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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

"They're Not Used to Being Seen": Teacher Reflections on Building Community and Belonging with High-Need Students

by

Celine Massuger

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education

Loyola Marymount University,

In partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

2024

"They're Not Used to Being Seen": Teacher Reflections on Building Community and Belonging with High-Need Students

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This dissertation written by Celine Massuger, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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Thank you to my support system throughout these past three years: my fellow Cohort 19 members, my principal Sonia Hernandez, and my parents, Evelina and Bruno. Special thanks to Ashley, Susy, and Steph for always believing in me and encouraging me when I doubted myself.

Lastly, thank you to my husband, Jeremy Forbing, who made personal, professional, and emotional sacrifices in order for me to complete this doctoral journey. None of this would be possible without you.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to every student who ever felt like school wasn't for them, every student who struggled to belong, and every student who was pushed out. May we as a society never forget that education is a fundamental human right, and may we never stop fighting for more inclusive and equitable schools.

And to my sons, Isaac and Owen. May you follow your dreams and discover your own path to leave this world a little better than you found it.

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ABSTRACT

"They're Not Used to Being Seen":

Teacher Reflections on Building Community and Belonging with High-Need Students

by

Celine Massuger

In today's education context, not all young people are able to complete their high school education. In fact, in 2016, the number of low-income young people ages 16 to 24 years who did not complete high school or were not enrolled in high school was 3.7 times higher than those of high-income families (McFarland et al., 2018). This may be due to discipline policies, conflicts with teachers and administrators, and other factors creating a poor school climate. The COVID-19 pandemic further created a sense of isolation amongst many students, causing disengagement from traditional approaches and revealing a need for an increased focus on community building. Sense of belonging is an important factor impacting school climate, academic outcomes, and well-being for students. However, research regarding the practices which foster belonging is limited. This qualitative study investigated teacher perceptions of sense of belonging in their context, as well as the classroom and school-wide practices that influence and foster a sense of belonging with their students. Findings suggest that student belonging is observable, impacted by previous schooling experiences, and fostered through caring, relational practices. Findings reveal effective classroom and school-wide practices linked to elements of critical hope that teachers used in order to build a sense of belonging with their students. Findings culminate in a graphic displaying these practices which could serve as a framework for implementation. In order to create classroom environments that empower students, the findings suggest the need for teachers

to apply practices such as setting community agreements; embracing student-centered, collaborative instruction; and having hard conversations instead of removing students from class. This research indicates the need for school site leaders to review existing school policies and practices to be more inclusive of high-need students. The findings also suggest that policy makers allocate increased funding for schools to become community centers, allowing them to better foster social interaction and recreational activities.

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Schools are structured institutions aimed at fostering learning. However, social factors are present as well. The experiences that students have in schools can impact their development and identity, whether positive or negative. Sense of belonging at school is an important social factor (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that students are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors and succeed academically when they feel connected to school (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2009). However, students tend to experience a high sense of belonging in primary grades, and then—consistent with stage-environment fit theory—belonging tends to drop off because the environment is not meeting the needs of adolescent students (Eccles & Roeser, 2009). A positive school climate is associated with various other outcomes, including lower rates of substance use, improved mental health, and decreased violence among students (Huang & Cornell, 2018). However, many schools continue to place emphasis on academic achievement and adherence to policies, while considering school climate and sense of belonging an afterthought. According to Renick and Reich (2020), a positive school climate and sense of belonging can influence students' academic outcomes and well-being. Nevertheless, not enough research exists regarding how to foster belonging, or which aspects of school climate relate to an increased sense of belonging. In addition, marginalized groups with the highest needs in particular are at risk of not belonging.

Sense of Belonging

The concept of sense of belonging first originated from Abraham Maslow's 1943 article, "A Theory of Human Motivation." In this article, Maslow described a positive theory of motivation, synthesizing work done by previous psychologists to develop his theory. It was suggested as a framework for future research. This is a flagship article in which many researchers feel the concept of belonging originated. Maslow stated that once physiological and safety needs of human beings are met, the need for love, affection, and belongingness will emerge. Maslow explained belonging as yearning for a place in one's group and affectionate relationships with people. In his theory of human motivation, Maslow stated that the need for love and belonging is so essential that a lack of this need being met often results in maladjustment (Maslow, 1943). Scholars, researchers, and psychologists have built upon Maslow's work to further expand and define the concept of belonging and its implications in different settings, such as schools.

