inclusive supportive learners. Morrissette (2011) study suggested that “feeling accepted by teachers and staff” created “a sense of community within the alternative program” (p.179). Program 2 shows acceptance in physical education class, where every student gets a chance to lead a stretch and supported is by other students in a non-judgemental and safe environment. They also have a no cell-phone policy to help promote connection, which in turn helps promote inclusion because the students are building supportive relationships with each other. The practice of inclusion was upheld by both program models and contributed to the goals of the alternate programs.

Positive and Flexible Learning Environment

The positive and flexible learning environment at both sites were created based on the models and goal, and mission statement of the programs. Program 2 was specifically designed for students that need social-emotional support and structured throughout the day to be both therapeutic and academic. Program 1 was designed for students with both external and internal needs and therefore has a very structured morning and a more flexible afternoon. Morrissette’s (2011) study also suggested that an alternate program that is “both structured and flexible” (p.181) is beneficial to students. Morrissette (2011) stated that “despite being relaxed, students appreciated clear expectations of what they needed to do in order to meet their objectives and succeed.” (p.181). The environment at both programs 1 and 2 was designed for what the students need to be successful. Quinn et al. (2010) suggests that alternative programs “create personalized environments in which students feel respected and fairly treated and where expectations for social, interpersonal, and academic success are supported” (p.15). This is reflected in program 1 and 2 through the different work areas, flexible , availability of one-on-one support. Having a learning environment that strives to meet the needs of their students,

instead of the structures and routines of a mainstream schools, is what makes alternate programs unique. Zolkoski et al (2016), Morrissette (2011), Boylan and Renzulli (2017), Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) and Smith et al (2007) all indicated that supportive teachers and a caring and positive learning environment were part of effective alternate schools. Having a positive and flexible learning environment upholds the models of both alternate programs because it is about creating a safe space for students and fostering an attachment to the programs.

Summary of Themes

This case study addressed the research question: what are the underlying philosophies and models of two BC school district alternate education programs and how are they being upheld? The findings revealed that in these two alternate programs, a clear mission, goal and model, cohesion, pedagogical relationships, flexible and positive environment, and inclusion demonstrated both the underlying philosophies and the practices that were used to achieve the programs' goals.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings from two descriptive case studies of alternate education programs in one central Vancouver Island school district with attention to implications and application of these findings to teaching, the development of alternate programs, and continued research in this field. The purpose of the case study is restated, as it is essential to relate the overall significance back to the research question. The limitations of the study are discussed, the significance of the study is described, and recommendations for further research are presented. The research question is as follows: What are the underlying philosophies and models of two BC school district alternate education programs and how are they being upheld?

Purpose of the Study

Students enrolled in alternate education programs are on the rise in British Columbia. In one Central Vancouver Island school district, the alternate programs have more than doubled in enrollment since 2016 (Government of British Columbia, 2019). This study described the models, philosophies, and practices of two alternate education program. The researcher specifically looked at what factors made each program distinctive, the models used and the philosophies of each program through the lens of the alternate school staff members.

Implications

The following implications focus on the five themes discovered in the findings as well as professional development suggestions for educators, implications for the researchers own practice and further research recommendations in the field of alternative education.

Alternate Program Development with Clear Mission, Goals and Model

Alternate programs are developed in school districts to meet the needs of their vulnerable, at-risk and high-risk students whose needs are not being met in other district schools or programs

(Nanaimo Ladysmith Schoolboard, 1995, para 1). The alternate programs developed in school districts depend on the student demographics, culture, needs, and space available. The findings of this study support current research that explores the need for alternate programs to meet the needs of students in their district. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) found that “most students who attend alternative schools were unsuccessful in traditional school programs and exhibited poor grades, truancy, behavior problems, or experienced special circumstances that impeded their learning” (p.106). The findings from this multiple case study indicate that having a clear mission, model and goal helped the programs be more effective because it clarifies who the program is for. This means that the students who enter a program, are in the right program based on their individual needs. The alternate programs in this district were created for the students; the students did not have to conform to the alternate program. This is accomplished by the intensive intake process and contract. Having a commitment contract that outlines personal responsibility and a commitment to continuing their education as well as the goal, mission and model of the program is essential for making sure that the students that enter the program will be successful. This requires a team effort as well as endorsement and cohesion of the staff members and administration. Having a model, goal and mission statement that focuses on the needs of the students helps create cohesion in the program for students and staff. For an alternate program to be successful it needs to be meeting a need that is not being fulfilled anywhere else, it also needs to have the correct students in the program.

