

SOMEBODY'S GOTTA FIGHT FOR THEM:  
A DISADVANTAGED AND MARGINALIZED ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL'S  
CULTURE OF LEARNING AND ITS CASE OF CHANGE

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## Dedications

This dissertation is dedicated to:

All educators who choose to teach, work with, and fight for  
students who are pushed aside because of their disadvantaged backgrounds.

The participants (the alternative school staff and students) of this study,  
who have inspired me greatly during my fieldwork.

And finally, to my greatest teachers,  
my parents, Hong-soo & Gwuy-soo Lee,  
my mentor Dr. Charles Reigeluth,  
and to my husband William Watson.

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## Abstract

Sunkyung Lee Watson

### SOMEBODY'S GOTTA FIGHT FOR THEM: A DISADVANTAGED AND MARGINALIZED ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL'S CULTURE OF LEARNING AND ITS CASE OF CHANGE

Marginalized and disadvantaged student bodies in public school districts have very different cultures of learning from mainstream learning communities. Policies and practices in schools tend to isolate these student bodies for convenience in administration and instruction, and little consideration is given to whether these experiences of isolation from the larger community are positive or negative. Through a critical ethnographic approach, this study examines the culture of learning of a disadvantaged alternative school and its role within a district-wide change effort. This study discusses to what degree a disadvantaged student population is included in a critical-systemic educational change effort by examining a marginalized learning community's culture of learning and its role within an educational change process. This study provides tentative improvement recommendations for systemic change efforts in school districts that should help disadvantaged and marginalized learning communities to become active agents of educational change processes, and should offer support to ultimately provide

better learning environments for disadvantaged and marginalized learning communities and student bodies.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The plight of disadvantaged and marginalized populations should be a sharp concern of the global society at large (Lewis, 2001). A society, global or local, is impacted by its various components, and when one of these various components suffers, whether through economic inequality, educational disadvantage or lack of political power, its pain is felt by and damages the society at large. Those concerned with issues such as underemployment rates, low earnings, menial occupations, crime rates, polarization, or intense conflict need to recognize the negative impact caused by the economic and educational inequalities the current society and its educational practices support. An ethic of care requires us to find ways of relating and working to transcend our differences (Ross, 2003). In short, as Ross (2003) quotes Lewis (2001) in her narrative on relational theory, caring is “no longer a matter of grace, of charity, of patronizing kindness. It is a matter of intense self-interest. For our own sake, we need to reduce the well of resentment... We have to care (p. 408).”

The disadvantaged student population is growing at a far more rapid rate than the average population. Not only are the educationally disadvantaged increasing in numbers and growth rate, the degree of disadvantage is rising as well (Levin, 1986; Natriello, McDill & Pallas, 1990; Pasco, 2003). As Natriello et al. (1990, p. 3) point out, “interest in the educationally disadvantaged has waxed and waned” over the years as educators and policy makers have periodically directed attention to the problems such students face in our schools and society. Similar to the trends in educators’ and the field of education’s interest in disadvantaged students, the second half of the 20th century in the United States was also a continuous struggle for educational reform and school improvement efforts.

Many educators have critiqued this ongoing trend of educational change and school reform, pointing out that these efforts have been without much national progress (Ravitch, 1995; Slavin, 1989).

However, the real challenge and problem of these calls for educational change is the fact that they have not been in response to the troubles and difficulties of the students that deserve and need the most support and improvement in schools: the disadvantaged students, youth who are in danger of failing at school and are from disadvantaged backgrounds, including poverty, ethnic status, family circumstances, language, type of school, geography and community (Day, Veen & Walraven., 1997). The calls for change instead were premised on the worry that American education is losing competitiveness in the international markets in the newly emerging age of science and technology.

Consequently, most educational reform movements during the decades since *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), have primacy in the setting of higher competency standards in graduation and test scores, and greater number of courses required in sciences, mathematics and English (Fritzberg, 2001; Johnston & Ross, 2001; Levin & Kelley, 1994).

The pressures of the high standards movement have been criticized by educators for directing the society to lose track of the crucial conversation regarding the purposes of education (Johnston & Ross, 2001; Marcello, 1999), and implemented changes in these school reform movements have not been relevant to disadvantaged students. In addition, some of these changes actually created additional barriers to the completion of schooling by disadvantaged students (Levin, 1986). While some argue that high standards do not necessarily present difficulty to disadvantaged students (Ravitch, 1995; 2000), the

majority of educators find in research and reality that efforts for higher quantity and quality education, such as increasing the length of the school day and year, greater numbers of courses, and higher standards for graduation, are unlikely to increase the success of disadvantaged students. These educators argue that these efforts rather force disadvantaged students to experience the feeling of failure and uselessness and have provided additional pressure for them to drop out of school (Natriello et al, 1990). States, districts and schools have responded to reform needs over the last two decades; however, most efforts have had little or no success in producing meaningful changes for disadvantaged, at-risk students other than through the hope that the rising competency standards and expectations for higher test scores will somehow promote the learning of all students (Levin, 1986).

Disadvantaged students in schools bring very different sets of family and community cultures into the learning communities (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Sennett & Cobb, 1972; Willis, 1981). Research shows that classroom learning is reflexive and interactive and that language in the classroom draws heavily from the sociolinguistic experiences of students at home (Bernstein 1975; Cook-Gumperez, 1973; Heath 1983, 1983; Labov, 1972; Mehan & Griffin, 1980). Also studies of the curriculum, the hidden curriculum, and the relationships between teachers and students have revealed how schooling can contribute to social reproduction (Anyon, 1981; Apple, 1979; Gaskell, 1985; Taylor, 1984; Valli, 1985; Wilcox, 1982).

The cultures of learning established by these student bodies and their teachers are very different from the mainstream learning communities within a school district. Policies and practices in schools tend to group and isolate these student bodies to gain

convenience in administration and instruction, and little consideration is given to whether, for the students, the experience of being grouped and isolated from the larger learning community is positive or negative.

School change for higher standards in the absence of fundamental changes that address the critical needs of the disadvantaged students only increases drop-out rates for those students who can scarcely meet current standards. It is clear that while there is an urgent need for educational change for the educational system as a whole, change efforts need to be more attuned to the needs of the disadvantaged and address those issues with special consideration, or the change effort will again be neglecting this population (Levin, 1986).

Among current educational change movements, systemic school change or systemic educational change is a movement that strives to change school culture so that schools meet all learners' needs, rather than only the majority of learners' needs. Scholars of systemic change movements argue that the current factory-model, industrial-age, school system has highly compartmentalized learning into subject areas, and students are "treated as if they are all the same and are all expected to do the same things at the same time" (Reigeluth, 1994, p. 204). The current school system, with its standardization and norm-based grading system, is not designed to meet individual learner needs; it rather results in sorting or "weeding out" students. Systemic educational change seeks to shift from a paradigm in which time is held constant, thereby forcing achievement to vary, which is a sorting-based paradigm, to a paradigm designed specifically to meet the needs of learners and their communities by allowing students as much time as each needs to reach proficiency and to move on as soon as each is ready. In order to achieve that goal,

systemic educational change argues that the school system must move from standardization and sorting to a completely different paradigm that supports customization to meet individual learner needs (Reigeluth, 1994; 1997; 1999).

The problem is that even systemic school change efforts in school districts that are committed to, and strive to change school culture so that schools meet all learners' needs, are likely to overlook the special attention these disadvantaged and marginalized student bodies need, focusing on the systemic, broader principles and overall process of change as a whole. Furthermore, as disadvantaged student groups are typically isolated, either physically, psychologically or both, from the rest of the learning community, it can be difficult for their voices to be represented and their needs recognized in a change effort that involves the rest of the mainstream learning community.

This study examines to what degree a disadvantaged student population is included in a systemic change effort by examining a marginalized learning communities' culture of learning and its role within an educational change process. This study provides tentative improvement recommendations for systemic change efforts in school districts that 1) should help disadvantaged and marginalized learning communities to become active agents of educational change processes, and 2) should offer support to ultimately provide better learning environments for disadvantaged and marginalized learning communities and student bodies.

In the next chapter, Chapter 2, I review the literature on 1) disadvantaged students and school culture, 2) systemic educational change for learner-centered instruction, and 3) ability grouping and alternative schools, to provide a better understanding of the context of this research project on a disadvantaged alternative school in a public school district

that is going through a systemic educational change effort. Chapter 3 will provide a description of the theoretical foundation of the research design and the methodology I chose for this study. I offer an explanation of critical epistemology and its connections to critical inquiry and Carspecken's (1996) critical ethnographic methods. Chapter 4 will present the results and findings of the study. And finally, Chapter 5 will discuss the implications of the research, offering conclusions and tentative recommendations for district-wide school transformation processes. It is my wish that this study will provide some guidance for systemic school transformers to find better ways to help disadvantaged and marginalized students and learning communities to become active agents of educational change and ultimately make fundamental changes in schools in order to better recognize and address the unique culture and needs of disadvantaged students.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

As this project is concerned with what district-wide school transformation efforts can do to better involve disadvantaged populations in the change effort and ultimately improve disadvantaged students' experiences in schools, it is crucial to examine the literature on disadvantaged students, school culture, ability grouping and systemic educational change. This chapter starts by discussing the conversations surrounding studying the *Other*. I will then review the existing literature on disadvantaged and marginalized students, school culture and systemic educational change for learner-centered schools. In conclusion, I critique the inattention to disadvantaged and marginalized alternative school's agency in educational change and call for specific effort for improvement in ensuring active participation of disadvantaged students in systemic educational change efforts.

### Studying the *Other*

Jafee (1993) argues that we are never totally different from others and that we are never wholly '*Other*' from those we are studying or researching. While this is true on many levels, I must note that the students, teachers and administrators that participated in this study are very different from me in many important ways. Characteristics such as race, age, social status, language, and level of education are some qualities that would disconnect each and every one of us involved in the study, including me, the researcher who initiated this project.

Studying the *Other* is a controversial issue. One might question how you could truly understand the *Other*, whose position you have never been in, as it differs from just 'studying other people' that are in similar positions and hold similar lives as the

researcher. Some claim that it can be a profound contradiction in oneself and that in fact it is a tendency to “study down” and a “cowardly act” (Fordham in Blake, 2004). Because it is easy to study those who are powerless and weak, there is always the possibility that we try to reduce our guilt by trying to “chronicle their lives.” According to Fordham, the profound contradictions, then, become the precise mechanisms by which we do nothing; we transform or change nothing by this act (Blake, 2004). Fordham instead argues that we need to represent the struggle by “studying up”: studying the practices and policies of the system that force these people to be powerless. Because both ways of studying to improve social equality have merit, this study attempts to marry the two components of studying the *Other*. It studies the practices and policies of the system that contributes and reproduces the inequalities of the society at large while engaging in discussions to understand and empower the “*Others*” themselves. The study explores the practices and policies of the educational institution and provides recommendations for improvement of the marginalized/disadvantaged students’ participation in educational change efforts.

#### School Culture and Disadvantaged Students

In seeking to explore the literature on the *Other*, the most common term used is ‘disadvantaged.’ Reviewing the literature shows that initial research on disadvantaged students focused on students who would potentially drop out of school. Over the years, the concern broadened to include the school experiences of disadvantaged youth in general, whether they dropped out of school or remained in school. Another major theme of the literature is that the problems of disadvantaged students are the consequence of long term conditions of society that are not susceptible to short term solutions (Natriello et al., 1990).

### *Who are the Disadvantaged?*

Research studies that use the term ‘disadvantage’ inherently compare the situations of individuals or communities with others who have access to whatever the ‘advantage’ or ‘average’ circumstances are. Fincher and Saunders (2001) write that “... being disadvantaged is thus an explicitly relative state, but the term also has a strong normative connotation. To be disadvantaged is to be unfairly treated relative to others” (p. 8). And as Syner, Angus and Sutherland-Smith (2002) point out, research using “disadvantage” as a guiding concept frequently refers to disadvantaging processes, processes that cause the production and reproduction of disadvantage for people and places.

The earliest and one of the most popular notions of disadvantaged students was “cultural deprivation”. With the Vietnam War as a backdrop and the discussion on Brown vs. Board of Education and the War on Poverty in the foreground, the debates over poor children and the importance of education as a means to save them through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act were heated in the 1960s (Stein, 2004). At this time, the notion of ‘cultural deprivation’ served as both a defining characteristic and an explanation of the problems of disadvantaged students. In addition, at the presidential address of the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association in 1955, Friedman (1970) referred to deprived homes, deprived areas, and emotional deprivation to explain the problems of children, and this definition became widely used.

However, scholars such as Riessman (1962) critiqued that, with the use of “cultural deprivation,” it is not appropriate to think of people in lower socioeconomic groups as culturally deprived since “they possess a culture of their own, with many positive characteristics that have developed out of coping with a difficult environment” (p.

3). Many critics of the notion of cultural deprivation have argued that it creates an explanation for the problem which blames the victims, misinterpreting cultural differences and cultural deficits and deprivation (Riessman, 1962; Valentine, 1968).

Thus, the term “educationally deprived” rather than culturally deprived was alternatively used to refer to disadvantaged students. The implications and suggestions for social and educational policies that derive from the view that disadvantaged youth are educationally deprived are different from those derived from the view that they are culturally deprived (Natriello et al., 1990). More recent discussions of the disadvantaged students have used the term, “at risk.” “At risk” generally refers to students who may be more likely to experience educational problems than others. Natriello and colleagues (1990) propose a definition of educationally disadvantaged which places it within an emerging understanding of education as a process that takes place both inside and outside of school, 1) the community, 2) the family and 3) formal schooling. Their definition is:

Students who are educationally disadvantaged have been exposed to insufficient educational experiences in at least one of these three domains. While the first awareness of the consequences of such experiences may surface in the schools where student performance is formally assessed, the source of the problem may rest with the school and/or with the family and the community in which the student is reared.

(Natriello et al., 1990, p.13)

The definition by Day et al. (1997) in a review of OECD’s research, policy and practice in the area of disadvantage is more inclusive in its range and scope.

‘At risk’ refers to children and youth who are in danger of failing at school, or in making a successful transition to work. Educational, social and vocational failure are predicted by a range of factors, including poverty, ethnic status, family circumstances, language, type of school, geography and community. ‘At risk’ refers in a general sense to children and youth from disadvantaged backgrounds.

(Day et al., 1997, p 17)

The positives of defining the disadvantaged population as having characteristics that make it vulnerable to certain environmental conditions are that educational policies can help prevent the problems located in the students’ families, community, or their schools. However, on the negative side there is a risk that it carries a danger of derogatory labeling and creation of self fulfilling prediction resulting from lowered expectations of student performance (Natriello et al., 1990; Wehlage & Rutter, 1987).

While there are many definitions of disadvantage, and there are different reasons people are disadvantaged, including gender, race, ethnicity, poverty, and language, in this study, I define disadvantage as an inclusive guiding concept that refers to 1) youth who are in danger of failing at school, in a general sense to children and youth from disadvantaged backgrounds (Day et al., 1997), and 2) disadvantaging processes, processes that cause the production and reproduction of disadvantage for people and places (Syner et al., 2002).

### *Risk Factors of the Disadvantaged*

There is a wide range of risk factors that can be implicated in this concept of “disadvantaged” or “at risk.” Schorr and Schorr (1988) describe some of the major non-school, family, and community risk factors as: growing up in persistent or concentrated

poverty or in a family of low social class; being born unwanted with too many children; growing up with an unemployed parent; having a parent who is a teenager, illiterate, or impaired; growing up in a neighborhood with a high level of social disorganization; and growing up outside of one's family, such as in multiple foster care. Although not all poor children are educationally disadvantaged, Schorr and Schorr (1988) identify poverty as the greatest risk factor of all, arguing that virtually all other factors are found disproportionately among poor students. Natriello et al. (1990) consider five key indicators of the disadvantaged as racial/ethnic identity, poverty status, family composition, mother's education, and language background.

School risk factors are also found in research to be important: poor standards in planning of teaching, poor assessment and evaluation of learning, students' attitudes towards learning and education linked with their motivation, low teachers' expectations of the students, and the prevailing anti-school culture or peer group attitudes towards learning and schools are formidable obstacles to learning and education (Cox, 2000).

#### *Bourdieu's Capital Theory*

French critical sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) capital theory is probably one of the most influential and useful ways of looking at the risk factors of disadvantaged students mentioned above. Bourdieu uses the notion of capital as a type of sociological index or set of indicators through which to explain social inequalities, including educational inequalities.

He develops an "economy of practice" with which he explains that all human activity is directed toward maximizing social advantage. Within this theory, he talks about the notion of capital as "energy of social physics". The concept of capital is broader

than the monetary notion in economics; it includes all monetary, non-monetary, tangible, and intangible forms of resources.

In his theory, Bourdieu (1986) also divides capital into symbolic, economic, social, and cultural capital. Economic capital is what can be immediately and directly transferred into money, financial possessions, or assets. Social capital is the total of resources that can be activated through association with social networks of players or organizations. Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. The treatment of this concept is instrumental, focusing on the construction of sociability for the creation of these resources.

Most importantly, cultural capital is the forms of knowledge, skills, experience, education, or any advantages a person has which give this person a higher position in society, including the high expectations that are enforced upon this person. For example, the community and parents provide their children with cultural capital: the experiences, skills, attitudes and knowledge that make the educational system a comfortable, familiar place in which they can succeed easily. Symbolic capital can be referred to as recognized prestige or honor, and functions as an authoritative embodiment of cultural value. While, symbolic capital cannot be transformed to other forms of capital, the first three forms of capital, economic, social and cultural capital, can have symbolic value.

These different types and forms of capital provide a way for critical researchers to study human activity by recognizing the differences of various types of capital and their convertibility, and ultimately help researchers to explore and discuss why students

might differ in their experiences in school systems (Pasco, 2003). Bourdieu's (1986) notion of capital is important to the discussion of at-risk/disadvantaged students in that he describes the knowledge and cultural heritage transmitted by the school as an arbitrary creation of particular social systems and conditions. He argues that different social groups and classes have diverse relationships to the formal culture of schooling and that the dominant classes have more influence and control on the school knowledge and practices than do the subordinate classes.

For decades we have had research that verifies the powerful influence of student background on success in schools (Coleman, 1966; Jencks, 1972; Good & Brophy, 1986). Students from the dominant culture naturally experience the school system as a more comfortable and familiar place that they succeed in. School systems reward students who exhibit the dominant capital and devalue the capital from the subordinate classes. Many educational researchers claim that, based on these analyses and observations, ultimately, academic performance in our schools does not truly represent students' competence, but rather represents the educational system's lack of appreciation of the cultural capital of the subordinate group in society (McLaren, 1998). Many researchers therefore argue that we should explicitly examine the relationship between students' backgrounds and the norms, values, and routines of the schools and classrooms (Cummins, 1986; Heath, 1983; McLaren, 1998).

### *School culture and disadvantaged students*

For researchers to examine the relationship between school culture and disadvantaged students' backgrounds, it is important to understand what school culture means and what the literature articulates about school culture and disadvantaged students. The term school

culture or milieu has been used to describe and research many different phenomena: school facilities, discipline codes, students' family background, racial composition, classroom instructional practices, teacher-student or teacher-teacher relationships, school rules and the nature of values or norms in schools. In this study, I define school culture with a focus on the characteristics of the specific school, but still with a more general and holistic scope or extent which includes many of the characteristics mentioned above: the school facilities, instructional practices, teacher-student and teacher-teacher relationships, school rules and the nature of values or norms in schools.