The current research study has taken place amidst this country's current educational context, where at least 20% of U.S. high school students stop attending school each year. The high numbers of non-completion may be due to discipline policies, conflicts with teachers and administrators, and other factors creating a poor school climate (Boylan & Renzulli, 2017). There is very limited data regarding students who have exited high school prior to graduation; therefore, it is difficult to understand which factors caused them to leave prematurely. When students stop attending school, they are at risk of not completing their education. Some may find alternative school placements in which they can be successful. Many alternative schools are able to operate in a manner that meets the needs of students with a variety of learning styles,

strengths, and needs (California Education Code § 58500). This flexible model can allow for a greater sense of belonging among students who struggled to belong within the traditional schooling context. Nevertheless, the stated purpose of traditional public schools is to meet the needs of all children, including those with higher barriers to education. To accomplish this, it is valuable to examine belonging in alternative schools and collect data on how teachers foster belonging among marginalized students.

Addressing a Problem of Practice

An educational problem of practice has been the dropout crisis. According to the U.S. Department of Education, a student drops out of high school every 26 seconds (Miller, 2015). However, every student deserves the opportunity to complete their education within a public school that meets not only their academic needs, but also provides a safe and welcoming environment. Goldschmidt and Wang (1999) found that in both middle and high schools, drop-out rates were higher when there were high numbers of low-socioeconomic status children attending the school. Minority students, low-income students, and students with disabilities are pushed out of school at the highest rates (Huang & Cornell, 2018). Students with high needs are often unable to make connections within their school, or are "pushed out" because schools are an unwelcoming place for many students who eventually give up on their education (Fine, 1987). These students struggle to find other educational spaces in which they can belong and be academically successful. Sense of belonging within schools has been linked to a number of positive outcomes, including academic motivation (Goodenow & Grady, 1993), social adjustment (Goodenow, 1992), and retention (Alexander et al., 2001). However, belonging has not often been prioritized or discussed within the education system, due to a hyper-focus on

standardized test scores and the lack of a clear framework. Since belonging is often undervalued within schools, students are often left to create connections on their own. Anderman (2002) found that a lack of belonging was associated with high absenteeism as well as increased school problems, such as difficulty with paying attention, completing homework, or getting along with teachers and peers. As such, students with the highest needs often experience the least amount of belonging in traditional schools. School belonging is linked to positive outcomes for students, including higher academic achievement and completion rates, which means that students with the highest needs are less likely to complete school than their peers.

When students do not graduate from high school, there are significant consequences. Wilson (2014) found that more than half of the prisoners who enter the criminal justice system do not have high school diplomas. In addition, the United States houses more than 25% of the world's prisoners, and incarceration rates in the country have quadrupled since the 1980s. People of color make up a disproportionate number of incarcerees, with African Americans being locked up at six times the rate of white people. According to Wilson (2014), our country has adopted a culture of incarceration to remove people from society who present difficult problems, including issues caused by disability and addiction. Schools have adopted similar practices, removing students whose problematic behavior causes a disruption to the learning environment, thus failing to identify or understand the underlying issues of student behavior and fueling the school-to-prison pipeline instead. Exclusionary practices, such as removing students from class, suspension, and expulsion have become common practice, leading to high numbers of students whose educational needs are not being met in traditional schools. The *Breaking School Rules'*

study (Fabelo et al., 2011) found that 54% of all students experienced at least one in-school suspension, and linked suspension to increased dropout rates.

A mixed-methods longitudinal study (Sanders & Munford, 2015) from New Zealand collected data from youth who did not graduate from high school, which is unique since most research takes place within schools. The strongest thread in the descriptions youth gave of their experiences was that they did not fit in, school was not for them, that they felt "not good enough" or different from the other students, which made them uncomfortable and caused emotional distress. Students struggled to create a positive student identity, to try to convince themselves and others that they belonged at school, which deteriorated over time, especially with the amplification of outside challenges, causing anger and frustration. The second most common set of educational narratives were exclusion from school, and what happened after leaving, including loss of motivation, feeling lost, and confusion about where they did belong if not at school (Sanders & Munford, 2016). This study further highlighted the need for more research regarding school belonging for all students.

The prevalence of high-need students being pushed out of traditional schools continues to be a social justice issue. Not all students are able to successfully complete secondary school, particularly minority students, low-income students, and students with disabilities. The current study explored strategies and behaviors practiced by alternative school teachers to increase belonging for all students, particularly those students whose needs have not been met by traditional schools. These findings could potentially create more positive schooling experiences for students with the highest needs.

Research Questions

This qualitative study has sought to explore experiences and perceptions related to sense of belonging among teachers working within the alternative education context, and to investigate the following three questions:

1. What are alternative school teachers' perceptions of sense of belonging in their context?
2. What support do teachers employ in their classrooms to build and increase students' sense of belonging in an alternative education setting?
3. What are teachers' perceptions of school-wide practices that foster students' sense of belonging?