Cohesion

This multiple case study identified the importance of staff and administration cohesion when running an alternate program. The importance of cohesion is supported by current research on the effectiveness of alternate programs (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Morrissette, 2011).

Cohesion of the staff and administration helped to strengthen the programs because they represented a united and solid foundation. The models, goal and mission of both programs were supported and integrated into both programs because all the staff endorsed them. The staff also relied on each other's strengths in the programs and thought of each other as part of a team. Having cohesion also made celebrating student and program success consistent and meaningful. Cohesion is an integrate part of having a successful program because without cohesion there is confusion and misunderstandings.

Pedagogical Relationships

The value of relationships within this case study supports current research about the importance of relationships on the effectiveness of an alternate program (Quinnet et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2007; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Morrissette, 2011; Zolkoski et al., 2016). The findings of this study indicate the significance of relationships in creating connections to the program and the staff. Relationships are important for student commitment to education and attachment to the programs. Parent and guardians' relationships can be fostered with parent nights every month. Having parents and guardians' part of the educational team for a student helps to create a sense transparency between the school and home. Greeting students by name everyday and asking about their lives helps to strengthen relationships. Educators can also share their own stories about their educational and life journey, which will help students open up about what is going on in their own lives. Relationships with students and parents are vital to the strength of a program because attached students are committed students. Relationships are the foundation of alternate programs because without relationships there is no sense of belonging.

Learning Environments, Flexible and Positive

Developing a positive, inclusive, caring and flexible learning environment is vital to the

success of an alternate programs. This is reflected in the current research on effective alternate programs through studies from Zolkoski et al (2016), Morrissette (2011), Boylan and Renzulli (2017), Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) and Smith et al (2007). Creating a learning environment that is reflective of student needs is something that all education programs should focus on, whether they are mainstream or alternative. The importance of the learning environment on the success of students is reflected through current research in the alternate education field and is valuable for all educators and administrations. The learning environments of the alternate programs suggest that flexibility in environment is important. Having alternate programs that have quiet spaces for students, moveable classroom furniture and preferential seating are important for creating an effective learning environment. The ability for students to choose where they are the most comfortable is essential because it allows students to feel safe. In order to create effective learning environments for their students, school staff, stakeholders, parents/guardians and administration should look at the need's students in their schools and programs.

Barriers and Inclusion

The findings of this multiple case study indicate the importance of inclusion in alternate education. Program 1 and 2 both strive towards inclusion in their models, goal and mission. The programs practice the values of inclusion throughout their programs. Inclusion is about “create[ing] a respectful, accepting, safe, and supportive environment for the students and staff of our school communities” (“Inclusion Policy”, 2016). Inclusion is extremely important in alternate education because of the barrier's to education the students in the programs face. Zweig (2003) study suggested that the barriers that affect educational success are both within and outside of the school system. In order to understand the complex needs of vulnerable, at-risk and

high-risk youth, educators and administrators need to learn more about the barriers to education affecting youth in their communities. These barriers will depend on the demographics, needs and cultures of their students. Through understanding the complex needs of their vulnerable, at-risk and high-risk youth, educators can help create a sense of belonging and inclusion in their own classrooms.

Professional Development

The findings of this study could be applied to the professional development of educators and administrators in school districts. With meaningful and purposeful professional development, staff members, could learn about the learning needs as well as social-emotional needs of their students. This could be accomplished by looking at their own communities and focusing on the barriers to education their students might have. The hope would be that by understanding their students better, staff members would form more meaningful connections to their vulnerable students. This would create more inclusive learning environments in classrooms and schools. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) suggests that “teachers can help students by creating strong home–school connections and by knowing about current home issues that may impact academic achievement. Many students stated that their teachers had a good understanding of and techniques for helping them to overcome their obstacles such as mental health issues, homelessness, teen parenting, and drug abuse” (p.110). Professional development could focus on supporting students with socio-economic, mental health and social emotional learning needs in their school district.

Professional Implications

The findings of this paper have changed and contributed to my own teaching as an

educator. The cohesion and strength of the staff at the two alternate sites has contributed to my understanding of how important endorsement and acceptance is when making goals, mission statements and models. I work in a mainstream secondary school; therefore, it was very interesting to see how a program can be created based on the strengths of a staff compared to what is expected in a school. Having always valued student relationships and creating a sense of belonging in my own classroom, it was validating to hear and learn about the importance of student relationships in the overall success of the students. Understanding student barriers to education has always been a challenge for me because of the complex needs of so many of my students that it can become overwhelming. The findings indicate the importance of these barriers and have renewed my energy towards focusing on recognizing and identifying these barriers with my own students.