However it is defined in scope, every school has its own culture which is socially constructed by the members within it, and in most cases school culture and milieu has a significant impact on student achievement and retention rates (Johnston, 1992). Within schools, identifiable faculty and student cultures exist (Metz, 1978).

As for disadvantaged students, clear values and fundamental principles are particularly crucial in school culture. Lacking a coherent vision or mission, purpose or values, schools create disorder for these students. Research shows that in the absence of clear values, with no fundamental values to serve as guides, disadvantaged students view differing teacher responses as unpredictable, and this becomes just more evidence for them that they cannot comprehend this unfamiliar and alien culture called school (Johnston, 1992; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Metz, 1978).

Furthermore, schools with strong cultures not only have clear values, they have adults who embody those values for students (Johnston, 1992, Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983). Most importantly, the heroes are diverse enough so that all students in the school can find someone with whom to identify. Superficial relationships between students and teachers

produce a sense of anonymity that encourages asocial or antisocial behavior by disadvantaged students (Johnston, 1992). The norms are continually extended to create more counterproductive manners by students and teachers.

Quite a few educational ethnographies in the 1960s and 70s brought the plight of disadvantaged students to both academia's and the public's attention. James Coleman (1966) argued that students' communities and family backgrounds were significantly relevant to school achievement. Robert Coles (1967) also engaged in a series of studies that examined children in racial struggles, children of migrant workers, and children of poverty and privilege.

In addition, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976) illustrated how "The structure of social relations in education not only inures the student to the discipline of the workplace, but develops the types of personal demeanor, modes of self-presentation, self-image, and social class identifications, which are the crucial ingredients of job adequacy" (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 131). Many critiques have noted how the analysis by Bowles and Gintis of disadvantaged students overlooks the crucial notion of agency, which recognizes the ability of people to take action and celebrate their own processes of understanding. For example, Michael Apple (1980) argued that the reproduction theory of Bowles and Gintis assumed that students and teachers do not creatively act in cultural ways to struggle against the ideological and structural constraints. Apple's (1980) critique of the lack of cultural analysis in reproduction theory brought about many critical educational research studies on student agency and resistance in schooling (Pasco, 2003).

Shirley Heath's (1983) work focused on the lives, language, and cultural backgrounds of minorities. Her work documented how disadvantaged students were

unable to decipher teachers' indirect request for adherence to an unstated set of rules and were not able to act in ways that met their teachers' expectations. John Ogbu (1974) also studied how people conceptualized their educational system and their place in it and how these conceptualizations influenced the way they behaved within the organization. He argued that this kind of understanding would shed light on why certain populations behave in certain ways and have such high proportion of failures in schools.

Sennett and Cobb (1972) explained how the cycle of lower expectations, poor student performance, and traditional classroom practices create "nobodies" that cannot fit into and are not valued in schools. They also illustrated how "breaking the rules" is an act that nobodies can share with each other as an attempt to create dignity that those in authority cannot destroy. This is similar to Paul Willis's (1981) study, where he described the way in which working-class British "lads" developed a counter culture to the traditional classroom culture that accepted the authority of the teacher and school. His analysis was similar to Sennett and Cobb (1972) in that the "lads" created a unique and positive working-class culture by controlling the system with the power that they had, but only partially, for this culture was effectively sustaining the authority of the culture they were opposing. Foley (1990) also found that these students tried to create a positive sense of their identity in the rigid social class system and Brown and Gilligan's (1992) work on marginalized adolescents also illustrated how disadvantaged adolescents search for experiences where they can create their cultural spaces and define their voices.

#### *Ability Grouping and Marginalization*

The literature shows that disadvantaged students bring a significantly different set of cultures to the mainstream school culture, and therefore many school policies and

practices tend to group and isolate these student bodies to gain convenience in administration and instruction. These policies and practices are known as ability grouping, tracking or streaming. Ability grouping is perhaps one of the most important, closely related discussions of disadvantaged and at-risk students. Although the public education system is based on the ideology of common schooling that promotes equal access and opportunities to all individual learners, widespread and deeply rooted patterns of tracking and ability grouping in schools often result in differentiated classroom learning environments and opportunities for students (Braddock & Dawkins, 1993; Oakes, 1992). Obviously, sorting students by ability, past achievement, interest or skill level, narrows the range of diversity in a classroom and enables teachers to create class curriculum, materials and assignments to fit the students' abilities, interests and styles. It is true that virtually every school makes use of grouping to one degree or another (Griffin, 1988).

However, despite the support for grouping, many critics have serious reservations about ability grouping, arguing that these decisions underestimate the societal sorting that results. Since the 1930s, ability grouping has been one of the most controversial issues in education because of various concerns, such as the fact that factors other than capacity are often used to determine track assignment, and that tracking is damaging to student learning. While educational researchers have been debating questions about ability grouping for more than half a century, recent research in ability grouping has shown consistent results (Betts & Shkolnik, 2000; Slavin, 1990; Zimmer, 2003).

Zimmer (2003) further examined ability grouping with the data set from the Second International Mathematics Study (SIMS) from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). The study revealed that it was

pointless to advocate tracking when the results of educational achievement studies suggest that it decreases the peer effect for low- and average-ability groups and overall has an insignificant effect on the high ability group.

Betts and Shkolnik's (2000) study also found little or no differential effects on all groups of students. The study confirmed findings from recent previous literature that found no overall effect of formal grouping policies on student achievement. The study did find some evidence that grouping has differential effects across students of different ability groups, but after controlling for class ability level in the non-grouping school plans, the sizes of the effects were very small.

Perhaps Slavin's (1990) best evidence synthesis is one of the most well known studies on ability grouping. Six randomized experiments, nine matched experiments, and 14 correlational studies compared ability grouping to heterogeneous class plans over a time period of one semester to five years. Across the 29 studies, the effects of ability grouping on student achievement were essentially zero at all grade levels. Slavin (1990) found that 1) comprehensive between-class grouping plans have little or no effect on the achievement of secondary students, 2) different forms of ability grouping are equally ineffective, 3) ability grouping is equally ineffective in all subjects, except that there may be a negative effect of ability grouping in social studies, 4) assigning students to different levels of the same course has no consistent positive or negative effects on students of high, average, or low ability.

The findings of these studies are consistent with the well known work of Oakes (1985, 1992) on ability grouping and many other critics who are opposed to grouping policies in schools (Goodlad, 1984; Griffin, 1988). In her work on tracking, Oakes (1985,

2005) found that high-level students gain nothing from ability grouping. Other middle or lower level students suffered clear and consistent drawbacks from the marginalization from the upper level students, such as loss of self-esteem and ambition in academic achievement. She and fellow critics argue that ability grouping is ineffective, unnecessary and unfair, and that these policy decisions create segregated schools by socioeconomic or racial standards and also have significant long lasting effects on students' self-esteem and life goals and opportunities (Oakes, 1985; 1992).

### Educational Change and Disadvantaged Students

#### *A Learner Centered School Culture*

Clearly, literature shows that our current schools' culture is not meeting the needs of all students. If the current educational system is not appropriate for all students' needs, then how should our schools change?

While the current society is shifting from the industrial age into what many call the 'knowledge-based, information-age society' (Toffler, 1984; Reigeluth, 1994; Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton & Kleiner, 2000), which is an era in which knowledge work has replaced manual labor as the predominant paradigm of work, current schools were established to fit the needs of an industrial-age society. This factory-model, industrial-age school system has highly compartmentalized learning into subject areas, and students are expected to reach the same level of mastery in the same amount of time (Reigeluth, 1994). The current school system that strives for standardization is not designed to meet individual learner needs. It is rather designed to be a sorting focused paradigm of education, and students are forced to succeed or accumulate learning deficits and eventually drop out.

The changes in society as a whole reflect a need for education to focus on learning rather than sorting students (McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Reigeluth, 1997; Senge et al., 2000). A large amount of research has been conducted to advance our understanding of learning and how the educational system can be changed to better support it. There is solid research about brain-based learning, learner-centered instruction, and the psychological principles of learners that provide educators with a valuable framework of the information-age paradigm of education (Alexander & Murphy, 1993; Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999; Lambert & McCombs, 1998; McCombs & Whisler, 1997).

Perhaps one area of study that gives us some understanding of how people learn is the work on brain research, which describes how the brain functions. Caine and Caine (2005) provide a useful summary of work on how the brain functions in the process of learning through the 12 principles of brain-based learning. Brain-based learning begins when learners are encouraged to actively immerse themselves in their world and their learning experiences. In a school or classroom where brain-based learning is being practiced, the significance of diverse individual learning styles is taken for granted by teachers and administrators (Caine & Caine, 1997). In these classrooms and schools, learning is facilitated for each individual student's purposes and meaning, and the concept of learning is approached in a completely different way from the current classrooms that are set up for sorting and standardization. The 12 principles of brain-based learning are the following (Caine & Caine, 1990):

1. The brain is a complex adaptive system.
2. The brain is a social brain.

3. The search for meaning is innate.
4. The search for meaning occurs through patterning.
5. Emotions are critical to patterning.
6. Every brain simultaneously perceives and creates parts and wholes.
7. Learning involves both focused attention and peripheral attention.
8. Learning always involves conscious and unconscious processes.
9. We have at least two ways of organizing memory.
10. Learning is developmental.
11. Complex learning is enhanced by challenge and inhibited by threat.
12. Every brain is uniquely organized.

Another critical line of research was carried out by the National Research Council to synthesize knowledge about how people learn (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000). A two-year study was conducted to develop a synthesis of new approaches to instruction that “make it possible for the majority of individuals to develop a deep understanding of important subject matter” (p. 6). The analysis on a wide range of research in learning emphasizes the importance of customization and personalization in instruction for each individual learner, self-regulated learners taking more control of their own learning, and facilitating deep understanding of the subject matter. They describe the crucial need and characteristics of learning environments that are learner centered and learning-community centered.

With significant research showing that instruction should be learner-centered to meet all students’ needs, there have been several efforts to synthesize the knowledge on learner-centered instruction. First, the American Psychological Association conducted

wide-ranging research to identify learner-centered psychological principles based on educational research (American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Psychology in Education, 1993; Lambert & McCombs, 1998). The report presents 12 principles and provides the research evidence that supports each principle. It identifies four areas of psychological principles: 1) cognitive and metacognitive, 2) motivational affective, 3) developmental and social, and 4) individual difference factors that influence learners and learning (see Table 1).

Table 1

Learner-Centered Psychological Principles

APA learner-centered psychological principles	
Cognitive and Metacognitive Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nature of the learning process. The learning of complex subject matter is most effective when it is an intentional process of constructing meaning from information and experience.</li> <li>• Goals of the learning process. The successful learner, over time and with support and instructional guidance, can create meaningful, coherent representations of knowledge.</li> <li>• Construction of knowledge. The successful learner can link new information with existing knowledge in meaningful ways.</li> <li>• Strategic thinking. The successful learner can create and use a repertoire of thinking and reasoning strategies to achieve complex learning goals.</li> <li>• Thinking about thinking. Higher order strategies for selecting and monitoring mental operations facilitate creative and critical thinking.</li> <li>• Context of learning. Learning is influenced by environmental factors, including culture, technology, and instructional practices.</li> </ul>
Motivational and Affective Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivational and emotional influences on learning. What and how much is learned is influenced by the learner's motivation. Motivation to learn, in turn, is influenced by the individual's emotional states, beliefs, interests and goals, and habits of thinking.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intrinsic motivation to learn. The learner's creativity, higher order thinking, and natural curiosity all contribute to motivation to learn. Intrinsic motivation is stimulated by tasks of optimal novelty and difficulty, relevant to personal interests, and providing for personal choice and control.</li> <li>• Effects of motivation on effort. Acquisition of complex knowledge and skills requires extended learner effort and guided practice. Without learners' motivation to learn, the willingness to exert this effort is unlikely without coercion.</li> </ul>
Developmental and Social Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developmental influences on learning. As individuals develop, there are different opportunities and constraints for learning. Learning is most effective when differential development within and across physical, intellectual, emotional, and social domains is taken into account.</li> <li>• Social influences on learning. Learning is influenced by social interactions, interpersonal relations, and communication with others.</li> </ul>
Individual Differences Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual differences in learning. Learners have different strategies, approaches, and capabilities for learning that are a function of prior experience and heredity.</li> <li>• Learning and diversity. Learning is most effective when differences in learners' linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds are taken into account.</li> <li>• Standards and assessment. Setting appropriately high and challenging standards and assessing the learner as well as learning progress – including diagnostic, process, and outcome assessment – are integral parts of the learning process.</li> </ul>

*Note.* From American Psychological Association's Board of Educational Affairs, Center for Psychology in Schools and Education, 1997, *Learner-Centered Psychological Principles*, Retrieved December 26, 2007 from 2005 American Psychological Association website: <http://www.apa.org/ed/lcp2/lcp14.html>

McCombs and colleagues (Baker, 1973; Lambert & McCombs, 1998; McCombs & Whisler, 1997) also address these new needs and ideas for instruction in support of all students. They identify two important features of learner-centered instruction:

a focus on individual learners (their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs) [and] a focus on

learning (the best available knowledge about learning, how it occurs and what teaching practices are most effective in promoting the highest levels of motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners).

(McCombs & Whisler, 1997, p. 11).

This twofold focus of instruction informs and drives educational decision making processes. In learner-centered instruction, learners are included in these educational decision-making processes, the diverse perspectives of individuals are respected, and learners are treated as co-creators of the learning process (McCombs & Whisler, 1997).

Personalized Learning is also part of the learner-centered approach to instruction, dedicated to helping each child to engage in the learning process in the most productive and meaningful way to optimize each child's learning and success. Personalized Learning was cultivated in the 1970s by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and Learning Environments Consortium (LEC) International, and was adopted by the special education movement. It is based upon a solid foundation of the NASSP's educational research findings and reports as to how students learn most successfully (Keefe & Jenkins, 2002; Keefe, 2007), including a strong emphasis on parental involvement, more teacher and student interaction, attention to differences in personal learning styles, smaller class sizes, choices in personal goals and instructional methods, student ownership in setting goals and designing the learning process, and technology use (Clarke, 2003).

In addition, the recent movement in differentiated instruction is a response to the need for a learning-focused (as opposed to a sorting-focused) approach to instruction and education in schools as well. Differentiated instruction is an approach that enables

teachers to plan strategically to meet the needs of every student. It is deeply grounded in the principle that there is diversity within any group of learners and that teachers should adjust students' learning experiences accordingly (Tomlinson, 1999, 2001, 2003). This draws from the work of Vygotsky (1986), especially his "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), and from classroom researchers. Researchers found that with differentiated instruction students learned more and felt better about themselves and the subject area being studied (Tomlinson, 2001). Evidence further indicates that students are more successful and motivated in schools if they learn in ways that are responsive to their readiness levels (Vygotsky, 1986), personal interests, and learning profiles (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Sternberg, Torff & Grigorenko, 1998). The goal of differentiated instruction is to address these three characteristics for each student (Tomlinson, 2001, 2003).

Although new approaches to instruction and education have been increasingly advocated to meet the needs of all learners over the past decade (Alexander & Murphy, 1993; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Reigeluth, 1997; Senge et al., 2000; Tomlinson, 2001, 2003), transforming school culture and the school system is not an easy task to achieve. Isolated changes, typically at the school level, have been attempted over the past several decades, and their impact on the school system has been negligible. It has become clear that this is not a simple job for a single person or institution. Teachers, administrators, parents, policy makers, students and all stakeholder groups must work together, as they cannot change such a complex culture and system alone. In order to make a significant change in the school system happen, a critical systems approach to transformation in school systems, is indeed, essential. The educational systems' inadequacies clearly

cannot be solved through piecemeal change; systemic organizational change is needed in our schools (Ackoff, 1981; Banathy, 1992; Squire & Reigeluth, 2000; Duffy, 2002).

*Critical/Liberating Systems Approach to Educational Change*

Systemic educational change strives to transform the school system so that it will meet all learners' educational needs. It is concerned with the creation of a completely new system, rather than a mere retooling of a current system. It entails a paradigm shift as opposed to piecemeal change. Repeated calls for massive reform of current educational and training practices have consistently been published over the last several decades. This has resulted in an increasing recognition of the need for systemic change in education as numerous piecemeal approaches to education reform have been implemented and failed to significantly improve the state of education. Systemic change seeks to shift from a paradigm in which time is held constant, thereby forcing achievement to vary, to one designed specifically to meet the needs of information-age learners and their communities by allowing students as much time as each needs to reach proficiency.

Systemic educational change heavily draws from the work on critical systems theory (Watson, Watson & Reigeluth, 2008). Critical systems theory (CST) has its roots in systems theory that was established in the mid-twentieth century by a multi-disciplinary group of researchers who shared the view that science had become increasingly reductionist and the various disciplines isolated. Bertalanffy (1968) was among the first scholars establishing a general systems theory which noted the existence of principles and laws that could be generalized across systems.

While the term *system* has been defined in a variety of ways by different systems scholars, the central notion of systems theory is the importance of relationships among

elements comprising the whole. Ultimately, systems theory is an interdisciplinary theory with relevance in both the hard and soft sciences. Hard systems thinking is suitable for closed, engineered systems, while soft systems thinking is appropriate for dealing with the complexities of social systems (Checkland & Scholes, 1990). Nelson and Stolterman (2003) argue that there are no set types or categories of systems; instead the view of a system is a matter of perspective and value.

Critical systems theory draws heavily on the philosophy of Habermas (1973, 1984, 1987). The critical systems approach to social systems is of particular importance when considering systems wherein inequality of power exists in relation to opportunity, authority and control. In the 1980s, critical systems theory came to the forefront (Jackson, 1985; Ulrich, 1983), influencing systems theory into the 90s (Flood & Jackson, 1991; Jackson, 1991a, 1991b). Jackson (1991b) explains that CST embraces five key commitments:

- critical awareness of examining values entering into actual systems design
- social awareness of recognition in social pressures leading to popularization of certain systems theories and methodologies
- dedication to human emancipation for full development of all human potential
- informed use of systems methodologies
- informed development of all alternative positions and different theoretical systems approaches.

Flood (1990) also illustrates this social systems viewpoint in detail in his *Liberating Systems Theory* by firmly grounding systems theory with a critical point of view. The core of *Liberating Systems Theory* is that it seeks emancipation of humans in

systems that promote subjugation and dominance (Flood, 1990). Liberating Systems Theory uses a post-positivist approach to analyze social conditions in order to liberate the oppressed, while also seeking to liberate systems theory from tendencies such as self-imposed insularity, cases of internal localized subjugations in discourse, and liberation of system concepts from the inadequacies of objectivist and subjectivist approaches (Flood, 1990).

Banathy (1991) and Senge (1990) apply systems theory to the work of educational systems. Banathy (1991) suggests examining systems through three lenses: a “still picture lens” to appreciate the components comprising the system and their relationships, a “motion picture lens” to recognize the processes and dynamics of the system, and a “bird’s eye view lens” to be aware of the relationships between the system, its peer systems and suprasystems. Senge (1990) applies systems theory specifically to organizational learning, stating that the organization can learn to work as an interrelated, holistic learning community, rather than functioning as isolated departments.

#### *Current Status of Educational Systemic Change*

As a relatively new movement in school change, there are currently various systemic educational change efforts being implemented. Some examples of these efforts are based on the following work: Jenlink, Reigeluth, Carr, and Nelson’s (1996; 1998) *Guidance System for Transforming Education*, Duffy’s *Step-Up-To-Excellence* (2002), Schlechty’s (1997; 2002) guidelines for leadership in school reform, Hammer and Champy’s (1993; 2003) *Business Process Redesign/Reengineering*, and Ackoff’s (1981) *Idealized Systems Design*.