Purpose of the Study

This study explored the experiences of alternative secondary school teachers working with students who have been pushed out of traditional schools. This research investigated how the concept of belonging has impacted the experiences of alternative school teachers. Through qualitative interviews, this study sought to uncover the strategies that teachers have used to create belonging among their students and help them heal from negative schooling experiences. This study also sought to identify the impact that school-wide policies and practices can have on school belonging. This research highlighted the voices and experiences of educators working closely with marginalized populations, allowing them to tell their stories in their own words. This study identified themes related to school belonging, and uncovered implications for future research.

This study also sought to provide a framework for school leaders working with students who have experienced school push-out or who have never felt that they belonged at school. Most importantly, this research sought to improve the experiences of high-need students within traditional schools. This study hoped to provide school leaders with tangible strategies that could be used to increase a sense of belonging, and to retain all students within secondary school until they graduate.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was to inform the practice of educational institutions in creating more humanizing experiences for students who may be at risk of not completing high school or may have high barriers to their education. This study sought to learn more about strategies and practices to increase school belonging for marginalized populations, which will in turn have a positive impact on their overall health. The goal of the research was to uncover best practices used to develop and increase students' sense of belonging in alternative school settings. The findings could then be applied in traditional school contexts to increase school belonging and secondary school completion for all students, including those whose narratives may not have fit into that of the traditional student. That may include students with learning challenges, students who are pregnant/parenting, justice-involved students, and students who have experienced or continue to experience trauma. The research sought to discover practices both within the classroom and at the whole-school level that could affect and influence a student's sense of belonging.

Theoretical Frameworks

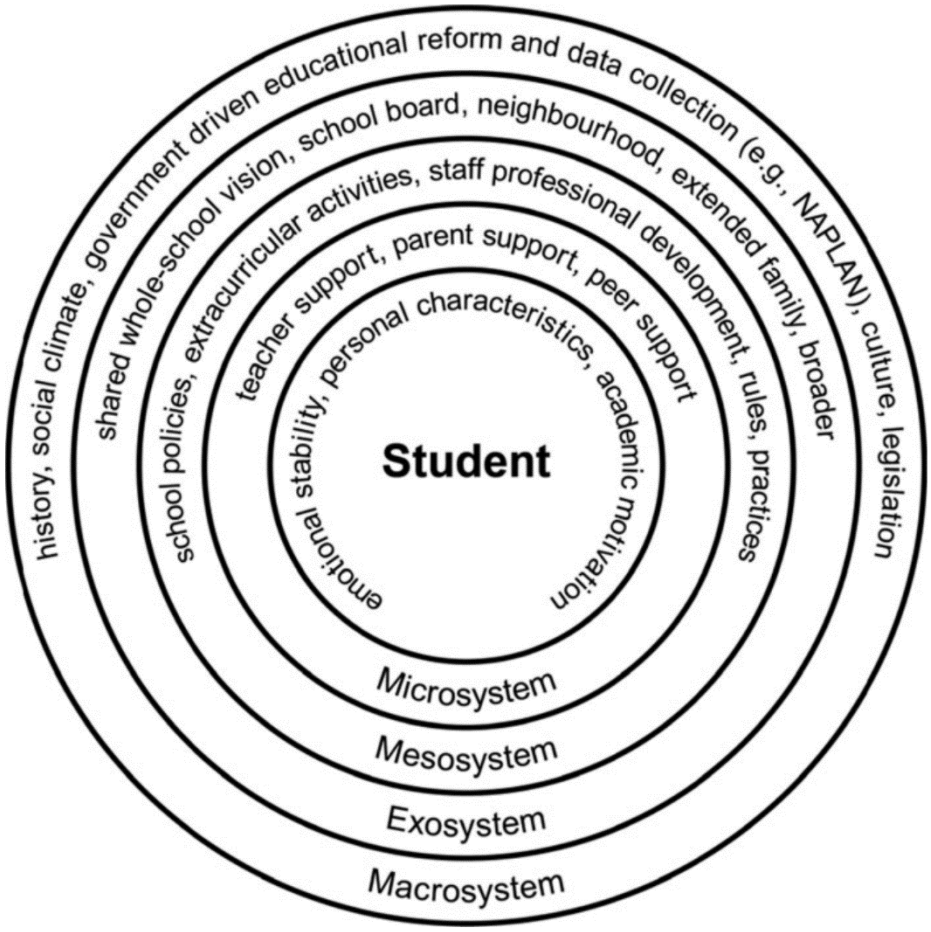
The conceptual framework for this study was a socio-ecological framework of school belonging created by Allen et al. (2016), adapted from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) sociological model of human development, to better understand the factors that impact a student's sense of school belonging across five levels (see Figure 1). This framework explained that all children are at the center of multiple levels of influence, and that schools can have a significant effect on their development and psychosocial adjustment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The innermost level is the individual level, which includes a student's personal characteristics, such as academic self-regulation, motivation, and self-esteem. The second layer is the microsystem, which includes relationships with teachers, peers, and parents. Also included are the mesosystem, which includes school policies and practices, which can have an effect on the microsystem layer, and exosystem, which focuses on the larger school community. The exosystem includes the local neighborhood, grandparents and extended families, local businesses, and community groups. The macrosystem level of this framework is based on societal norms, government legislation, and other external factors that affect students in schools. Less empirical information on school belonging is available regarding the exosystem and macrosystem levels because it can be difficult to examine the direct effect on students (Brown Kirschman & Karazsia, 2014).