Further Research

Alternate education in British Columbia is growing and increasingly more programs are being created in school districts to meet the needs of their most vulnerable, at-risk, and high-risk students (Shaw, 2018). Further research in the field of alternate education in British Columbia is needed to understand the growth of this form of education. Canadian research should focus on establishing results from all over the country in order to give insight into what each of the provinces and territories are doing to meet the needs of their disengaged at-risk and high-risk youth. Research about the process of reengagement from a student perspective once a student is disengaged would also be beneficial as it could help teachers and administration understand how to prevent student dropout. Also, additional research should be done to further understand why students are not connected to their communities or mainstream public school.

Limitations of the Study

The results of this descriptive case study are not generalizable based on the case study design and the results cannot be replicated (Yin, 1994). Case studies are a thorough description and analysis of a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Cases studies are a search for deeper understanding and meaning (Merriam, 2009, p.39). The answers the participants provided during the semi-structured interviews relies on their experiences, interpretations, and perceptions. In quantitative research, “individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds” (Merriam, 2009, p. 22). The interviews occurred during one moment in time, meaning that the participants could have different answers if they were interviewed at another time Also it was limited in the participant group, who were all educators. A study that included student and parent/guardian participants might offer a more comprehensive description of the programs.

Significance of the Study

The alternative education programs in one central Vancouver Island school district were created to meet the needs of the vulnerable and high-risk student population in the district. In British Columbia, alternate education programs are established by school boards to meet the specific needs of the students in their demographic and geographic area (British Columbia School Act, 2018). This makes each alternate program and school unique to each school district. The effectiveness of each alternate program can therefore only be measured within the framework of each school district. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be replicated and to fully understand the programs, they must be studied as distinct parts of alternate education in British Columbia. This study demonstrated how one district created two alternate programs to meet the diverse needs of their students. The researcher hopes the findings on the models and philosophies of these two programs will be able to provide more knowledge of alternate

education in British Columbia, as well as adding to the current research in the field. It could also be useful to look at the key themes of these programs; a clear mission, goal and model, cohesion, pedagogical relationships, flexible and positive environment, and inclusion, and relate them to the current research on other alternate programs. It could help inform administrators, staff members or community stakeholders about some of the successful models and philosophies used in alternate education in their district.

Conclusion

Alternative education programs are created to meet the needs of at-risk, high-risk, and vulnerable youth by focusing on their educational, social, and emotional needs. These students are disconnected from their home schools for a variety of different reasons. They have either been pulled out or pushed out of their schools. In one central Vancouver Island district, two alternate programs were created to meet the needs of these students. To achieve 'success for all' mainstream public schools and alternate programs need to meet the needs of their students by providing positive, inclusive, flexible, and nurturing learning environments. They also need to be designed with purpose, and their goals, mission statement, and models should reflect this. The philosophies of alternative education programs or mainstream public schools and their staff need to be cohesive and meaningful. According to Aristotle, education is key to leading a happy and fulfilled life (Curren, 2000). The acquiring of knowledge, skills, and attitudes through education contributes to being a productive member of society (BC Ministry of Education Governance and Legislation Branch, 2018). In British Columbia, every student has a right to an education and to be educated.

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Appendix A



Alternative Education: Success for All

Principal Investigator

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Student Supervisor

Mary Ann Richards, PhD.
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I am a student in the Master of Education in Special Education program at Vancouver Island University (VIU). My research, entitled "*Alternative Education: Success for All*," aims to describe the models, philosophies, and practices of learning alternatives in the ****. My hope is that my research will contribute to the understanding and future success of alternate education in British Columbia.

Research participants are asked to complete a face-to-face research interview. If you agree, you would be asked questions concerning your experiences while working at learning alternatives, with emphasis on factors such as program environment, school goals (Circle of Courage, inclusion), academic instruction and behavioral training. All interviews will be done confidentially, and each participant will be given a pseudonym in all documents.

The information collected during the interview is likely to be uncontroversial, and thus the research poses only a very small risk of harm to participants. Depending on the information you provide, there is a possibility that the information you provide might cause embarrassment or an uncomfortable work environment. You will not be directly identified in the research write up. However, given the specific school contexts, there is a risk that you may be identifiable by those who know you based on the information you provide. All participants will also be given a copy of their transcripts before coding and will be able to exclude any sensitive information from their transcripts or withdraw from the study at any time. There is also a risk that some of the answers you share during the interviews could be viewed evaluative in nature depending on if the responses are negative or positive. These risks can be minimized or mitigated by the opportunity to edit your transcripts before they are used in the study.