While, systemic educational change is a fairly new approach for educational

change, there already have been some stories of school districts making meaningful changes in schools based on the systemic change ideas. One of the best practices of systemic change is the change effort the Chugach School District (CSD) has carried out. The 200 students in CSD are scattered throughout 22,000 square miles of remote area in South-central Alaska. The district was in crisis twelve years ago due to low student reading ability, and the school district committed to a systemic change effort. Battino and Clem (2006) explain how the CSD's use of individual learning plans, student assessment binders, student learning profiles, and student life-skills portfolios support and document progress toward mastery in all standards for each learner. The students are given the flexibility to achieve levels at their own pace, not having to wait for the rest of the class or being pushed into learning beyond their developmental level. Graduation requirements exceed state requirements, as students are allowed extra time to achieve that level if necessary, but must meet the high rigor of graduation level. Student accomplishment in academic performance increased dramatically as a result of these systemic changes (Battino & Clem, 2006).

Caine (2006) also found strong positive changes through systemic educational change in their extensive engagement on a project called "Learning to Learn" in Adelaide, South Australia, an initiative of the South Australian Government that covered a network of over 170 educational sites. From preschool to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, brain-based, learner-centered learning environments are combined with a larger set of systemic changes, leading to both better student achievement and significant changes in the culture and operation of the system itself.

While these schools have been successful partially because of the smaller scale of

the districts and schools when compared to others, the vision and process of school transformation that critical-systemic change efforts provide appear to be promising. *Need for Active Agency of Disadvantaged Students in Systemic Educational Change*

Despite the potential for successes and even with systemic change processes taking account of disadvantaged students' position in the transformation in a much more inclusive way than other school reforms, systemic change processes have not involved disadvantaged student bodies and communities as active agents in the change processes. In the current systemic educational change literature that has been reviewed above, change models and change efforts are not making conscious and specific attempts to address or tackle the fundamental problems these disadvantaged and marginalized communities face in school districts that constrain them from becoming active agents of the change process and therefore becoming active beneficiaries of the change.

As in most school activities and change efforts, disadvantaged and marginalized student populations are isolated from the mainstream populations, and the social inequalities these student populations face are hidden behind what Ross (2002, 2003) calls "seductive words" such as community. Naturally their voices are not as well represented in systemic change efforts as critical systems theory and systemic educational change theories (Flood & Jackson, 1991; Jackson, 1991a; 1991b) and change guidelines (Jenlink et al., 1996; 1998; Banathy, 1991) call for.

#### Research Questions

This project attempts to conduct research that provides recommendations for systemic change efforts in school districts that 1) should help disadvantaged and marginalized learning communities to become active agents of educational change processes, and 2)

should offer support to ultimately provide better learning environments for disadvantaged and marginalized learning communities and student bodies.

There are three sets of research questions for this study:

- 1) What is the alternative school's culture of learning like?
- 2) Is there a relation between the alternative school and the change effort? Are members of the alternative school involved in the change effort in any way?
- 3) What kinds of support and policy changes are needed in systemic educational change efforts in order to ensure active participation of disadvantaged and marginalized alternative school members?

### Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the literature on disadvantaged students and systemic educational change efforts. The vast majority of the systemic change literature does not provide exceptional attention to the marginalized, disadvantaged student population, failing to provide enough insight into what kind of support is needed for improvement for these students. For this reason, the research questions listed above are set forward for exploration.

## CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

This chapter presents and justifies the methodology I have chosen for this study. In order to best answer and explore the research questions stated above, for this study, I selected Carspecken's (1996) critical ethnographic methodology. Critical ethnography not only details my orientations and values for educational research most accurately, but it also best provides guidelines for the process of engaging in data collection, analysis and validation for inquiry in educational change that concerns disadvantaged and marginalized student populations.

In this chapter, I first examine the philosophical foundations of critical educational research by describing critical epistemology and its foundation for and links to critical inquiry. I then explain the research design, research site, and data collection and analysis process of critical ethnography as adapted from Carspecken (1996). I also discuss the limitations of the study and validation methods employed in this study.

### Philosophical Foundations of Critical Inquiry

#### *Critical Epistemology and Critical Inquiry*

Critical ethnography, or critical qualitative research, is distinguished by its epistemology. Epistemology is the "...branch of philosophy concerned with the theory of knowledge" (Carspecken, 1996, p. 9). Critical epistemology draws from the work of pragmatist scholars such as Dewey, James, Peirce, and Mead (Carspecken, 1996), but is also linked to the work of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. Frankfurt School critical theorists such as Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, who initiated conversation with the German

philosophical thought of Marx, Kant, Hegel, and Weber (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003), began their work just before World War II in Germany's Institute for Social Research.

Critical theory was naturally influenced by World War I, post-war Germany, and economic depression and industrialization due to war and was developed to direct work towards positive social change. Critical theory continues to impact emancipatory social research and influence numerous disciplines today. Critical epistemology guides critical inquiry. Critical inquiry is, "...qualitative inquiry concerned with social inequality, directed toward social change" (Carspecken, 1996, p. 3).

Critical methodological theory is one that is well fit for studying subtle forms of oppression and cultural power because it incorporates reflection into itself so that the concept of "critique" becomes comprehensible in a rigorous way. It is a methodological theory that makes sense of the fact that we can produce knowledge of the human subject that acknowledges the freedom of a subject to become aware of and criticize the cultural forms within which she acts and lives. Many critical researchers "...find contemporary society to be unfair, unequal, and both subtly and overtly oppressive for many people. We do not like it, and we want to change it" (Carspecken, 1996, p. 7). The value orientations and beliefs of critical inquiry are as follows (Carspecken, 1996; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003):

- Research is a form of cultural and social criticism.
- Certain groups in society are privileged over others.
- The oppression which characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural or inevitable.
- Oppression has many faces.

- Mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly part of the oppression.

### *Validity Claims and Three Ontological Realms*

The use of Habermas's notion of validity claims is crucial in critical inquiry.

Carspecken's (1996) critical ethnography draws heavily from Habermas's work on validity. Validity claims are "equivalent to the assertion that the conditions for the validity of an utterance are fulfilled" (Habermas, 1984, p. 38). Habermas (1984, 1987) separates these validity claims into three formal ontological categories. He argues that every single speech act in our daily communication fits into the three ontological categories: objective, subjective, and normative. Table 2 provides a summary of these three validity claims and three worlds (Habermas, 1984, 1987; Carspecken, 1996, 1999). If we can acquire understanding of the meaning and role of validity claims in everyday normal human communications, then "we will be able to formulate the special requirements that a social researcher conducting formal inquiries into social processes must employ to produce a trustworthy account" (Carspecken, 1996, p. 58). In this study about a disadvantaged and marginalized alternative school, I used Carspecken's (1996) critical ethnographic methods which build on and were adapted from Habermas' (1984, 1987) notion of validity claims to explore the meaning behind participants' behaviors and statements about learning and school experiences.

Table 2

Three Validity Claims and Worlds

<b>Validity Claim</b>	<b>Type of Access</b>	<b>World</b>
OBJECTIVE	Multiple access to a world of objects and events through the senses.	The world
SUBJECTIVE	Privileged access to a world of intentions, feelings and states of awareness.	My world, Your world, Her / His World
NORMATIVE	Shared access to a world of culturally constituted norms and implicit beliefs.	Our world

*Values in Critical Ethnography*

The researcher is the primary medium of ethnographic research, and research decisions, analysis and interpretations are constantly sorted out through her value perspectives and subjectivity. As with any methodology, the ideological nature, identity, and viewpoints of the researcher influence what she sees and how she sees it (Peshkin, 1985; 1988; 2000).

This research study applies critical inquiry, because it attempts to reveal and diminish inequalities within K-12 education. I begin this study with a strong value orientation. I believe that knowledge and schooling is mediated by power relations that are socially constructed, and that the negative educational experiences in schools that disadvantaged students have are rooted in the oppression in larger society. I believe that academic

failure and student marginalization should be analyzed through an examination of policies and practices for educational change. I also believe that research can be and should be used as a form of societal and cultural analysis and criticism.

In critical ethnographic research, meaning is understood through the hermeneutic circle. In understanding meaning, the subjective orientation of a person is primarily a framework that the person assumes to be shared between herself and those she tries to understand. The hermeneutic circle then comes into play and even in daily life initial forestructures are constantly changed through the circle. This results in a change of the holistic structures used by the interpreter such that both past and future interpretations change. A researcher uses the hermeneutic circle consciously and tries to understand meanings in ways that participants themselves understand them. The researcher consciously aims to “position-take as her participants do” and this greatly reduces the effects of bias (Carspecken, 1996).

Being consciously reflective of my value orientations, I engaged in research in the field by trying to understand people as they understand themselves and each other. I consciously used the hermeneutic circle to attain as much of an insider’s position as I was able to attain. This was facilitated by peer debriefing and member checking where interpretations are presented to peers and also the participants of the study themselves to get feedback. These interpretative frameworks correspond to typifications and generalized other positions within a culture. I detail further methods I used to approach that goal in the following sections.

## Research Method

### *Research Design*

The research design of this study is rooted in critical ethnographic methods. In critical ethnographic methodology, the lifeworld, which represents the norms, values, and attitudes of the cultures shared by the participants, is what a researcher is trying to understand. The researcher tries to understand the language, behaviors, norms, values, culture, and ideologies in which the world participants live. Then the researcher engages in a systems analysis which examines the extra-cultural conditions that help us to understand why we have found the cultural (“lifeworld”) components and structures in our interpretation. Systems analysis would include exploring the economic and physical-environmental conditions as well as legal conditions within which people construct and reconstruct their cultures. This can reveal various relations between cultural, economic, political and other conditions that are not as visible to people themselves from within their lifeworlds (Carspecken, 1996).

In critical ethnography, a researcher can elucidate an understanding of, and shed light on the nature of culture and human agency at a more comprehensive and complete level. Carspecken (1996) stresses that critical ethnography uses research to “refine social theory rather than to merely describe social life” (p.3). Critical inquiry is “... qualitative inquiry concerned with social inequality, directed toward social change” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 3). In this study, critical ethnographic research methodology was used in order to explore an alternative school’s role in a district educational change effort and to explore policy changes that are suggested for improving school culture for more active participation of disadvantaged and marginalized students.

## Research Site Description.

### *Metropolitan School District of Sunnydale Township*

The study was conducted in Sunnydale (a fictitious name, as are all the names used here), a small suburb of a large Midwestern city. I have been involved in the MSD Sunnydale's educational change effort for over 4 years as a change-effort support member and have been working closely with the Sunnydale Enrichment Institute (SEI) for about a year as a volunteer Webquest developer and Media Center developer (See Prolonged Engagement in the Field section for detailed information). The research questions of this study were inspired from the work of this change effort and school. I engaged in research at the SEI alternative school in the Metropolitan School District (MSD) of Sunnydale Township.

MSD Sunnydale is one of the 11 public school districts in a Midwestern City. MSD Sunnydale serves roughly 5,600 students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2007), Sunnydale's percentage of students receiving free/reduced lunches and textbooks for the 2003-2004 school year was about 42 percent, eclipsing the state average. Sunnydale Township is now well into evolving from a heavy concentration of farming and somewhat rural characteristics to being more of a service and commercial-based locale. The population has been increasing, and with ongoing new residential construction, the low-income, disadvantaged student population has been increasing significantly. The school district has been working on a construction / renovation project to meet the needs of the incoming population.

### *Path to Success*

In order to address the need for change, the school district had initiated several change projects. The overarching change initiative for all these projects was the systemic

educational change effort, Path to Success. Sunnydale Township was collaborating with facilitators at Midwest University to work on a district-wide systemic transformation effort. A professor at Midwest University agreed to serve as facilitator for the transformation effort along with a team of graduate students, after being expressly invited by leaders of all the major stakeholder groups in the school district. The facilitators and school district have followed the guidelines suggested by the Guidance System for Transforming Education (GSTE) (Jenlink et al., 1998). The Path to Success's ultimate goal is to transform the schools through a district-wide ecological systemic transformation (Squire & Reigeluth, 2000) to better meet each student's individual needs and help every student reach his or her potential.

#### *Sunnydale Enrichment Institute*

Another effort to address the need for change for this incoming disadvantaged population was the creation of this specific alternative school, the site I engaged in research with, the Sunnydale Enrichment Institute (SEI). Founded only about five years ago, SEI is a physically isolated alternative school that in principle is a part of the Sunnydale Central High School. While this alternative school was originally established for students who preferred flexible learning environments and project based learning with technology, SEI had come to only serves disadvantaged and at-risk students that were expelled from the high school over the years. SEI does not share school grounds with the high school; it is located one mile further south, across the street.

In regards to the facility, SEI is a one-classroom schoolhouse. It shares a building with the school district's charter school, Sunnydale Innovation Academy and a Community College. It has one large room that is divided into two small offices for the

teachers, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a large classroom. The large classroom is divided up into a media center, a location for seminars that is mostly just desks and chairs both for individual and group work. The classroom walls were covered with various kinds of artwork that the students had created; including positive themed graffiti which covers one entire wall. Typically, the Institute was pretty loud with both students and teachers being very active.

SEI serves around 70 students total, and has two full time staff that included one principal and one teacher. The two instructional aides and one counselor were part-time staff. The principal, instructional aides and counselor all regularly took the role of teachers, helping students with their daily schoolwork. Students mostly worked on “projects” or “packets” out of the five learning choices they had as daily schoolwork. The students were able to choose among 1) learning packets, 2) PowerPoint projects, 3) posters, 4) movies and 5) Plato [computer based learning software] to engage in their studies.

#### *Participants and Participant Selection*

Participants included all five school staff working in the SEI, the principal, teacher, secretary, counselor and part time staff (see Table 3). One district administrator that had been working closely with the SEI was also included in the study. The participants’ selection for the students was the most difficult. I was looking to explore the alternative school’s culture and it’s agency in the district’s school change effort, so it was important to find and engage with diverse student participants. I interviewed students who had a large influence on the school culture of the SEI, both negative and positive, and especially the students that have interest in their empowerment as a student in Sunnydale

Township. Those who were not interested in actively empowering themselves were also interviewed as their opinions were also valuable sources to understanding culture and empowerment issues. During the participant selection process, I tried to include as many students as possible who showed interest in participating, but also put special effort into encouraging students who didn't appear to be interested in participating or learning about the Path to Success. Data were collected and analyzed from multiple sources, including researcher observations, field notes, focus-group interviews, and individual interviews from the research site. The process of data collection and analysis were based on the work of Habermas's and Carspecken's approach for critical ethnography described earlier in this document.

Table 3

Study Participants (SEI Students, Staff and District Administrator)

	Pseudonym	Role in SEI	Years in School	Year in SEI
Students	Jenny	Student	High School Junior	1 year
	Samira	Student	High School Senior	3 years
	Rick	Student	High School Senior	3 years
	Kyle	Student	High School Sophomore	1 year
	Eric	Student	High School Senior	2 years
	Ayesha	Student	High School Senior	Half year
	Pat	Student	High School Junior	Half year
	Brittany	Student	High School Senior	Half year
	Kristy	Student	High School Junior	2 years
	Sean	Student	High School Senior	Half year
Staff	Bob	Principal and teacher	25 years of teaching and administration	4 years
	Lisa	Full time teacher	6 years of teaching	3 years
	Susan	Part time support staff (Instructional	Currently Delta airlines full time employee,	3 years

		aide)	4 years in MSD of Sunnydale Township as instructional aide	
	Ken	Part time support staff (Instructional aide)	8 years in MSD of Sunnydale Township as instructional aide	1 year
	Alicia	Part time support staff (Counselor)	25 years of teaching as teacher, building principal and counselor	4 years
District Administrator	Greg	District Administrator (Director of Special Projects)	30 years of teaching and administration	17 years in MSD of Sunnydale Township

#### Data Collection

I collected data from January to May of 2008. Using a critical ethnographic framework (Carspecken, 1996), I collected the following forms of data: individual interviews, focus-group interviews, and observations.

#### *Prolonged Engagement in the Field*

As I have mentioned earlier, Sunnydale's district-wide systemic change effort, Path to Success, has been partnered with Midwest University's School of Education Support Team that helps facilitate the change process. I have worked as a Midwest University support team member of Path to Success for around four years, so I have been working with Sunnydale Township for quite some time. As a support team member, I have designed and facilitated numerous professional workshops for teachers and staff, videotaped many meetings and events, and offered my thoughts and ideas for better facilitating the change process. During this time, I have established relationships with school district administrators, principals, and teachers, and have knowledge of and

experience with the change process as a participant. As for engagement in the SEI, I had been in the field for a period of 7 months, working as a volunteer instructional consultant and web quest designer. During this time, I visited the SEI once every two weeks or so and exchanged emails frequently. I worked with the principal and a teacher on building a Webquest on tolerance and diversity, exploring hate crime issues in history. I also interviewed some students on their experience of using Plato Learning Systems instructional software during classes. During those times, I worked to build relationships and gain trust with the participants through informal meetings and discussions unrelated to this research project.

For a five month period, January to May of 2008, I visited the school once or twice a week, specifically for this study's data collection. My visits lasted about two or three hours. During the visits, I engaged in classroom observations, and conducted multiple interviews and focus-group sessions with participants. I also acted as a media center developer, providing support for acquiring funding and discussing ideas to create a media center for the school. The following forms of data were collected: individual interviews, focus-group interviews, and observations. I used a critical ethnographic framework (Carspecken, 1996) in the data collection process.

#### *Individual Interviews and Focus Groups*

During the interview process, I talked to ten students, five teachers and one district administrator. I talked to ten students for thirty minutes, two or three times each. I interviewed five teachers for one hour, two or three times each. I interviewed one district administrator one time for two hours. The administrator interview was a one-session individual interview, but the students' and teachers' interviews included both focus-group

interviews and individual interviews. It was the choice of the participants whether they wanted to engage in an individual interview, focus-group interview, or both types of interviews. When the participants chose to engage in interviews, they were given control of deciding how long to meet, as well as what topics they would like to discuss that day among the broad topics that I had shared and initiated earlier. (Please see appendix for interview questions). I also interviewed some participants as individuals to follow up on themes that emerged in the focus-group sessions. All interviews were audio recorded with the participants' permission, and the audio recordings totaled approximately 25 to 30 hours in length.

#### *Documents for Interpretation*

Before and during the individual interviews and focus group interviews with SEI staff and school district administrators, I made an effort to get support in compiling documents for analysis in order to better understand the systems level school culture, management and facility operation and any other areas of interest related to the SEI. The primary documents that were to be collected and used for analysis were the early foundation and proposal documents of the SEI, which included the objectives and goals of the school. However, during the data collection process, I found that there were no formal documents or proposals prepared for the SEI. The district, therefore, was not able to provide any SEI documents.

#### *Observations and Field Notes*

I also observed the students and teachers during regular class hours, lunch hours, and breaks. During the observations, I did not audio tape in order to be less intrusive, but I did take notes of the observation sessions. I used the observations to better understand the

culture of the alternative school and the relationships among the participants. For observational notes, I usually sat at a corner of the classroom in order to understand the holistic picture of the classroom. I often studied the interactions between the students and staff and took detailed notes and drew diagrams of the relations and interactions among the participants. I used the notes to specifically verify and further understand the comments the participants had made during their individual or focus group interviews. I took field notes most extensively during observation sessions, but I took notes during other sessions as well. During all observations, individual interviews, and focus-group sessions, I took field notes, writing down thoughts, questions, and ideas that arose from the observation or discourse.

#### *Researcher Role in the Data Collection Process*

Since this study was grounded in critical ethnographic methods (Carspecken, 1996), my role as an active supporter and advocate for the participants in the SEI did not oppose or interfere with my research methods. I was an active facilitator of the discussions that I initiated and encouraged the participants to ask themselves and each other challenging questions about their culture of learning in an alternative school and in an isolated community within a school district as well. I believe that the discussions we had ultimately served to empower them to become active agents in the ongoing educational change effort in Sunnydale Township.

#### Data Analysis

After the interview sessions, I transcribed the audio recordings. As mentioned before, the audio tapes totaled approximately 25 to 30 hours in length. The main tool for data

analysis was coding analysis, with concepts such as meaning field analysis, reconstructive horizon analysis and systems analysis (Carspecken, 1996).

### *Initial Meaning Reconstruction and Meaning Field Analysis*

The basic process of human understanding is hermeneutic and interpretive, and a circular process is involved; movement from the tacit toward the explicit and then back to the holistic (Carspecken, 1996). One of the most important concepts that I applied to the analysis of the data was meaning field analysis. A meaning field is not only a tool of the researcher to interpret meaning, but a substantive feature of all communication. A meaning field is the range of possible meanings or interpretations for an act or speech act. Meaning fields allow for everyday life interpretations of meaning to become more explicit. When people communicate, they often understand each other's intended meanings within a field of possible meanings having some ambiguity, rather than as a single explicit and definite meaning. A researcher must be very aware of this principle of ambiguity in interpreting meaning such that all meaningful acts are understood to carry fields of possible meanings rather than a single meaning. The researcher thinks in terms of the meaning fields that could be grasped by all the participants involved in an interaction. Thinking in terms of meaning fields informs the coding process and other data-analytic processes used by the researcher (Carspecken, 1996).

After reading through the primary record and beginning the coding process, I selected several segments for explicit, initial meaning construction. The meaning fields allowed me to explore and consider the range of possible interpretations, which makes tacit meaning more tangible (Carspecken, 1996). The reconstructed meanings can use statements such as *or*, *and*, *or/and* to indicate the ambiguities of meaning. The use of

meaning field analysis makes preliminary impressions of meaning from observations become more explicit and also provides foundation for reconstructive horizon analysis. Meaning fields also allow the researcher to fully comprehend the act or speech act, exploring deeper into the tacit meaning before coding the data.

### *Reconstructive Horizon Analysis*

Pragmatic horizon analysis is a kind of meaning reconstruction that brings new levels of precision. Building on Habermas's (1987) validity claims, Carspecken (1996) developed the concept of reconstructive pragmatic horizon analysis to understand and elucidate the objective, subjective, normative-evaluative, and identity claims of communicative acts. Reconstructive horizon analysis of the data provides in-depth insight into the coding. This is an analysis of speech acts and actions that is both horizontal and vertical analysis; horizontal analysis, with the objective, subjective, and normative claims, and vertical analysis, with the foregrounded and backgrounded claims (Carspecken, 1996). As presented earlier, Habermas (1987) discusses the three worlds or validity claims (the objective world, the social world, and the subjective world) and argues that communicative action relies on a cooperative process of interpretation of all three worlds simultaneously and that all three worlds are situated in each speech act, even when it thematically stresses only one of the three components. By gaining further understanding of the data through both horizontal and vertical analysis, the reconstructive horizon analysis technique enables the researcher to understand acts and claims clearly, making them explicit and allowing the multiple layers of meaning that are both subtle and overt, to be fully considered. Ultimately, validity horizons helped to find cultural themes that

actors are drawing upon and reproducing at various levels of backgrounding and foregrounding.

Based on my research questions on the culture of a disadvantaged alternative school in an educational change process, I was especially interested in normative claims or identity claims. Carspecken (1996) developed the concept of identity claim that is consistent with Habermas's theory of communication action, but is of particular importance as it reaches into the existential needs of persons. Every act has relevance to the existence of a person, and people are motivated to maintain valid identities and have routine ways to keep up a sense of themselves to themselves. It is a fundamentally important and yet distinct concept that must be distinguished from all three (subjective, objective and normative) claims of a meaningful act.

The identity claim carries a mix of normative and subjective components: the subjective components refer to generalized subjective capacities, and the normative components refer to evaluations of the kind of person. The result of the analysis of the identity claim is an "I – me" configuration. The 'I' part of this arrangement refers to how self-aware, responsible, or accountable the person is, and the 'me' part refers to the 'kind' of person that one claims oneself to be (me) which involves a set of possible 'kinds' of persons (Carspecken, 1996).

#### *High Level and Low Level Coding*

Using the concepts and depth of understanding and interpretation obtained from the meaning fields and reconstructive horizon analysis, I coded the data, using both low level coding and high level coding. Low level codes are those that "fall close to the primary record and require little abstraction," (Carspecken, 1996, p. 147). High level codes "are

dependent on greater amounts of abstraction” and should be used with other forms of analysis and horizon analysis (Carspecken, 1996, p. 148). High level coding took place after developing low-level codes and intensive analysis to generalize findings that emerge from various forms of data, particularly meaning and validity reconstruction, horizon analysis and the analysis of interactive power. It was also important to consider how the lifeworld or microlevel data related to the system or macro-level themes.

### *Systems Relations and Systems Analysis*

While there are criticisms of general qualitative research that it is micro-level, low-generalizability research, Carspecken (1996) argues that the analysis of systems relations is both morally and epistemologically important to aim for and absolutely crucial in order to gain a full understanding of qualitative research findings.

It is important to note that there is a distinct difference between lifeworld and system. Lifeworld is related to action orientations such as values, norms, beliefs and identity claims. It tells us why people act as they do in the ways they would explain it if they were fully aware of all the implicit implications of their meanings. On the other hand, systems analysis concentrates on the relation between action consequences and action conditions. Action consequences include all those that an actor is aware of, those the actor is not aware of, those the actor intends and those the actor does not intend.

The researcher engages in systems analysis, which examines the extra-cultural conditions that help us to understand the lifeworld components and structures. It often involves the relation between conditions that impact action externally. The economic and physical-environmental conditions as well as legal conditions within cultures and the interpretative schemes actors have in relation to such conditions are explored. This often

reveals various relations between cultural, economic, political and other conditions (Carspecken, 1996).

Systems analysis was used in this study to discover particular system relations by examining several related sites and is concerned with comprehensive action consequences. This helped to understand the macro level social theories and cultures in all social sites and all group cultures by comparing data to other cultural themes found in earlier forms and phases of analysis (Carspecken, 1996). Systems analysis was applied after reconstructive analysis because reconstructive analysis provides validity for the systems analysis (Carspecken, 1996).

#### Limitations

The limitations of the methodology used in this study are the low generalizability and potential researcher bias.

##### *Low Generalizability*

As many qualitative research projects and findings are critiqued, the most obvious limitation of this study is that it is not easily generalizable to larger populations because of limited sample sizes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). While implications and recommendations might be drawn from this study that could inform and benefit other district-wide systemic educational change efforts, this study presents no evidence for generalizability to all disadvantaged, marginalized students or all school change processes. Keeping this limitation in mind, I was cautious in how I presented the data findings in the later chapters.

##### *Researcher Bias*

The other potential limitation of this study is researcher bias. While, this study is grounded in critical ethnographic methods (Carspecken, 1996) and my intended role as an active supporter and advocate for the participants did not oppose or interfere with my research methods, I engaged in continuous self-reflection to address my own value orientations as a researcher in order to recognize concerns of possible researcher bias.

### Validation Methods

As suggested from the critical ethnographic methods of Carspecken (1996), I employed the following methods for validation: an examination of researcher value orientations and continued self analysis; member checking; peer debriefing; strip analysis; negative case analysis; and finally prolonged engagement in the field.

#### *Examination of Researcher Value Orientations and Continued Self Analysis*

As I have discussed earlier, self reflection and self analysis are very important to a critical ethnographic researcher. Before and during my engagement in the study, I made a great deal of effort to examine my own research biases and reflect on my value orientations initiating this project. Many sociologists call this validation method “reflexivity” (Callaway, 1992; Hertz, 1983, Gergen & Gergen, 2003). This self reflective analysis process helped me to become more aware of my own biases and value orientations in light of the study. I needed to consider my own investment in the research, my value orientations and what I expected to come out from this project, both in terms of research findings and the effects of this project in the alternative school. Throughout my engagement in the field, I reflected on my value orientations by critically reflecting on my thinking, relationships and encounters with the participants.

#### *Member Checks*

Another validation method that Carspecken (1996) recommends for equalizing power relations was member checking. I used member checks throughout the data collection and analysis process. I shared the transcripts with the participants to ensure that their opinions and ideas were represented accurately. If participants asked me to change, correct, or remove what they had said, I followed their requests. It is my hope that I included the participants' voices, thoughts and intentions as much as possible in the analysis of the study.

#### *Peer Debriefing*

I also used peer debriefers to check my biases, misinterpretations, and absences of interpretation in my data analysis. I asked two peer debriefers to look at my data on meaning field analysis, reconstructive analysis, coding, and systems analysis. I asked them to go through a similar data analysis process to see if they came up with interpretations similar to my conclusions. One of them was a University support team member for the Path to Success, who was knowledgeable of the theory and work involved in this systemic educational change effort, to serve as a peer debriefer.

#### *Strip Analysis*

I also used what Agar (1986) and Carspecken (1996) refer to as "strip analysis" for validity requirements. Once I had a number of broadly employed cultural themes reconstructed, I then took strips of the primary record and checked them to see whether they were consistent with the reconstructed themes, codes, or systems.

#### *Negative Case Analysis*

Carspecken (1996) also calls for “negative case analysis” where I found cases or cultural themes that did not seem consistent with the larger analysis, in which case I tried to come up with an explanation for the lack of fit.

#### *Prolonged Engagement in the Field*

Finally, I employed the method of prolonged engagement in the field for another validation method. I have worked to build strong relationships and gain trust with the participants through informal meetings and discussions unrelated to this research.

#### Conclusion

This chapter has described the critical ethnographic research methodology that was used in this study to explore a disadvantaged and marginalized alternative school’s place and role in a district wide educational change process. It has also justified the use of this methodology and described the steps and validation methods employed to improve the rigor and validity of the study. The following chapters present results of the data analysis and initial recommendations for disadvantaged and marginalized students in a district wide educational change process.

## CHAPTER 4. RESULTS & FINDINGS

### Introduction

Sunnydale Enrichment Institute (SEI) is a one-classroom schoolhouse. It shares a building with the school district's charter school, Sunnydale Innovation Academy, and a community college, Community Tech. It has one large room that is divided into two small offices for the teachers, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a large classroom (see Figure 1). The large classroom is divided up into a media center and a location for seminars that is mostly just desks and chairs both for individual and group work. The classroom's walls were decorated with various kinds of artwork that the students had created. One of them was a large section of graffiti that the students had worked on collaboratively with the help of a professional artist, who happened to be a friend of Lisa (full-time SEI teacher).

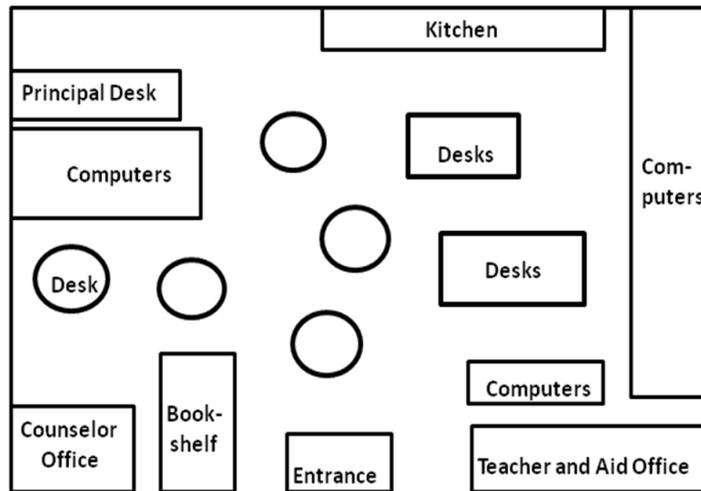


Figure 1. Diagram of Sunnydale Enrichment Institute

The classroom of the Enrichment Institute seemed like it could hold 50 students at once, but there were usually only about 15 to 20 students in the classroom. Typically, the Institute was pretty noisy and active. Some of the students were walking around getting food, some were talking to teachers or friends, some were diligently working on their

studies, and some were sitting around in the teachers' office. The office and the classroom were not separated but had a half wall with a large glass window in between.

There were around 70 students and 5 staff in the SEI. Staff included two full-time and three part-time staff members in the classroom. The two full time staff included one principal and one teacher. The two instructional aides and one counselor were part time staff. The principal, teacher and instructional aides all took the role of teachers, helping students with their daily schoolwork. The counselor came in a couple of times a week to talk to the students who were having difficulties with school or their personal lives.

As noted earlier, the SEI was always quite noisy with students and teachers being very active in whatever activities they were engaged in. The students would come in at any time during the day that they had promised, either morning or afternoon. Girls would often bring their children. Throughout the whole day, the SEI would have various activities going on. Some students would be walking around to get food or drinks from the kitchen, they would often cook for their peers and teachers, a handful of students would be talking to the teachers or a group of friends about all sorts of different topics, others would be quietly working on their own, and some students would be surfing the web or listening to music on the computer.

Teachers mentioned that usually the level of learning of the students would not be as high as the traditional school when the students started in the SEI; however through the years at SEI, the students would rapidly progress. And by their senior year, many of them would be taking the GQE (Graduation Qualifying Exam) without problems. In reality, many of the students who had given up on their hopes to finish high school had clearly developed intrinsic motivation in their education and post-graduation aspirations

for higher education in their interest area, such as nursing or music.

Students mostly worked on “projects” or “packets” out of the five learning choices they had as daily schoolwork. The students were able to choose among learning packets, PowerPoint projects, posters, movies and Plato [computer based learning software] to engage in their studies. Students who were working on packets usually were studying math or English, whereas others who were studying science or social studies would be more likely to be engaged in PowerPoint, posters or movie projects. While most students worked individually, they would naturally form a group and support each other through various forms of peer-tutoring.

My previous work with the alternative school was with developing web-based curriculum for tolerance and diversity issues. During my fieldwork for this specific study, I worked as a media center developer for the school, and my relationship with the students and teachers grew to be more intimate. We would engage in long and in-depth conversations about school, movies, books and all sorts of different life experiences.

In this chapter, I present the findings that emerged from the data analysis of these conversations with the participants and my observations in the classroom. I organized the results into categories, themes, and sub-themes, describing the impact that different experiences had on school staff, students, and their school experiences and lives. I separated the findings into four categories of experience that emerged from the data: a) students navigating through life and school, b) teachers’ lives and efforts at the alternative school, c) non-involvement of the alternative school members in the district change effort, and finally d) negotiating with feelings of isolation, resistance and

yearning for respect in the school district. Themes and sub-themes are presented within each of these four categories.

### Categories, Themes and Sub-Themes

Four categories of themes and sub-themes emerged from the data analysis, revealing the relation between the alternative school and the district change effort. As I analyzed the data, I paid attention to these emergent categories, themes and sub-themes. Categories are mainly the topics of the guiding questions. The themes are the larger, major topics that emerged frequently during the analysis of the data. The sub-themes were secondary, as they were less often reported than the themes, but still illuminate some themes that clearly emerged from the data. Below, in Table 4, I detail each theme and sub-theme.

Table 4

### Categories, Themes and Sub-themes

Question	Category	Theme	Sub-theme
Research Question 1: What is the alternative school's culture of learning like?	Category 1. Students navigating through life and school	We need choice and control	Five learning choices
			Working at your own pace
		We need a relaxed atmosphere	The trouble-maker
			The need to communicate and talk while working
			What about the girls?
		We need relationships and heroes	Relationships in traditional schools aren't good
			Close relationships with friends and teachers
			Feeling of being cared for
		Life is bigger than school	Need to work for the family.
			More important goals/things to do with life than school

	Category 2. Teachers' lives and efforts at the alternative school	Self identity and teaching values	The underdog/bleeding heart.
			Service is what motivates me
		Somebody's gotta fight for them	The need to fight for these students
			Efforts of the teachers
		School and the real world are different	Why do we need to learn this?
			Shock of getting into the real world from school
			The "real" problems: urgent things that need to be taken care of in life
			Too much emphasis on credits and tests
		I would never go back	It's much more creative
			Curriculum and relationships are natural
Relevant to real life			
Research Question 2: Is there a relation between the alternative school and the change effort? Are members of the alternative school involved in the change effort in any way?	Category 3. Non-involvement of the alternative school members in the district change effort	No parent & student involvement	No parent Involvement
			No student Involvement
			SEI student's thoughts on the district and high school change
		Limited teacher and staff involvement	Some knowledge
			Very little knowledge
			No knowledge
		Relations between the Path to Success & SEI	Still, we believe that we are a part of it.
			We live the mission
		Still looking for hope to be included in Path to Success	I'd like to participate and represent our community
			We can help schools to work better with students like us
Research Question 3:	Category 4. Negotiating	Feelings of isolation	Missing out on the life of a normal high school student.

What kinds of support and policy changes are needed in systemic educational change efforts in order to ensure active participation of disadvantaged and marginalized alternative school members?	with feelings of isolation, resistance and yearning for respect	Feelings of isolation	Missing out on the life of a normal high school student.
			Feeling of being labeled and pushed aside.
			Teachers and staff feeling alienated
		Resistance to authority	Students' resistance to authority
			Teachers' resistance to authority
		Yearning for, resources, communication and respect from the school district	Yearning for resources
Yearning for communication with and respect from colleagues.			

As described in Chapter 3, I used validation methods to ensure that my analysis was trustworthy after analyzing the data. I used peer debriefing (having two colleagues analyze the data on their own and compare their analyses to mine), member checking (as I showed my analysis to the participants for feedback in order to verify my analysis), strip analysis (reanalyzing chunks of data to verify that they matched my previous conclusions), and finally negative case analysis (I reflected on data that disagreed with my primary conclusions).

While engaging in this data analysis and validation process, I examined the in-depth meanings of the categories, themes, and sub-themes that emerged from the data. What follows is a description of the details and stories in the data that emerged during the process of analysis and validation. In the following section, I further explain the detailed and personalized stories within the categories, themes, and sub-themes, which emerged

through the analysis of the data. The following section describes the first research question.

### **Research Question 1: What is the Alternative School's Culture of Learning Like?**

#### *Category 1: Students Navigating Life and School*

The first guiding question of this study was: what is the alternative school's culture of learning like? The first emergent category addresses much of the first guiding question as it highlights the experiences the students had while transitioning from their past experiences at the traditional high school to their present time in the alternative school. Here, I present the emergent themes of the need for choice and control, a relaxed atmosphere, relationship with heroes, and the understanding that life is bigger than school.

*We need choice and control.* When I started to sit down for interviews with the student participants, one of the early, major themes that were brought up by all participants was the pride that they had for their school. During the conversations, students would frequently talk about how great it was for them to have choice and control in their schoolwork. Nearly every student I talked to mentioned the choice and control they had in the school. Jenny, who was in her junior year and had been at the SEI for about one year discussed how she appreciated the "different ways of learning". Her comment was a universal theme for the students I talked to.

The SEI doesn't hold you down and make you learn the way they want to teach you. At our school, they don't really 'teach' [lecture] you, and you can do your work in different ways – learning packets, PowerPoint projects, posters, movies and Plato [a computer based learning software]. It's all up to you when you get

your work done.