All records of your participation will be confidential and private. Only my supervisor and I will have access to information in which you are identified. Due to the small size of the study and schools there is a risk that you will be indirectly identifiable. With your permission, the interview would be audio recorded using Otter Voice Notes and later transcribed into writing. Otter Voice Notes stores recordings on a sever located in the United States and complies with the EU-U.S. Privacy Shield Framework and Swiss-U.S. Privacy Shield Framework as set forth by the U.S. Department of Commerce regarding the

collection, use, and retention of personal information transferred from the European Union and Switzerland to the United States. Since the servers are located outside Canada, the data stored would not be subject to Canadian privacy legislation. Otter Voice Notes privacy policy can be located at <https://otter.ai/privacy>. Otter Voice Notes can select segments of raw or partially processed audio and associated transcribed text from multiple recorded conversations from multiple users to be used as training data for their artificial intelligence (AI) technology. All audio files and data will be uploaded directly to the researcher's password protected computer within 5 days of the interview taking place and removed from Otter Voice notes. You will be provided a copy of the transcript and invited to make changes to the transcript as you wish (e.g. if you would like to withdraw a particular statement you made during an interview). Electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer. Signed consent forms and paper copies of interview transcripts will be stored in a locked file cabinet in my home. Data will be deleted and shredded three years from the end of the project on June 31st, 2023.

The results of this study will be published in my Masters thesis, and may also be used for conference publications, presentations, and published in peer-reviewed journals.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time where practicable, for any reason, and without explanation. You will be provided with a copy of your transcript and will have the opportunity to revise or delete comments. You may also choose to withdraw up to two weeks from the time of being provided a copy of the transcript. If you decline to review the transcript, you may withdraw up to two weeks from the date of our interview. If you choose to withdraw from the study, all information you provided during the interview would be withdrawn from the study and destroyed.

I have read and understand the information provided above, and hereby consent to participate in this research under the following conditions:

I consent to the interview being audio recorded using Otter Voice Notes. Yes No

I consent to being quoted using a pseudonym in the products of the research. Yes No

Participant Name _____ Participant Signature _____

I, Christina Hollman, promise to adhere to the procedures described in this consent form.

Principal Investigator Signature _____ Date _____

If you have any concerns about your treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Board by telephone at 250-740-6631 or by email at reb@viu.ca.

Appendix B

Thank you for consenting to take part in this study. I will be audio recording this interview using the Otter Voice notes application on my cell phone. Once I begin please feel free to share reflections or stories at any time during the interview. All questions will be focused on your experiences working with youth rather than the students. Any questions before I begin?

1. What makes your program unique?
2. In your experience do the students at your school feel welcome? If yes, how is this achieved? If no, what do you believe is missing?
3. What are the typical ratios for students to staff members? Do you think this is important?
4. Do students have different environments where they can learn? (prompts; quiet space, empty rooms, collaborative space)
5. Do students have any input in the decoration or layout of the spaces available to them?
6. What are some of your core values or/and philosophies as an educator? (prompts if needed; inclusion, relationships, graduation, academics)
7. Can you give me an example of a typical or particular day at your school?
8. What are your school goals and how are you striving towards them?
9. Does your school practice the Circle of Courage? How?
10. Does your school offer any special programs for students? If so, what are they?
11. What was your proudest moment as an educator working at learning alternatives?
12. Do you have any behavioural training? If yes, did you get the training because of your role learning alternatives or did you have it previously?
13. What is the most important part of your job? Why?
14. How are academics given to students (i.e. small group instruction, packages etc)?
15. How flexible is your program? Can students have extended absences or chose not to do academics for a period of time and still find success?
16. How does your school measure student success? (prompts; graduation, careers, completion of project, confidence)
17. What is your schools' approach to student discipline/rules? (prompt; nonauthoritative, authoritative)
18. What do you do when a student is being disrespectful to yourself or others? Are there set rules in place for behaviour that is disruptive or unsafe?
19. Is there anything else you would like to share about what makes your program special?

Please note that this is a list of possible interview questions, the interview may be led in another direction by staff members during the interview process which would eliminate some of the above questions or add to the above questions with previously unthought of queries.