Samira's experience in the school was a good example of what the alternative school strived for. Samira was an 18-year-old, African American girl who was already a senior when I first met her about a year ago. Her humble and sweet demeanor made her very easy to like, and her shy smile was charming. When we started talking about her life and school, she explained to me that she had fallen behind in school because she had been in a juvenile correction facility for over a year. Samira said that she felt that she had come a very long way in the past couple of years. She recalled getting into numerous fights in the streets and said that those fights had her "locked up" for over a year. She said that for years, she thought she would never graduate high school. But now, she said that she only had 14 credits left to finish high school, and that she was one of those people who knew what she wanted to be in the future. She talked about how she now had a specific dream for her future: a career as a nurse.

You know, I really thought I would never come back [to school] after I was locked up. But this place [the alternative school] has really given me another chance. Everything has changed. Just everything. I really don't want to waste my time anymore. I'm going to finish school and go to Community Tech, so I can be a nurse.

When I asked her what had changed things for her, she talked about how important it was for her to have choice and control of learning, both regarding the methods and the pace of learning. Like Jenny, she pointed out the five different learning tracks they had in the SEI.

This is about the best school I've ever been to, honestly. The teachers give you a lot of attention... But for me, the most important thing is that you get a lot of choice. You can do all sorts of different things... projects, packets, seminars, Plato and movies. You can work at your own pace and work on things so you actually understand what you're doing, instead of having to be done when the teacher tells you to be done.

Nineteen-year-old Eric, who fell behind in school because of an illness, shared similar experiences as Samira and also highlighted the importance of choice in his learning. He and his extended family all lived in Sunnydale for generations, and his family lived right across from the high school. While he hadn't gotten in trouble with the law or school policy like Samira, he had been unhappy in the traditional schools and had been in all three Sunnydale high schools: the traditional high school, the charter school [the Innovation Academy], and his current school, the SEI.

When I started high school, I really didn't like it, so I tried out the Innovation Academy [the charter school]. I was doing fine there, but then I got really sick and they wouldn't work around that. I was sick and they were just saying that I fell behind and that I missed things, and they wouldn't understand. I think that is when Bob [the SEI principal] said he would help me and he pulled me in here. It's working out for me. I come in, start up my station [his work desk) and start working. You don't have to sit in your desk and listen all the time. I like working at my own pace, you know. I am a hard worker. I always turn in my required credits. Basically, you make your own rules for yourself and you meet your own expectations.

The importance of student choice and control was also stressed by the school staff. Lisa, the only full time teacher in the SEI, had worked as a teacher at traditional schools for over 3 years before she came to the SEI. She shared how her experiences differed as a teacher at traditional schools and the SEI. She recalled how, when she was at the charter school, kids were literally “falling apart” in the traditional setting. She emphasized the importance of “not micromanaging the kids”. She underscored how trying to overly control them mostly results in bad situations, because they have a lot of problems with authority:

They just have problems with authority. So just by trying to tell them what to do, you automatically turn them off. So giving them choices, tons of choices, suddenly they don't hate you. You're suddenly not the enemy. It's just that simple. It's just like magic. As soon as you change the role of the teacher to be more of a facilitator or a project coordinator, and you're not the authority figure, suddenly all the problems go away.

She felt that compared to the traditional school, the SEI always “kept her on her toes”. She would never sit down and was always actively involved with high energy. She went on to discuss her sense of pride in her school:

Here, every day is different. Very spontaneous and creative. Because on Monday a student might be having a problem at home, and they might be really angry, and we might decide to write about anger. Then another student the next day might mention that they watched something on TV about the Holocaust, and we might do a PowerPoint project on that. We give them choices, tons of choices.

*We need a relaxed atmosphere.* The disappearance of behavioral problems because of the more relaxed atmosphere in school was another major theme. Students Kristy and Pat had similarities in terms of what they felt was so critically wrong in traditional schools. They felt that everything in the traditional schools seemed impersonal and stressful. Kristy and Pat both viewed themselves as easy-going people who liked engaging in jokes or long conversations with friends and teachers. Both recalled how they used to get into trouble all the time at the traditional high school. Kristy talked about how at her past school, she would get into trouble for “nothing” and that she would get so frustrated with not having the freedom to talk to her friends while doing her work. She compared the two schools’ learning environments and shared how things were so much better for her at the alternative school.

I used to get into trouble for nothing. Nothing! And teachers would always say ‘what’s wrong with you?’ I wouldn’t get into fights with teachers or anything, but they would just always.... Just giving people more freedom to talk will make schools much better. Instead of always saying ‘do this, sit down, stop talking like this’, but letting us do what we want to do while doing the work. It’s not like we’re not doing the work. Just like letting us talk to our friends while we work. It lets us do the work and get it finished. Over here, it’s not like that. I can talk to my friends and have good relationships with them.

Pat shared similar observations. Pat remembered how at his past school, he was well known to be “the trouble maker” in class. He agreed with Kristy that he would get into trouble for “not doing what they told me to do and for joking around with people.” He pointed out how the SEI’s relaxed environment of teachers’ willingness to talk with

the students and build relationships with them naturally encouraged him to work without getting into trouble all the time.

They [the teachers at the high school] just wanted you to get your stuff done and get out. Teachers here aren't like that. They talk and joke around with you. They don't get mad for talking and joking with other people like the teachers at the high school do. Here, everybody gets real active and jokes around with you and stuff. We are all like real people. It's a lot more motivating. Just having to come in every single day and sit through eight periods of class is really hard for some kids. Putting so much stress makes students to hate school... so this more relaxed learning environment [I discuss the students' use of educational vocabulary in Chapter five] really works. It takes an awful lot of stress off.... I'm not behind anymore. I think I'm going to be able to graduate early and go to college and get into the music industry like I dream of every single day.

Kristy's best friend, Ayesha, agreed. Unlike others, Ayesha said that she would have rather stayed at the high school if she could have, as she feels like she is missing out on things that are going on there. However, she said "the learning environment is much better over here." She shared her thoughts on small things that matter a great deal, such as listening to music and being able to talk, in helping students to work harder in school.

I honestly think we have people [SEI students] work more here [the SEI] because we can listen to music [while we work]. We can do things we want to do while working on our stuff. We can get food from the kitchen, we can talk to our friends, and we can listen to music if we want. Even in the high school, what I think is that, if a student wants to listen to music, they should be able to listen to music as long

as they are working, and if it was at a controllable level where others can't hear it. Because we are allowed to do things we want to do, people work [study] a lot more over here.

She continued to share her thoughts, suggesting how schools could “change things up”. She also underscored that the prevention of girls getting into trouble should be dealt with in a different way than boys, with letting girls socialize and have fun.

They [the schools] could change it up, you know. Like school dances. They only have one school dance a year. I don't think that's enough, really. I think we should have more school dances. Having more school dances... it'll make girls stay out of trouble and the streets, you know. Other than just having basketball, football, baseball and things for the boys. If they did more of those dances and things more, it would be better for girls.

The teachers shared the same observations with the students on the disappearance of behavioral problems. Lisa noted how behavioral problems in the traditional classrooms “just disappear” when they came to the SEI. She explained that it was usually because they didn't have to sit still all the time anymore; they could get up and get food, and they could listen to their music with headphones. Lisa went on to talk about her experience teaching a traditional lecture class in the SEI because of state requirements for her license. She said that was definitely an eye-opening experience for her.

Once I had to teach a unit for a week for the practitioner's requirements, so I had to create that situation, bringing about 15 to 20 kids in for a week-long seminar to teach a unit, and it was so interesting to see how they would just automatically change back to their previous behavioral patterns. They were sitting there in a

traditional classroom where they have to listen for an hour and sit, and they suddenly got really confrontational with me. Even though I am the same person from last week, they would act very differently... with attitudes. It was really interesting to see how they could so quickly switch back into their old 'defensive' mode.... It was pretty amazing.

*We need relationships and heroes.* Another emergent theme in the first category (see Table 4) was the students' strong need for relationships and so-called heroes in schools. Different students identified more with different staff members, but the common theme was that the students felt a strong connection with the staff. Samira and Rick both commented on their special connections with Bob, the principal. Pat and Eric considered the instructional aide, Susan, their hero. Many of the girls underscored the support and caring Lisa, the younger, female teacher, provided them.

Ayesha recalled how no one had really had the time to advise her with her studies back at the high school. She commented on how she felt that she had never been taken care of as a student at the high school.

When they told me this year that I need four more credits, back at the high school, I felt like they should have told me at the first semester. They never told me. They never call you down for nothing. I was only called down five times for the whole four years, to talk about the ISTEP or to switch a class, or for attendance. I felt like they should have told me at the first semester, I need four more credits, not letting me know at the last semester. You really can't associate with people over there. Now the teachers really help me out a lot. They really know where I'm at, and they push me to get my work done.

Even Brittany, who had only been there for two weeks, discussed her impression of the relationship aspect of the alternative school, saying that “friends and social life is better at the SEI.” She described how she realized that you get to know people at the SEI, including teachers and that the atmosphere was very friendly and agreeable.

Samira discussed how the close relationships with her teachers and knowing that the teachers “really cared about her” made her “feel good”. She explained how Mr. K (Bob, the principal] had brought her a long way during the years.

The teachers there [high school], all they do is just sit at their desks all day. They sit there and do their thing. Over here, teachers aren’t like that.... It’s a smaller environment, and the relationships with the teachers are most important to me. The teachers show me that they care. It really makes me feel good knowing that they care about me, my life and the things that I am going through. And they help me try to get through them. They push me to do the work. If I have questions about the work, they fully explain things to me. I get the attention that I need here because the teachers come to talk to you and talk to you one on one. Mr. K [Bob] is kind of my savior. Mr. K has brought me a long, long way. Without him here, I would not be here. I really give my thanks and respect to Mr. K. He really connects with you one to one and really encourages you to know that you can do it.

Rick shared similar experiences at the SEI. He also identified the turning point of his school life as being able to work with Mr. K and realizing that he was able to work at his own pace. Like many other students in the school, Rick was working full time to support his family. He valued hard work and masculinity and described himself as one

that had to really ‘work hard and accomplish something’. He often talked about going hunting with his father and brothers and his recent dreams of going to a taxidermy school in the south when he graduates high school. And he would add that the reasons why he wanted to go to the school were to “make good money” and have a better life than his family ever had. Rick was not shy about telling me why he was not happy with his previous school experiences, but he was also very clear that his current school and his relationship with the staff was something different, something he could work with.

When I first came here, I thought it was going to be like any other school, didn’t give much crap about anything. Sunnydale has pretty much screwed my whole family. My two older brothers, both of them, they didn’t let them graduate. And they hated me, just because my last name was Kerry. Now they are trying to screw my little sister, Julie. And that girl is an Einstein there. Really smart. The teachers over there [high school] really did me wrong. But Mr. K really got me turned around and changed how I thought about everything. Mr. K turned everything around for me. Actually, I’ve been sober [from drugs] for over a year now and coming to school... because of him.

While Rick had lots of stories to tell, he was most proud about his accomplishments at the alternative school, getting credits and knowing that he would probably be the first of his siblings to finish high school. And he identified Mr. K (Bob) as the most important reason why his life had turned around.

*Life is bigger than school.* The last theme of the first category was how the students felt that life was just “bigger” than school. Kyle started the conversation on how “people just might have bigger goals than school”, delving deeper into why he felt that

schools needed to be more flexible for people who had different paths to take. Kyle was a good-looking, agreeable, popular student in the classroom because of his laid-back but friendly demeanor. He had enlisted in the Marines and had convinced the high school principal that he needed to come to the SEI in order to make up the nine credits he needed to graduate in time.

The reason why I'm here is because I enlisted in the Marine Corps, and I have nine credits to make up. But I thought there is no way I'm going to be able to make it up and graduate when I need to graduate to go into the Marines. They told me to take the computer classes, but just the thought of going through all those classes with computers was horrid, and I probably wouldn't have made it in those classes, and I'm really trying to graduate on time. I called my principal and told her about my situation that I really wanted to graduate in time so I could go into the Marines, so she talked to Mr. K and here I am. I sit in my corner every day and work real hard. I'm not behind anymore; I might be able to graduate early, even. And I'll be able to live my dream. It's my dream. I dream of it every single day...being able to travel around the world, serve my country, and the feeling of belonging.

Sean concurred, adding to the discussion of how the SEI allowed him to also focus on important non-educational aspects of his life. Sean was one of the shyest, but sweetest boys in the class. You could tell that he was a softhearted boy the first time you met him. He would quietly but diligently do his work in the corner with his group of friends. It was obvious that the teachers regarded him very highly. Sean had never really had problems in the traditional school but had to come to the SEI as his mother was a

single mother working very long hours, and Sean was responsible for taking care of his three younger brothers and sisters. He indicated how the SEI worked well for him, and also commented that he felt that schools like SEI would work better for other students as well.

I think other people [the traditional high school students] would really like our school too.... The shortness of the day is very nice for us, because some of us have to hold full-time jobs just for their family to make it, or take care of their kids... like Jamie has two little baby girls she needs to take care of.... And I need to help out with work at home for my mom to be able to work.

Rick shared similar thoughts with Sean and Kyle. He felt that school should not be something getting in the way when he needed to support his family. He discussed how his job was important to him, and how he felt that the teachers (at the traditional high school) did not understand his situation, as they were making “good money”.

It’s really hard working two jobs and coming to school, you know. Over at the high school, I had to work two jobs and go to school. I was so angry with the teachers; I couldn’t stand their cockiness. They make good money! And plus they get 3 months off work every year, and get paid! They get paid when they don’t even work. So hell no, they don’t understand....

Now that I’m at the SEI, I can work full time and still go to school. That’s the best thing. I can come in and keep working on my schoolwork so I can graduate and then go work like I need to. Of course, when I started I was on drugs and things... and drinking when I first came here so it was worse then, so things were different.

But being here... I've been sober for about a year now. Things have really turned around for me.

While the students at SEI had different reasons why these factors were so important for them, they were consistent in discussing how they appreciated and were proud of the SEI's learning environment. The most important factors they noted were learning choices and control, the relaxed environment, relationships they had built, and the atmosphere of understanding that life is bigger than school. The pride in SEI's culture of learning was not only described from the students' perspective. The following category describes the teachers' perspectives regarding the school's culture.

*Category 2: Teachers' Lives and Efforts at the Alternative School*

The second category that emerged in the data analysis process was the teachers' lives and efforts at the alternative school. Teachers' shared their teaching values and philosophies, how those related to who they were as people, and what kinds of effort they put into the SEI as teachers and staff.

*Self identity and teaching values.* The first emergent theme in this category was the theme of the teachers' self-identity and how that related to their teaching values and philosophies. Both Bob and Lisa shared how their identity fits with their teaching at the SEI.

Lisa is the only full-time teacher at the SEI. She is a beautiful young female teacher in her late 20s. She looks young and fit and has short, dark brown hair. She has a laid back personality, just very comfortable with her surroundings, but was also very willing and happy to share her opinions. And she seemed to project this energy of comfort and hope to others around her. She was always very supportive and

understanding of the students and her colleagues. She reflected on how she was the ‘good student’ during her school days but had come to realize that she was very naïve and that when she came out into the real world, it was not exactly the way she thought it would be. Lisa continued to explain about how her experiencing the gap between reality as perceived while in school and the real world made her want to help students to see the world in a more relevant way and help them with their “real” problems.

I was the good student in my school years. I remember just being so caught up in grades and worrying about tests constantly. You come out to the real world, and you say, I don’t get graded? I never had any problems, never got into any problems, you know? It makes me wonder if I had a chance to be in a school like this, not being wrapped up in grades and things, what would it have been like? I think that’s why I really think it’s important to help the kids see school as relevant to their real problems.

Bob, the principal and teacher of SEI also shared his perspective on who he was, and how that related to his ideology of teaching. He was probably in his late 50s, a Polish, second-generation immigrant. He is a very engaging and passionate person, who has endless stories to tell. He has a unique energy that never stops going. As long as there were kids that needed him, he would be fully engaged, passionately teaching or talking with them. It was not a real surprise to see how students who had already graduated would often stop by at the school in order to talk to Bob about their new jobs and SAT plans. Bob’s theory of self was that he was the underdog his whole life and that he is still an atypical person. He recalled the days he was in school as a student. He started his life-long “underdog” story with his coincidental relationship with Greg Romano, a district

administrator in Sunnydale Township that I also interviewed for this study. As the director of special projects of Sunnydale, Greg Romano was indeed one of the stars in Sunnydale Township. He was also the knowledge-work coordinator (district facilitator) of the Path to Success, so because of my work with the change effort, I happened to know him very well.

You see, everyone has a reputation. Do you know Greg Romano? Greg Romano and I went to the same elementary school; his father was my soccer coach. We lived two blocks from each other. We went to the same schools: same elementary school, same high school. Do you realize that he was the altar boy, and I was not? Do you get the message here? When we got into high school, everybody said to Greg, 'Hey, Greg we've heard such great things about you!'... *I missed 90 days of school, but my parents never got one call from the teachers. So you know why I need to take up for the smaller kids.*

Bob went on describing his experience as a not-so-successful student.

OK, I'm going to be honest with you. If you were going to look at my school grades, you will say, how in the world did you ever become a principal? I graduated high school with basically a 1.0. I got a [baseball] scholarship to Arizona State, but I got a 489 on my SAT scores. Which gives you an indication that I did not care about school in high school. My family did not have a college background: my father had a 7<sup>th</sup> grade education; mom had an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education, so grades weren't that important to me at that point. So I didn't get to go to college because of poor grades.

Bob said that he was lucky enough to get drafted into the Yankees professional baseball organization after failing to get into college, so he played baseball for a year. He “blew his elbow” the following year, so he enlisted in the army for three years. After three years of service in the military, he decided to go work in a factory in his home town.

What happened was that while I was looking for a job, my friend said you should think about going to college, and you could do some coaching and stuff like that. So I decided to go to Max State [University]. I was on probation because of my high school records. The first semester, they made me take astronomy, a television course with 500 students, philosophy at 8 o’clock in the morning talking about Immanuel Kant, which I was totally lost and got a 1.50, so the dean called me and told me that they would have to let me go. I begged and pleaded him for a second chance, and that I wanted to take classes that I was interested in, not philosophy and astronomy. I took physical education and some other courses that I wanted to take, and I ended up getting a 3.0. Next semester, I got a 3.5, and now look at where I am.

Bob said that after he got his teaching license at Max State University, life started going well for him. He continued to talk about his beliefs in teaching and how he felt his career was focused specifically on fighting for these “kids who can’t do it”. This led the conversation of how most SEI staff members had very similar reasons why they were teaching at the SEI.

*Somebody’s gotta fight for them!* The second emergent theme in this category was closely related to the first theme: the teachers’ ideology or philosophy for fighting for the

kids whose lives are hard because of how society and school are hard on them. Bob started off the conversation, discussing what his teaching license meant to him.

You see, I was always the underdog and nobody cared about me. And one of the things that I vowed when I got my teaching license was that I'd take up for the kids who can't do it. ... You were a good kid, and I like you, but I don't need to take up for you, because you do a good job taking up for yourself, and all I need to do for you is to pat you on the shoulder and say keep it up, you're doing a great job. Right?

Lisa also shared what motivated her to become a teacher and teach at the SEI.

Well, I did two years of Americorps, both years in schools. I knew when I was in college that service was what really drove me to do anything. The first year, I was at a public school through the Peace Learning Center. The second year, I was in an American Indian reservation in Utah, an elementary school. It was hard there. We were there to help, and they were good times. But some of the Native Americans there view us as intruders and that was hard... teaching there. I did full time substitute teaching for a year after that. Then I decided to do Transition to Teaching. And I had one year of student teaching that was basically full time. So that was my fourth year working in schools. And I finally got my teaching license....

Susan, the instructional assistant at SEI, expressed similar reasons why she needed to be at the SEI, despite the fact that she was busy working another full time job. "Oh, no, I sure don't do it for the money, honey" was how she started the conversation. Susan worked at the city airport for Delta Airlines customer services. She got up at three

a.m. in the morning, worked from four a.m. till noon and then came to the SEI to work with the students. She explained that she had important reasons to be at the SEI: how her parents went to Sunnydale Township schools, how she had been in Sunnydale Township when she was growing up, and that she has sent eight daughters into Sunnydale Township schools, including her youngest daughter, who was currently a student at the traditional high school.

I've seen the school grow and the township grow. I feel like I've seen everything. But the most important reason I'm here is because I can't help but give what I have. I call myself a 'bleeding heart'. I just feel like 'I've been given so much; I too need to give' [a hymn from her church]. We need to give back to society and that's our future.

Bob also talked about how he vowed to take up for the smaller kids that could not make it easily, and that it was because of his experience as the underdog all his life. He indicated that his experiences helped him to understand what these students needed and build important relationships.

Somebody's gotta fight for them, and because I was the underdog all my life, I vowed to take up for the kids that couldn't make it easy. A lot of the kids know that I was not a good student in high school and that I've done some things that I'm not proud about. But that helps kids to call me at home, even after graduation, telling me that they have a problem. I feel comfortable saying that we have important relationships. We build relationships.

Their parents love them, but sometimes they don't show the kids the great things that could be waiting for them out there. If we don't raise their awareness that there are better things out there, they will never know.

Bob went on to summarize how and what he does in order to help the students at the SEI to be successful. He commented on how society and school are not generous to these students and that he needed to do anything he could to help them succeed. He emphasized multiple times the need for making negatives into positives. He said that modeling positive and optimistic attitudes towards life was one of the biggest goals he had in teaching the SEI students.

Society is not generous to these kids that fail. I know that we need to talk to these kids and do anything that they need us to do for them. So I always start early and end late. I get here at 6:00. When kids get here at 8:00, its constant movement, so I need to get here early to get everything ready so I have everything set for them in the morning. Kids at our school need the push to really understand. I tend to be forceful at times and push, but try to understand about what is going on in their personal lives.

We just need to let them know that they can do it, that things will work out for them. To learn to be positive all the time. I always try to make negatives into positives for my kids. We all try to be positive, try to be upbeat. Then we help kids to learn to pat themselves on the shoulder and say 'Hey, I did great!' Now other people are saying 'You're just doing what you need to do. It's expected of you. That you're great.'

He took Samira's example as the epiphany of what he called "rags to riches". He described how she so strongly believed that she couldn't make it, that she would not be able to get out of trouble and graduate. "But look at her now! She has grown so much and she is so close to finishing school. I am so proud of her." He continued to reflect on his long years of teaching, noting that:

I've learned that I can make kids realize that they want to do things that are good for them, not by me saying 'You need to do this' but them thinking that it is a good idea. Making positive changes and letting them know that great things are out there for them.

*School and the real world are different.* Another emergent theme in the teachers' interviews and focus groups was how life turns out to be so different from school and that SEI students realize that much earlier in life than most people. Lisa went on to talk about how she wanted to help students to see the world in a more relevant way and help them with their 'real' problems.

The kids at SEI ask you when you tell them to do something, 'Why do I have to do this? What does it have to do with my life?' They need it to be meaningful to them. They have so much going on in their lives other than school; they need to know why it's worth it to do this?

As you grow older, we get to know the world more, and life is not always really like what you learned in school. How many times do you really have a test over anything, and sit down and solve it? You just get information and put things together and come up with your own conclusion....

Susan also discussed her concerns about where the American educational system was headed, taking the example of the high school's recent decision on adding more credits for graduation. She strongly felt that the system was "just trying to keep them busy", and "that's what's wrong about our education system." She felt that adding credits or taking more exams would not do anything for the students. "No, no, no, no. That doesn't work."

Bob agreed with Lisa's and Susan's comments, delving deeper into his thoughts on how the students' lives at SEI were involved in so many problems or issues other than school that needed urgent solutions.

The kids here, they are here for various reasons. Because of behavioral problems such as getting in fights with teachers, getting in trouble with the law, pregnancy.... Life is not really like what you learn 'in school'. These kids need to take care of some things that most kids at the traditional high school don't have to deal with. The stories that they have about friends in drugs and alcohol, those stories are similar to some of my stories when I was young. My friends were messed up sometimes, but I took them home and made sure they were safe in bed. These kids have lots going on. For these kids, we really need to try to understand their personal lives and talk to them so they let us know what we need to do for them. We need to help them get through.

*I would never go back: creative, natural and relevant!* The final theme of the second category was the pride of the SEI staff in their school. All the staff members mentioned how they absolutely preferred to stay at the alternative school setting as a teacher, if possible. When discussing the culture of learning, Lisa talked in detail about

her experiences at the previous charter school she had worked at 3 years ago, and how it compared to the SEI.

I was teaching at a charter school on the east side of the city then, and it was really poorly run. A lot of the administrative staff did not have any experience in education, and it was out of control. I left there and was lucky to get an interview here. The charter school did not have contracts, so I was not on a contract, so basically I was the third teacher to leave them at the end of October. I had an interview with SEI the week I quit, and I was offered the job here right away. I started November 1<sup>st</sup>, and that was around three years ago. I think about it, and I feel like it was fate.

At the charter school that I worked at, we would do two hours straight of reading and two hours straight of math, everyday. And by the end of the month, the kids were fried and literally falling out of their chairs. All I was trying to do was to keep them from falling out of their chairs. I tried to address that concern with the principal once, and she was not interested in listening to any of our ideas. I felt awful leaving the kids, but I couldn't stay any longer, crying every day.

Lisa expressed how passionate she felt about the SEI's culture of learning, how it felt more natural, creative and interesting for the students. Lisa also talked about how she knew this creative, intimate, and natural way of teaching was not only helpful for the students, but that it also kept the teachers at the school more motivated and engaged as well.

I really do love it here. I wouldn't go back to a traditional setting; it [teaching at the SEI] gives you more of a chance to be creative, I think. And to get to know the

students, because I get to hang out with the same group every single day. It's just more natural that subjects overlap, so if they do a project, if they do a paper over the Holocaust, they will get world history, English and computer, which to me makes sense. Things do overlap. That's how it works, only being in school three hours a day when they have other things that they need to attend to. I love it; it's just more natural and creative. They will come up with what they want to do, and we work with them to see how that can work with the state standards.

The instructional aide of SEI, Ken, concurred, adding that he shared similar experiences with Lisa. He had worked at the traditional high school before, and he discussed similar points that the students made from a staff member's perspective.

I would say my days at school are all about helping and creating. That's the day. Helping on what they are doing, and creating what they would do next. I actually have been over at the high school, but they eliminated my position there, so they reassigned me here. I really like it here. Much better. It's more open, you're able to really help and create things here, and there are no time periods to get something done in a 50-minute period, bells, or curriculum pressure.

And because the kids here have to work, take care of their kids and stuff, you don't get some problems that you have at the traditional high school, like trying to make kids do work. Here the kids really try to work and work around their other schedules to make school work for them, so it's a lot easier to work with these kids. They do need the freedom and less regulation. I have some kids I had over at the high school, and over there they wouldn't do anything. And now over here, they have really turned their lives around.

Bob also talked about how SEI was the “best of all the worlds” he had been in. He underscored that he felt happy and fulfilled with the people he worked with, and the challenges that he faced at the SEI everyday were meaningful to him. “I just need to be around them [the students]. I want them to know that they can make it, that they can do it. I tell them I’m not here to play ‘I gotcha’, I’m here to help you succeed.”

**Research Question 2: Is there a Relation between the Alternative School  
and the Change Effort? Are Members of the Alternative School  
Involved in the School District’s Change Effort in Any Way?**

Category three emerged as the answers to these questions, revealing that there was no involvement of the alternative school students and parents in Path to Success, and limited access to information about Path to Success for SEI staff members.

*Category 3: Non-involvement of the Alternative School Members in the Change Effort*

*No parent & student involvement: Don’t know much about it.* One of the most important principles of the Path to Success effort is to involve all stakeholder groups within the entire school district, including teachers, administrators, staff, parents, community members and students for a meaningful educational change. These stakeholder representatives were invited to serve as Leadership Team members by the Core Team members, which is the decision-making team for the Path to Success. Parents from many different school levels have been invited to join the district-wide change effort Leadership Team, and many of them have participated as invaluable members in the change effort (see Table 5 and Figure 2 for further details about Path to Success). While the students do not actually direct the decision making of the educational change

effort, they are invited to work as the ‘lunch group’ at the traditional schools, giving them a chance to provide input as to what their vision of the transformed schools should look like.

Table 5

Revised Discrete Events in the GSTE (Guidelines for Path to Success)

Phase I. Initiate a Systemic Change Effort	Facilitators assess and enhance their own readiness for the process and form a Support Team.
	Facilitators establish or redefine a relationship with a school district and discuss per diem payment for Event 3.
	Facilitators assess and enhance district readiness for change.
	Negotiate and sign a contract/agreement with the superintendent and board for Phase II.

Phase II. Develop Starter Team	Facilitators and superintendent form the Starter Team.
	Hold a retreat to develop the Starter Team dynamic.
	Develop Starter Team understanding of systems, design, mental models, the systemic change process, dialogue, and small-group facilitation.
	Assess and enhance district and community capacity for change. (Identify assets and barriers, and use community forums if needed.)
	Develop an agreement/contract with the Starter Team and School Board for Phase III, scope out resource needs, and plan a budget for internal funding and a proposal for external funding.

Phase III. Develop the District-Wide Framework and Capacity for Change	Starter Team expands into the Leadership Team, Starter Team becomes facilitators, facilitator becomes an advisor and “critical friend.”
	Hold a one-day retreat to develop the Leadership Team dynamic.
	Facilitators develop Leadership Team understanding of systems, design, mental models, the systemic change process, dialogue, and small-group facilitation. (Address throughout Events 13-17.)
	Leadership Team develops a district-wide framework with broad stakeholder participation (community forums). This includes identifying changes in the community’s educational needs, and using them to develop a mission, vision, and core values for an ideal school system. It takes this opportunity to assess and enhance district and community interest in, and culture for, systemic change. It develops pyramid groups for broad stakeholder involvement.
	Leadership Team identifies current and recent change efforts and decides what relation those should have with this effort.
	Leadership Team develops a change process strategy, including capacity

	building and funding. Advisor’s role is defined and funded for Phase IV.
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Phase IV. Create Ideal Designs for a New Educational System	Leadership Team forms and capacitates building-level Design Teams and conducts a workshop on the framework.
	Design Teams create building-level designs and systems for evaluating those designs with broad stakeholder involvement. Leadership Team supports and monitors the Design Teams.
	Leadership Team forms and capacitates a district-level Design Team.
	Design Team creates a design for ideal district administrative and governance systems, and systems for evaluating that design, with broad stakeholder involvement. Leadership Team supports and monitors this Design Team.

Phase IV. Create Ideal Designs for a New Educational System	Design teams create building-level processes for evolving as close as possible to their ideal designs. Leadership Team supports and monitors the design teams.
	Carry out implementation plans, formative evaluations, and revisions of the evolving designs and the implementation processes.
	Periodically evolve the ideal designs (building-level and district-level).

*Note.* From “Trends and issues in p-12 educational change” by C. M. Reigeluth & F. M. Duffy, 2007 In R. A. Reiser & J. V. Dempsey (Eds.), *Trends and Issues in Instructional Design and Technology* (Second ed.). Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson, Merris Prentice Hall.

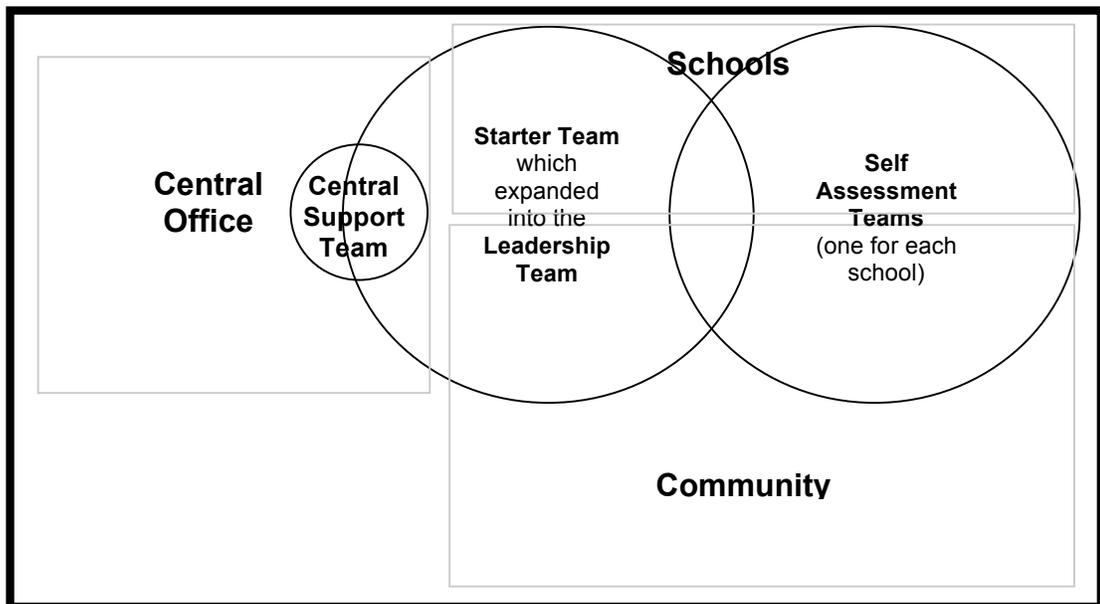


Figure 2. View of Teams in the Path to Success

The findings showed that the alternative school students and their parents had virtually no involvement in the district change effort, Path to Success. All the students I interviewed - Jenny, Samira, Rick, Kristy, Ayesha, Pat, Eric, Kyle and Brittany, reported that they know of Path to Success because they have seen the Path to Success 'Vision Mission Statement' mounted on the school buildings, but they did not have much understanding of the change effort. Eric's response, "I've heard about it, just teachers talking about it. Heard of it from Mr. K. Don't really know about it" was a very typical one.

The students all stated that neither they nor their parents had ever been involved with any Path to Success activities. I verified with the Path to Success facilitators that there were no parents or students from the SEI in the list of the Leadership Team or student lunch group meetings. While the students felt that they did not know much about the change effort, most of them had learned about the Small Learning Communities change, as the changes at the high school were a relevant topic to their friends. The high school had just gone through a significant change last year, dividing the school into five learning communities. Each community had an area of focus, such as technology skills, social issues, liberal arts or creative arts. Some of these students voiced their thoughts about the changes at the high school. Rick in particular seemed to feel strongly about the changes at the high school. He explained that he had more information and thoughts about the changes, as his younger sister was currently attending the high school.

What the high school is doing now, with the [small learning] communities in Path to Success... they are trying to figure out what your career is going to be, when you are coming out of middle school. They are trying to work it like college, and

that's just stupid. People go to college and they still change their degrees all the time. My friend at Midwest State University changed her degree six times. And she's only a freshman.

What that does is that it separates. They do all that so they can say, okay all the good kids here. All the bad kids here. The middle kids here. That's what they are doing at the new school. I'm dead serious. It separates very smart kids, not so smart kids, kids who don't want to do nothing, and dumb kids. That is exactly what they are doing.

While Eric did not have such strong frustrations like Rick, he felt that the change effort in general was not meeting the needs of himself or his friends at SEI. He said that "what they are doing is fine, going into learning communities, but they could have those but make it so they don't separate people..." He felt that the high school should change to be "more like what we're doing over here [SEI]".

If you really think about it, if we do it like what we do here, we would have people stay in school, get their education and not get so mad at teachers and everybody at school. There wouldn't be as many fights and less stress on more people. Graduation rates would go up. Because yes, people come here because they get kicked out of school or they can't stand it over there [the high school]. But here people do their work and graduate, I think all the other schools should be like our school, not separate kids like they do now.

*Limited teacher involvement: It's all great, but is it really serving all students?*

The staff of SEI also reported that they knew that change efforts were going on in the school district, but they had never been a part of it. They had limited information about

the Path to Success, and usually had that information because of different roles they had in the school district rather than as staff at SEI. Bob, the principle was the only one that reported that he had been a part of some Path to Success work as a part of the district administration team.

Being a part of the administrative team, it allows me to know. Both from the superintendent and the staff, but also the board's vision. As a part of the administrative team, I've got to know about the ins and outs. The nice thing is that everyone always believes in the vision, I think. It's just one piece of paper, but here at our district we try to live it. How we make decisions, do some of our training in professional development, working with students and teachers and all. We also publicize it a lot; we see the Vision Mission statement all the time in the classrooms.

Susan shared her thoughts about the Path to Success from the perspectives of both a parent of a student at the high school and a teacher at SEI.

I do know a little bit about it, just through the website, and because I worked at the middle school before... or what Bob tells us sometimes. I have a kid in the high school, so I guess I know more about the Small Learning Communities and all. I'd really like to know more, actually.

It's great on paper, great concept and vision, but I just don't know if it's working. We were [officially included in the Small Learning Communities] but we were never included in that [in reality]. I was in all the meetings for the Small Learning Communities as a parent, but I know that we [the SEI] were never a part of it. Bill [the superintendent] and Peg [Director of Student Services] may think we are

included, but if the staff at the high school do not think that we are part of them, we will never be a part of it.

Ken talked about his exposure to the Path to Success at the high school, but expressed the frustration he felt due to being left out of the process, as he was ‘just part-time support staff’.

Because I was at the high school for 5 years, I know about it. It was pretty much everywhere, from the drawing board to real changes like the Small Learning Communities. So I was familiar with it because I was over at the high school. They really didn’t include the support staff in the Path to Success planning. I just had to force myself to learn and try to stay on top of what was going on. They really didn’t plan for the support staff to be an integral part of the Path to Success. I would have liked to be considered a stakeholder, like the certified teaching staff, but it wasn’t like that. Over here, we work towards the mission of the township, but we are not going to be a part of the success of the Path to Success, Small Learning Communities. If the Small Learning Communities succeed, we are not going to be recognized as a Small Learning community and be a part of the success.

Lisa, the only full time teacher, actually knew the least about the Path to Success. She shared her feelings of isolation regarding the district change effort.

Well, I’ve only heard about the Path to Success from you [the researcher], really. I’ve never heard about it ever from anybody. I only saw the Path to Success Vision Mission statement on the walls. The Vision Mission statement was fine, and I certainly didn’t have a problem with it. It’s great trying to be reflective with

the aim to serve students better, but it was somewhat generic. And I feel like SEI could have been more included more, and gotten some more support, too, by doing that. I just feel like... some just basic, very basic things... our kids are being denied. These kids don't fit in very well in the traditional setting, but because of that, do they have to be denied from these basic needs? Yeah, the Vision Mission statement is great, but is it really serving all students? Are we best serving the alternative students, with the apparent lack of resources, help and support?

*Relations between the Path to Success & SEI: Still, we believe that we are a part of it.* While both the staff and students of SEI felt that they weren't directly included in the Path to Success, the staff felt that the large vision of the district change effort, Path to Success, provided a positive direction for the SEI's culture of learning. Both the SEI counselor, Alicia, and Bob shared how they believe that the vision of the district has provided groundwork for this type of institution of learning. Alicia said,

It's very different here; there are more ways to help students. It's more open to the concept of seeing the vision of why this is necessary. I also believe that this culture comes from the vision of the district as a whole. I think we all have the same mission, that's why it works here.

Bob was confident about how the SEI was "living the Path to Success vision". He also mentioned his trusting friendship with the superintendent of Sunnydale and how that related to SEI's relationship with Path to Success.

Bill [the superintendent] and I have been good friends for a very long time, and we've always been able to do things outside the box. We always had that

mentality and work ethic that we would do anything for these kids that need different ways of doing things. Almost anything for them at any time.

You see, when I was working as the principal of Greenville's alternative school, we had a group of people come in from Sunnydale and see us; they liked what they saw. And when they hired me, Bill (Sunnydale's superintendent) and the board asked me to create something very different for students, and we came up with this five years ago..... This alternative school has become something that is different [from what we planned in the beginning], but still I know that we live the Path to Success mission. We do live a lot of those things that we talk about in Path to Success. We really do try to live the vision. This is the one-classroom schoolhouse that we talk about in Path to Success. The information-age school where every single child gets attention and gets to learn at their own pace.

Lisa also shared how she felt frustrated that the SEI is misunderstood, for she believes that the school is truly reflecting the Vision Mission statement of the Path to Success.

I think the Vision Mission statement really reflects our school. But the interaction I've had with the high school because of transferring credits [when the SEI students earned credits at the SEI, the high school had to officially approve to put the credits in their files], I feel that they are all suspicious of what we do. We ask them to put those credits in for our students, and it takes more than a semester for them to approve! My feeling is that they think we give them [the students] credits for nothing. Which I don't understand; I would really like the teachers to come over and observe what we do, and they would understand.

*We're still hoping to be included in Path to Success: I'd like to participate to represent our community.* While both the staff and students of SEI felt that they weren't currently included in the Path to Success, they still are hopeful for being included in the future. Susan's (the instructional aide) thoughts were that the SEI still had a fundamental connection to the Path to Success and that the SEI would eventually be more included in the district-wide dialogue.

I feel like sometimes we are totally forgotten about over here. But the concept, at the very top, because Path to Success' goal is to get every kid educated, I also think that it is because of the Path to Success that this school is here, and these kids here get another chance. If the vision of this change effort, to educate every single student, if that vision weren't there, these kids would not be in school.

There is no doubt in my mind about it, they would be dropouts. And if we weren't here, these kids would be all dropouts.

I think we need a lot of people to change their way of thinking. We got to rethink our thinking, and it's very hard. Change is hard to get the entire group on board. Some people had a harder time, and some people are very open. But that's how the world works. We need to change how we think about schools. We'll get there.

Lisa talked about how she would really like to represent the SEI community if she had the chance and if she were asked to be a part of the Path to Success. She commented on the importance of communication multiple times, and how she felt that the SEI needed more of that with the high school.

Yeah, I think I would have gone to participate in the Path to Success if I had the chance and if it had meant that I could represent the SEI community, and to see

how the SEI would be involved and all. I would still be happy to go and contribute. Maybe more communication is needed for that to happen; I don't think I am on their email listserv. I don't get any emails from the high school. I only receive district-wide email, we're a part of the high school, but it's almost like we're not, so maybe more communication would solve that? So we could be included?

Ken shared similar thoughts with Lisa. He talked about how he felt that they weren't yet included in the change effort, but that he hoped the SEI would become one of the valued communities that participated.

I don't think there is any relationship between Path to Success and our alternative school right now. We operate pretty much independently. We are totally separate. And we are not going to be a part of the success of the change. Even if the change effort were to succeed, we are not going to be recognized as a learning community and be a part of the success. But I do think we are part of the mission, and we are working towards the mission of the township. I just wish it could be all-inclusive.

Students also shared interest in giving their ideas and opinions for the district school change effort. Kyle and Pat both thought it would be fun and productive to talk about improving schools for future students who had trouble in schools like themselves.

I think I would really like talking to people from schools. Just sitting down and talking about what we think and stuff like we're doing now. I can tell you a lot of stories about my friends and really talk about how schools should be more like our school here.

Ayesha concurred, adding that she would be greatly interested in sharing her voice. “I would like to help keep people off the streets and keeping them out of trouble.”

The findings showed that SEI members felt that they were not directly included in the Path to Success as stakeholders. Nevertheless, they had a sense of pride that the SEI’s work was grounded in the Path to Success, and that they were truly “living the Path to Success’ vision” of the information-age, one-classroom schoolhouse, much more than the other traditional schools.

**Research Question 3: What Kinds of Support and Policy Changes are Needed in Systemic Educational Change Efforts in Order to Ensure Active Participation of Disadvantaged and Marginalized Alternative School Members?**

Category four emerged as the data analysis showed SEI students and staff negotiated and coped with feelings of isolation, resistance to authority, and yearning for resources, communication and respect from the district.

*Category 4: Negotiating with Feelings of Isolation, Resistance and Yearning Respect*

*Feelings of isolation.* Feelings of ‘isolation’ and ‘alienation’ often emerged in the data analysis process. The students and staff of the SEI both shared these feelings of isolation or misunderstanding by the district and traditional high school. Many girls talked about wanting to go to prom or use the district library, and the boys would talk about how it was unfortunate that they did not have sports. Rick noted how he felt unfairly labeled by the high school teachers and administrators:

You know, my friends heard about this school, and they wanted to come too. And the teachers over there say no, you can’t go over here [the SEI], you’re too smart

you can't come over here. They are labeling people. They say SEI is pushed away to the side. They say that the SEI kids are the kids that do everything wrong.

We're going to be pushed off to the side. [They say] this is the school where they dump kids.

Emily agreed with Rick, describing her trip to the high school for the GQE (Graduation Qualifying Exams) as "awful." She said she was not sure how well she did on the test, because "First of all, I don't usually get up at 6 o'clock in the morning, and plus I had girls talking about me as soon as I got there." She strongly questioned why she had to go to the school she has been kicked out of in order to take the test.

Lisa further explained Emily's situation, underscoring how the current school policies needed to change in order to be more supportive of the SEI students' academic success. She talked about how there was "definitely a stigma on our kids", and how the SEI students couldn't go back to the high school grounds.

Normally they can't really go back. They get arrested if they do. They can't even use the district library. But a lot of our kids take the GQE over and over again, and they have the kids have to go over to the high school to take it... where they got kicked out, and they get really angry. They are just furious that they have to go over there. 'If we go over there any other time, we get arrested, and now you're making us come over there to take this test?' They hate tests, they hate the high school, they hate the students and teachers there... they are just set up to fail. That is one of the things that we are really fighting for, to be able to take the tests here.

Lisa continued, describing how the feeling of isolation and misunderstanding was not limited to the students, but was also shared by her and her colleagues. She said she did not really get to know anyone at the high school, even though she was finishing her third year of teaching in the district. She also discussed how she felt that the SEI staff was looked down on, because they were teaching the students that they did not want over at the traditional school.

I feel completely isolated. I've never worked there before [high school], but my impression [based on the interactions I had with them] is that we're viewed with suspicion. That we're just giving the kids credit for doing nothing. That we're sitting around doing nothing, you know... that we're not working hard.

Bob shared similar observations as Lisa. He felt that the SEI was considered the ugly step child. He noted how he thought that the SEI was not getting enough credit for what it does and what it strives for.

When Bill [the superintendent] hired me, he said, 'Bob, I want you to create an alternative school that is totally different than any other alternative school.' We did that. I know that we live the mission of the school district. But it's defeating when our colleagues look at us and question if we are doing a good job here.

*Resistance to authority.* As described in Category 1, many students of the SEI strongly resist the authority of the school district. Rick felt the teachers did not understand students like him at all and showed his frustration saying that he "couldn't stand the teachers there." Pat also agreed with Rick, remembering how he would get into trouble for "nothing." Lisa had also consistently commented on how the students had problems with authority.

However, the students were not the only ones who showed resistance to authority. It was not too hard to see that the staff was also resistant to authority or to being told what to do. Bob's resistance was most visible. While he wanted to improve the circumstances of the SEI's isolation, his comments on some matters clearly indicated his resistance to authority as well.

I know that I'm an atypical principal, and the problem with that is that atypical principals get into trouble. I do not follow the directives too well. I also end up doing things that I think is best for the kids, even if the authority tells me not to. I sometimes get into deep trouble.

Bob gave an example of him receiving a call from one of his students, telling him that Rico is on 75<sup>th</sup> street skipping school. Bob would get into his car, drive to 75<sup>th</sup> street to knock on doors looking for Rico, and bring him back to school. He talked about how people get upset or make fun of him for going to such an extreme length that wasn't considered the wisest choice in their opinion. He continued to talk about how it was by his "personal choice", he does not attend the high school principals' meetings.

I don't attend the principals' meetings. And that is by personal choice to not attend those meetings. Because they are just so long. I hate being away from this facility for so long.

And the information does not come over here. Someone was here [from district professional development] talking about curriculum mapping, I get a phone call saying 'why weren't you here at the session?', and [I said] 'we never heard anything about it'. They say 'I forgot to tell you about it, sorry'. It's always like that.... So we like to be ourselves.

SEI's instructional aide, Ken, shared very similar thoughts as Lisa and Bob. Having had the opportunity to work at the high school as staff, he explained how the SEI was like the ugly stepchild of the high school, the black sheep of the family. He commented on how the SEI was a "necessary evil," as he felt that, other than sending students they could not handle over there, the high school staff did not want to have anything to do with the SEI.

So whatever we do, it's not considered, and there is not really any relationship with the other schools. Even though we are supposed to be officially considered as one of the Small Learning Communities, we are not regarded highly by the staff over there. Other than the fact that they like to send over the kids they can't handle over there, so we get them... that is their out. If they have kids that are having problems, guess what, we can send them to the SEI. So that's what they do. At the high school, we're a necessary evil. We're here because the superintendent wanted an alternative school and the board approved it. Other than they send kids to us, they don't want to have anything to do with us.

*Yearning for resources, communication and respect from the school district.* The final theme in category four was the yearning for resources from the school district, communication with district colleagues and respect from other schools within the school district. Lisa talked about how their limited resources compared to other schools.

Our kids can't use the district library, so everything is highly internet based. We managed to find some computers in the basement that weren't being used. But it was all his own [district technology staff] work... they [district staff or high school administration] didn't [help]. Most of those books here are bought out of

our own pockets or laying around. That's how we put that together. Our resources are extremely limited. John and I have to go to the high school and beg, borrow and steal textbooks.

Bob and Lisa both underscored that they really want to fight against the negative attitude and make the school so anyone who wants this type of learning environment can come. Lisa looked at Bob, explaining that "Bob is really pushing and fighting for us to become one of the Small Learning Communities for real."

Lisa felt that the only solution to the current state of alienation and isolation was to improve communication and have other schoolteachers and administrators come to the SEI and see what is going on in the school.

For us to really change the perception towards us, I feel a strong need for communication with the high school and other schools. I don't know if they want to come, but if they come and observe, they'll see how hard we work; it's not like we're on early retirement or anything. I've tried to say that we should encourage the teachers and principal to come and observe. That's the only real solution that I can really see. But I don't know if they want to do that. I'm sure they are all very busy....

A district administrator, Director of Special Projects, Greg, shared his perspective on the SEI's isolation within the school district as a whole.

The biggest problem is that there is not really an identified direction on paper; there was no goal set there that would be shared. You can't really anticipate how you can move them through, but at the same time you need to know what steps you want to take. There was never a proposal with how the program will run. It

just kind of evolved ... from what Bob wanted to do. Of course you play with people's strengths ... but you still need to have more solid direction. I think it should have been spelled out more. And if Bob is doing what we want them to do, write it down and work towards it.

I wish we had a committee for the SEI, like we do for the Innovation Academy [the district's charter school]. It's about how things evolve, when there aren't procedures in place and goals ... so it completes a circle. If these procedures aren't there, you end up in a place where it was never supposed to be that way, where you're excluding kids. You're supposed to be encouraging them to become successful rather than isolating them.

It was clear that Greg shared concerns with the staff that the SEI was excluded and alienated from the school district. When I asked if he thought there might be a chance to put a committee together for the SEI and work on the procedures so that the SEI would not be so neglected, he shook his head, saying that he had doubts that it would happen in the near future. Even though Greg was concerned about the marginalized community, he could not see the district administration coming together to make things change for the SEI. That was a somewhat different perspective from what the staff of the SEI was holding about the SEI's future.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the data on the students' and staff's experiences in the systemic change effort at Sunnydale Enrichment Institute. Four categories emerged in the analysis process, and themes and sub-themes were presented in these four categories. The data described the alternative school's culture of learning and revealed the relationship

between the alternative school and the district change effort.

The four categories of findings were: a) students navigating through life and school, b) teachers' lives and efforts at the alternative school, c) non-involvement of the alternative school members in the district change effort, and finally, d) negotiating with feelings of isolation, resistance and yearning for respect in the school district. The subsequent themes and sub-themes were presented within each of these four categories (see Table 4 for a detailed summary of the data).

In chapter 5, the next and final chapter, I provide a discussion regarding the implications and limitations of these findings and results, and also offer recommendations for future research in systemic educational change for disadvantaged and marginalized students.

## CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### Introduction

In this dissertation, I intended to answer the following questions: 1) What is the alternative school's culture of learning like? 2) Is there a relation between the alternative school and the change effort? Are members of the alternative school involved in the change effort in any way? 3) What kinds of support and policy changes are needed in systemic educational change efforts in order to ensure active participation of disadvantaged and marginalized school members?

I sought to answer these primary research questions through a critical ethnographic study at an alternative school in a Midwest public school district that was going through a systemic educational change effort. A total of ten students and five staff at the alternative school participated in the study for a period of five months. I also interviewed one district administrator that was involved in the creation of the school. I observed the classroom and interviewed these participants, focusing mostly on the culture of learning and the relationship the school had with the district change effort. I analyzed the data collected using Carspecken's (1996) analysis methods for critical ethnographic data analysis.

In this final chapter, I first provide a brief review of the emergent findings of the study. Following the study's summary, I discuss the implications of the findings. I then examine the limitations of the study and provide recommendations for future research in the area of systemic educational change and disadvantaged students.

## Summary of the Findings

Before discussing the implications of the study, I would like to briefly summarize the findings presented in the previous chapter. The four categories of findings that emerged from the data and revealed the SEI members' experiences within the alternative school were: a) students navigating through life and school, b) teachers' lives and efforts at the alternative school, c) non-involvement of the alternative school members in the district change effort, and finally d) dealing with feelings of isolation, resistance and yearning for respect in the school district.

The first category revealed how students were navigating through life and schooling within the alternative school. Themes that emerged include: the students' need for choice and control, the importance of the alternative school's relaxed atmosphere, the impact of relationships and heroes, and the teachers' understanding that life is bigger than school. Students talked about how the five learning choices available to them and the self-paced approach to learning gave them the freedom that they needed. The disappearance of behavioral problems was a strong theme as well. Relationships with teachers and friends in both the traditional school and SEI were frequently discussed. The feeling of being cared for and finding a hero to relate to was an important part of school for these students. Under the theme of life being 'bigger than school', students working to help support their families was often discussed.

The second category of the findings illuminated the teachers' lives and efforts at the alternative school. Teachers talked about their self-identity and their teaching values, how they felt the need to "fight" for the SEI students, how they felt that school and the real world are so different, and finally their pride and love for the alternative school.

Under the theme of self-identity and teaching values, the teachers were clearly viewing themselves as the underdog or being motivated by service. This was closely related to the teachers' strong desire and efforts to fight for these students, as they viewed society as being "hard" on these students. Teachers also discussed how school and the 'real world' were rather different, and how the SEI students had urgent things that needed to be taken care of in life. Finally, the teachers discussed their pride and love for the natural, creative, and relevant school culture.

The third category that emerged was the non-involvement of the alternative school members in the district change effort. The findings showed that there was virtually no SEI parent or student involvement in the district change effort, Path to Success. There was also limited teacher and staff involvement. The principal was the only person that reported to have information and involvement in the Path to Success. Other staff members reported that they had that information because of different roles they had in the school district rather than as staff at SEI. However the SEI members shared a sense of pride that the SEI's work was grounded in the Path to Success, and that they were truly "living the Path to Success' vision". They also showed a strong desire and hope to be included in the Path to Success.

The final and fourth category emerged as the data analysis showed SEI students and staff negotiated and coped with feelings of isolation, resistance to authority, and yearning for resources, communication and respect from the district. The students and staff of the SEI both shared these feelings of isolation. The students felt that they were "missing out" on the school experience, or felt "labeled and pushed aside". The teachers felt they were viewed with suspicion and looked down on because they had the SEI

students. Both the students and staff of SEI shared the sense of yearning for communication and respect from the school district. Based on these findings, I discuss the implications of this study in the next section.

### Implications of the Study

There are many implications from the findings of this study. In this section, I focus on the empirical and practical implications of the research, relating to implications for district-level systemic educational change theories and guidelines and district-level policies, and implications for an improved school culture for disadvantaged or marginalized students.

#### *Implications for Systemic Educational Change Theories and District-Level Policies*

In examining the underlying values of systemic educational change theories and guidelines, it is clear that a primary goal of systemic educational change is to meet the needs of all learners. As mentioned earlier in this paper, systemic educational change draws heavily from critical systems theory (Watson, Watson & Reigeluth, 2008) which is dedicated to human emancipation for full development of all human potential (Jackson, 1991b). Liberating Systems Theory, another influence on systemic educational change theory, seeks at its core to emancipate humans in systems that promote subjugation and dominance (Flood, 1990). Furthermore, new approaches to instruction and education which meet the needs of all learners have been recommended (Alexander & Murphy, 1993; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Reigeluth, 1997; Senge et al., 2000; Tomlinson, 2001, 2003), and systems theory (Ackoff, 1999; Banathy, 1996; Nelson & Stolterman, 2003) and systemic educational change guidelines (Duffy, 2006; Jenlink et al., 1996, 1998) consistently call for giving all stakeholders a voice in the change process.

As this study reveals, change models and change efforts have not been able to ensure that disadvantaged populations are engaged in the change process and have their needs met. The inherent culture of existing educational systems and the fundamental problems and isolation faced by disadvantaged and marginalized communities constrain them from becoming active agents of the change process and therefore becoming active beneficiaries of the change. Therefore, the implications of this study for systemic educational change theories and guidelines and district-level policies focus on three issues: a) getting alternative school teachers on board, b) providing support for the parents of disadvantaged students, and c) providing support for all student voices in a systemic educational change effort. Each of these implications is discussed next.

*Getting alternative school teachers involved.* The findings of this study are consistent with the current systemic educational change literature, which calls for broad stakeholder involvement and argues that the exclusion or noninvolvement of critical stakeholders would bring substantial challenges to truly changing the educational system for all learners (Duffy, 2006; Jenlink et al., 1996, 1998). One clear implication of this study comes from the observation that there was a lack of involvement of the alternative school staff and teachers in the district's systemic change effort, which therefore was not able to work towards meeting the needs of all learners, particularly the disadvantaged students, in the school district.

The study shows that there was a clear need for the alternative school teachers to be involved in the district change effort, as the alternative staff members felt isolated from their peers in the district and even exhibited similar patterns of resistance to district authority as the disadvantaged students themselves did. As stakeholders in the district

who identified strongly with the school district's vision for a new way of schooling, the teachers and staff felt proud that they were "living the mission" but were disappointed that their efforts were largely unnoticed or even considered with suspicion. These feelings of isolation and resistance served as obstacles to having these resourceful teachers and staff participate as leaders in the change effort.

Because these teachers and staff members in the alternative school were largely responsible for dealing with all of the students in the district who had been unable to succeed in the existing learning environment, they are likely the most experienced stakeholders in implementing the kind of learner-centered approaches for which the district's vision statement calls. For the alternative school members to be uninvolved in the change effort and furthermore feel isolated from the rest of the district is a clear obstacle and one that should be prevented in future systemic educational change efforts.

It is important that future change initiatives make a stronger effort to involve teachers who use alternative approaches with disadvantaged students, in their attempts to ensure broad stakeholder involvement and have a true understanding of the state of all components of the existing systems. By not including the alternative school community in the change effort and by not being aware of what the alternative school was doing, change leaders missed a powerful opportunity to involve learner-centered experts in the change process and instead continued the culture of isolation that exists within the old system.

The findings of this study reinforce the current systemic educational change literature's emphasis on the importance of communication across a district so that teachers and staff are aware of the successes and lessons learned by their peers, and a true

collaborative learning community can be created which brings a variety of viewpoints fully representing all stakeholders to the change process (Duffy, 2006; Jenlink et al., 1996, 1998). Systems theories and systemic educational change models encourage the inclusion of all stakeholder groups, and this study indicates that, much like creating mindset change, true inclusion of all stakeholder groups, particularly traditionally alienated or non-mainstream groups such as the teachers and staff of the alternative school, is very challenging but critical to the success of a change effort. The study of the relationship between the alternative school and the district-wide change effort clearly shows that communication, attention to detail, and full understanding of the state of the existing system, including its underlying cultures and habits, are important in order to truly involve and empower all stakeholder groups.

*Providing support for the parents of disadvantaged students.* In addition to the lack of involvement of alternative school teachers and staff in the systemic educational change effort, parents of the disadvantaged students also were completely uninvolved in the change effort. The second implication of this study is that parents of disadvantaged students often face greater challenges in participating in a change effort, and therefore should be provided with additional support for involvement.

A recurring theme in the data was that for many of the disadvantaged students, there were more important things in life than school. This was mentioned by the students as well as the school's teachers and staff. The fact that some students had come to the alternative school because they were unable to meet their outside responsibilities, such as working full time to support their family, in the traditional school setting illustrates how the parents of these disadvantaged students often faced significant challenges in life and

educating their own children, and therefore had considerable obstacles which prevented them from actively sharing their viewpoints and participating in any school activities. Many of these students' parents often relied on their children to provide for the family by working or taking care of their siblings. Simply making parents aware of district change effort meetings is not likely to be sufficient for these parents to become involved. For districts to truly try to involve the parents of all of their students, additional support needs to be provided to parents of disadvantaged students. Special effort needs to be made to help these parents be involved in the process. This could include monetary support for the hours they provide in the effort, childcare and transportation services, as well as scheduling meeting times for a variety of work schedules.

These parents, much like their children, likely have the perspective that the district does not truly wish to hear their point of view; therefore, it is important that significant effort be placed in encouraging them to be involved and share their experiences and viewpoints. Creating this mindset change can be a challenge as, even more so than typical parents, the parents of disadvantaged students are unlikely to feel they can have a voice in their children's schooling.

*Providing support for all student voices.* A very important implication of this study is the need for all students, particularly disadvantaged students, to have their voices heard and to be given an active role in the systemic educational change process. Students are the one stakeholder group which is most likely to be overlooked, as there is a strong tradition of telling students what and how to learn, whether it be their parents or their school teachers or administrators making the decision. This study showed that while the school district made some effort to include student perspectives in the change effort by

having lunch group meetings at the traditional high school, the student stakeholder group was the least represented in change activities, and none of the alternative school students were involved at all. The study indicates that if making a paradigm change to a new learner-centered paradigm is indeed the goal of school districts as the systemic educational change literature calls for (Duffy et al., 2000; Reigeluth, 1994, 1997; Reigeluth & Duffy, 2007), then that learner-centeredness needs to start in the change process itself and not only be reflected in the new instructional approaches.

One major theme of the study's findings was the importance that the students in the alternative school placed on their ability to have choice in and control of their learning environment. These students expressed their severe frustration with not having control over how they learned in the traditional school system, and their teachers and staff reinforced how the students were much more focused and well-behaved when they were given choice over how they learned and control over the environment they worked in. It is therefore very important for systemic change efforts to not only ensure student choice and control in the learning process through customization and personalization of instruction in the classrooms, but to also include all students' voices in the systemic educational change process itself.

These findings show how the alternative school students were not involved in any way in the district's change effort, but they exhibited real enthusiasm for sharing their perspectives and lending their voices to the change effort during the interviews. As students who had largely failed in the existing educational system and were now experiencing success in a more learner-centered environment, they felt that they had much to share to help other students who were having problems. These findings imply

that it is very important that systemic educational change efforts pay specific attention to representing the perspectives of disadvantaged students. This is perhaps the overriding implication of this study that these students, who are often isolated and shunted aside from their peers, need to be supported so they may become positive and active agents of change in school change efforts.

These students are failing in the current sorting-based paradigm, which promotes their failure rather than their learning (McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Reigeluth, 1997; Senge et al., 2000), and the culture of dealing with these students is deeply engrained. While the SEI was created to help these students, the teachers and staff of the school largely felt that the SEI was created in order to have a place to get rid of the problem students, and this culture of isolation in the district made it a greater challenge for these students' voices to be heard. Overall, the study's findings also show that systemic educational change efforts have a critical need to be more active in supporting disadvantaged students, parents and their teachers to become active agents in the change process. In addition to the disadvantaged student population involvement in actual change efforts in school districts, it is also important that future systemic educational change facilitation guidelines and theories make significant revisions to provide detailed guidelines and methods that ensure disadvantaged students, their teachers and parents will have the opportunity to express their needs and hopes for the new system. Particular effort needs to be made to ensure that the voices of disadvantaged students are heard as they traditionally are less likely to succeed in the current paradigm and therefore have a greater need for the new system to provide for them and their educational goals.

### *Implications for School Culture for Disadvantaged and Marginalized Students*

In examining school culture for disadvantaged students, clear values and fundamental principles are crucial (Johnston, 1992; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Metz, 1978).

Furthermore, disadvantaged students need staff and teachers who embody those values (Johnston, 1992, Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983). The literature also shows that disadvantaged students bring a significantly different set of cultures to the mainstream school culture, and therefore many school policies and practices tend to group and isolate these student bodies to gain convenience in administration and instruction. This often results in differentiated classroom learning environments and opportunities for students, and educational researchers have been debating the questions about ability grouping for more than half a century (Braddock & Dawkins, 1993; Oakes, 1992). Based on these perspectives, the implications for school culture for disadvantaged students from this study focus on four issues: a) having a dialogue about teaching and learning, b) the role of teachers and the significance of relationships, and c) school policies for ability-grouping programs, and d) the importance of choice, control and freedom. Each of these implications is discussed next.

*Having a dialogue about teaching and learning.* One of the most interesting aspects of the student interviews was how they frequently used professional educational vocabulary such as “learning environment” or “graduation rates”. The students would talk about how their “learning environment” differed from the traditional schools they’ve been at, and how they believed the “graduation rates” would increase if the schools were able to make changes to be more flexible like the SEI. It was clear that the students were engaging in active discussion about their learning process with the SEI staff and teachers.

They were being encouraged by their teachers to be reflective about their own learning process and were discussing the reasons behind the options made available to them as collaborators, using the language of their teachers to frame their choices.

The open and inviting dialogues about their own learning were helping the students to take ownership and control over their schoolwork. It was also facilitating them to become more active participants in their school experiences overall, such as building intimate friendships, engaging in recreational games, decorating the classroom or cooking for their peers. The SEI's open discussions with these disadvantaged students about learning and teaching in everyday classrooms could be a very important method for engaging disadvantaged students and facilitating their success in school.

These findings are consistent with and reinforce the research on learner-centered psychological principles which discuss the importance of motivational, affective, social, and individual differences in students' learning process (American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Psychology in Education, 1993; Keefe, 2007; Keefe & Jenkins, 2002; Lambert & McCombs, 1998; Reigeluth, 1997; Tomlinson, 1999, 2001, 2003).

*The role of teachers and the significance of relationships.* These open conversations not only facilitated ownership and agency of learning for these students, but also created stronger relationships with their so-called heroes (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983) in schools. And this also supported the school to have a coherent vision of the school with clear values (Johnston, 1992, Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983) that were continually being discussed and shared as a community.

The teachers and staff of SEI all took on a drastically different role in the lives and learning process of these students compared to traditional school teachers. The teacher's role as the content knowledge instructor was very different: to help the student to decide to identify personal learning goals for themselves and to help find the best way for the student to achieve those goals (Lambert & McCombs, 1998; McCombs & Whisler, 1997, Reigeluth, 1994).

They viewed themselves as the students' guides, facilitators, fathers, mothers, and sometimes even the grandparents of the students' children. The most important difference was that the staff would build long-term, important, caring relationships with the students (Lambert & McCombs, 1998; McCombs & Whisler, 1997, Reigeluth, 1994), rather than wanting the students to "do their work and get out," as one student described the traditional schools. The SEI students portrayed their teacher as a person "who cares about me", "who makes me feel good", "who turned my life around" or even as someone who is "my savior".

The findings of this study reinforce the current educational literature's call for an examination of the role of teachers and staff (Alexander & Murphy, 1993; Bonk & Cunningham, 1998; Bradford, Brown & Cocking, 1999; Lambert & McCombs, 1998; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Reigeluth, 1994) and how school relationships should be reconsidered (Johnston, 1992; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Metz, 1978).

*School policies for ability grouping programs.* Despite the participants' pride and hopefulness about the SEI's culture of learning, the findings revealed that the experiences of "isolation" and "alienation" often emerged in the SEI members' lives in Sunnydale Township. The students and staff of the SEI both shared these feelings of isolation from

the district and traditional high school and sense of being misunderstood. In this manner, the study also sheds light on the issue of ability grouping or tracking. The results of this study show that the concerns about the practical challenges of teaching heterogeneous classes should be discussed through an effort and commitment by all educators to search for more effective and innovative instructional approaches that cater to diverse students, rather than blindly advocating for ability grouping policies (Oakes, 1985; 1992, Slavin, 1990). Both students and teachers in the SEI felt that the school system as a whole should move towards the direction of more personalized and inclusive school atmosphere.

This is consistent with the recent literature on ability grouping and tracking which was reviewed in Chapter 2, showing that while arguments in support of ability grouping draw from assumptions about the effectiveness of grouping, ability grouping studies overall show that the effects on student achievement are non-existent (Betts & Shkolnik, 2000; Slavin, 1990; Zimmer, 2003). Literature also shows that practitioners feel uncomfortable making decisions that could create segregated schools by socioeconomic or racial standards because the creation of such schools has been shown to cause significant negative long-lasting effects on students' self-esteem and life goals and opportunities (Oakes, 1985; 1992).

This finding of this study reinforces established research that points out that it is now time to move beyond examining whether ability grouping is effective or not and instead consider how schools can meet the needs of a heterogeneous student body without grouping. It is time to make larger investments in efforts and research that have potential to reverse the negative impact of tracking and meet the future needs of our society by providing a more equitable and effective learning environment in our public

schools (Slavin, 1990).

*Truly learner-centered schools.* During our conversations and interviews, students frequently talked about the importance of having choice and control in their schoolwork. Students talked about how they appreciated the “different ways of learning” and how the school didn’t “hold you down and make you learn the way they want to teach you.” Each student was continuously engaging in an active, self-learning, planning process. This process was clearly enhancing motivation by placing greater responsibility and ownership on the students (Schlechty, 2002). As they had a certain amount of credits due every couple of weeks, they learned to set and meet deadlines on their own, rather than being micro managed to do a certain amount of work every day by a teacher.

This study’s findings are consistent with the substantial body of literature on learner-centered instruction, personalized learning, and differentiated learning which was reviewed in Chapter 2 (Alexander & Murphy, 1993; Bonk & Cunningham, 1998; Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999; Lambert & McCombs, 1998; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Reigeluth, 1994) that calls for customization and personalization in instruction for each individual learner, and the creation of environments that support self-regulated learners who take more control of their own learning.

The alternative school’s approach to instruction is also very similar to Reigeluth’s (1994) notion of a personal “inventory of attainments”, where the students strive to master and check off their attainments that detail their individual progress through the district’s required and optional learning standards. Each student has different levels of progress in every attainment, according to his or her interests, talents, and pace of learning. The students move to the next topic as soon they master the current one, and

while each student must reach mastery level before moving on, students also do not need to wait for others who are not yet at that level of learning. In essence, the idea is to overcome the system of schools that hold time constant, which therefore forces student learning to vary. In the new paradigm of schools, all students work at their own maximum pace to reach mastery in each attainment. This personalized, customized, and self-paced learning process would help schools to facilitate students in achieving the high expectations they have for themselves. The SEI's students verified this in their universally positive comments regarding the gratification they felt at being in control of their own learning.

#### Limitations

There are several limitations of this study: its low generalizability, lack of providing the parents' perspectives, non-availability of documents on the SEI, and potential researcher bias are discussed in the next section.

##### *Low Generalizability*

As mentioned in the methodology chapter, many qualitative research methodologies are critiqued for their lack of generalizability, and the most obvious constraint of this study is that it is not easily generalizable to other schools or school districts' systemic educational change efforts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). While implications and recommendations have been drawn from this study that could inform and benefit other district-wide systemic educational change efforts, this study presents no evidence for generalizability to all disadvantaged, marginalized students, nor all alternative schools, nor all systemic school change efforts. I cautiously presented the findings in this study, keeping these limitations in mind.

### *Researcher Bias*

A potential limitation of this study could be the researcher's bias or strong value orientation. While, this study is grounded in critical ethnographic methods (Carspecken, 1996), and my intended role as an active supporter and advocate for the participants has not opposed nor interfered with my research methods, I had a strong value orientation regarding these issues. Primarily, I was aware that my value orientations, such as that systemic educational change should include all stakeholders and that stakeholders should be active participants, could impact participants' thoughts and responses on their perspectives of Path to Success. With this in mind, I attempted to continually reflect on my role and facilitation of the study as a researcher throughout the data collection and data analysis process in order to limit researcher bias.

### *Need for Parent Perspectives*

Another limitation of this study is the absence of parents' perspectives regarding school culture and school change. I was not able to visit the students' homes and interview the students' parents. Therefore, while the students provided information that their parents did not engage in any activities regarding the Path to Success, there was no means to understand what kind of school change these parents wanted for their children, and if the parents were or were not interested in contributing to the Path to Success. In future studies, understanding the parents of the disadvantaged students could be a very important addition to this area of research. The parents' influence on the school culture is also an important topic of interest that will provide valuable insight to improving school culture through systemic educational change for disadvantaged students.

### *Non-Availability of Documents*

A final potential limitation of this study is the non-availability of documents that I had planned on collecting. While engaging in the interviews and focus-group interviews with SEI staff and school district administrators, I made a special effort to get support in collecting documents for analysis in order to better understand the district-level school culture, and management and facility operation related to the SEI. The documents that were to be collected and used for analysis were the early groundwork and proposal documents of the SEI, which included the objectives and goals of the school. However, during the interview process, I found that the committee that was put together to establish the SEI turned their effort to establishing the Sunnydale Innovation Academy, the charter school of the school district instead, and there were no formal documents or proposals prepared for the SEI. The lack of documents for a more district-level analysis of the school's management, facility operation and school district culture is a limitation to this study.

### Future Research

I plan to continue this line of research in the future to understand how disadvantaged students should become active agents of school change efforts. Here, I provide suggestions of ways that this research on disadvantaged students and systemic educational change could be expanded empirically, theoretically, and methodologically.

### *Empirical Research*

There is a variety of ways that this empirical work could be expanded. Most importantly, it would be valuable to compare the results of this study to other alternative schools or programs at different public school districts. For example, it would be important to

conduct similar studies at other public alternative schools or programs and compare the results to see how the school cultures differ. Would the culture of learning of other alternative schools still be similar to the SEI? Or is the culture of learning at SEI unique in terms of having been influenced by the Path to Success? This would give a better understanding of what kinds of influences or relationships educational change efforts have on alternative schools in school districts that are going through educational change. I would anticipate different results from different districts, schools and programs, and it would be interesting to see how school change efforts should be taking these important implications into account in their change processes.

Another way to understand and expand research about how schools should be engaging in change for disadvantaged students would be to expand the participants to include the parents of these students in order to understand their perspectives and visions for their children's schooling. Understanding the holistic picture of all parents', teachers' and students' perspectives on school change will be a valuable input for systemic educational change efforts to have a richer understanding and base to draw from for the vision of the change.

Finally, in addition to understanding the full picture of the disadvantaged and marginalized student community's needs and vision of schooling, it is important to explore what kinds of support systems and policies are needed to have meaningful contributions from these members. For example, it would be valuable to compare what kinds of communication methods or resources are most effective in bringing these members to be more active in the change process. These effective methods and resources should be different for students, teachers and parents. These research findings will be

invaluable for systemic educational change efforts to find actionable solutions that can be implemented in the change process.

### *Theoretical Research*

Theoretical improvement in the area of systemic educational change is needed in order to provide leverage in the field of educational change. The theory and guidelines for engaging in systemic educational change, such as the Guidance System for Transforming Education (GSTE) (Jenlink et al., 1998) and the school system transformation (SST) protocol (Duffy, & Reigeluth, 2008), could be further expanded through the empirical studies suggested above to facilitate the promises of engaging the disadvantaged and marginalized communities. This study indicated that the disadvantaged and marginalized students and teachers both wanted to be included as respected members of the educational change effort. Future research is needed to understand how best the theory and guidelines can support these students, parents and teachers in becoming active agents in the educational change process.

### *Methodological Research*

The methodology of conducting interviews and focus groups with the researcher being a participant in the school calls for further consideration. I plan to use both long-term individual and focus-group interviews to further understand the potential and promise of using these methods of reflective and developmental empowerment of disadvantaged students. Additionally, in the area of systemic educational change research, more work is needed in order to understand how we can better engage in reflective and constructive, critical dialogue with teachers serving in the disadvantaged and marginalized schools.

Finally, more research is needed to understand how such dialogue should be shared and further extended to the administration and district-wide dialogue.

### Conclusion

Marginalized learning communities or disadvantaged student bodies in public schools have different cultures of learning and instruction from the mainstream learning communities. Their culture as a learning community within the school district is also very different from the mainstream school culture. Many school policies and practices tend to separate these student bodies to gain convenience in administration and instruction, and little consideration is given to whether these experiences of separation are actually effective and positive for all students.

Through a critical ethnographic approach, this study examined the culture of learning and the practice of instruction of a marginalized learning community by exploring an isolated alternative school community in a public school district that is going through an educational change process. The findings of this study show that systemic educational change efforts could be much more successful with the utilization of the input and experiences of these disadvantaged students' and their teachers' in the process. More research in systemic educational change and school culture for disadvantaged students is needed in order to reflect on more actionable support, solutions and policies where these disadvantaged or marginalized students and their teachers will become more active agents and beneficiaries of change in the school district, and therefore bring the school district to truly become learner-centered and meet the needs of all learners.

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