This framework demonstrates that a student's development takes place within systems that interact with one another, creating multiple levels of influence. It emphasizes the importance of social relationships but also includes tangible environmental factors such as classrooms and resources, as well as whole school approaches. Use of this conceptual framework has allowed for exploration of the various layers of belonging, and examined implications for the individual,

classroom, and organizational levels. This conceptual framework also allowed for various strategies and practices identified through the research process to be categorized to individual layers of school belonging, which could increase the ease of implementation for school leaders, depending on which areas of school belonging they are intending to prioritize.

Figure 1

The Socioecological Framework of School Belonging



Note: Reprinted from "Fostering School Belonging in Secondary Schools Using a Socio-Ecological Framework" by K. A. Allen, D. Vella-Brodrick, & L. Waters, 2016, *Educational and Developmental Psychological, 33,* p. 97-121, copyright 2016 by Springer Science+Business Media, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-016-9389-8, used by permission.

This framework was selected because it allowed for deeper exploration that will refine understanding of belonging in the context of alternative education. This research utilized the framework to identify what practices are implemented, how they are implemented, and the success of those practices, based on the perceptions of educators working within that context. This research also allowed this framework to be applied to a specific population of students who have historically experienced exclusion and a lack of belonging within school (i.e. minority groups, students with disabilities, students with low socio-economic status), for which there is limited existing research.

This study also utilized the concept of critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) as a conceptual framework guiding the research. Critical hope demands a committed and active struggle "against the evidence in order to change the deadly tides of wealth inequality, group xenophobia, and personal despair" (West, 2004, pp. 296–297). This study included the three elements of critical hope: material, Socratic, and audacious. Material hope involves connecting pedagogy with events that directly affected students' lives, such as making cards and raising money for a student whose family member has passed away. Socratic hope involves building a teacher-student relationship as the result of pedagogy that prioritizes the humanization of students above all else. Teachers who foster Socratic hope were willing to take risks, make sacrifices, and give support above and beyond that which was required to their students. Audacious hope stands in solidarity with urban communities, engaging in collective struggle and pain, and also striving for collective healing, rather than disposing of students who act out or misbehave. According to the concept of critical hope, effective teaching depends most heavily on one thing: deep and caring relationships. This research explored how educators utilize critical

hope to increase students' sense of belonging, and identified the relationship between caring and belonging for high-need students.

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative study explored the experiences of teachers working with students ages 16-24 at an alternative charter high school in Southern California. Currently the high school has 16 school sites within the Southern California region located in different communities, offering a high school diploma, vocational training, leadership development, post-secondary readiness, and supportive services. 100% of the students enrolled at the alternative school have transferred from other high schools, or returned after a period of non- enrollment from high school. Since 2008, over 5,400 former high school push-outs have received their high school diploma at this alternative school. According to YouthBuild Charter School of California (YCSC)'s website, these students, on average, earn 1.7 times the amount of credits in the alternative setting as they did in their previous school. When they are able to commit to their education for a year-and-a-half in the alternative school, they have an 85% chance of graduating (YouthBuild Charter School of California, 2021).

Invitations to participate in interviews were sent out to teachers at different school sites in different communities. The purpose for exploring teacher experiences at multiple school sites is to identify commonalities and themes shared by alternative school teachers serving different communities. Semi-structured interview questions were developed by this researcher, utilizing findings from the five layers of school belonging developed by Allen et al. (2016), as well as other empirical data gathered from the literature. This research utilized a semi-structured

interview strategy because it allowed this researcher to prepare questions in advance, but still give flexibility to pivot and adjust as needed depending on the participants' responses. Participants were identified by the researcher and asked if they were willing to participate in an interview regarding their experience with school belonging. Participants were asked to sign a release consenting to participate in the research process, and steps were taken to conceal their identity. Interviews were conducted via the Zoom videoconferencing platform (www.Zoom.com) and recorded by the researcher. The audio recordings were transcribed using the online speech recognition service Temi (www.Temi.com). The transcribed interviews were printed in order to take notes and identify codes. The coding process involved a reading mode (Yin, 2016) to analyze the interview data and look for patterns. Findings were identified by reading and reviewing the interview transcription, and developing themes that emerged from the interview. The narrative data was manually coded using different colored highlighters in order to uncover meaningful themes.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions

While the findings related to school belonging in alternative education settings are significant, it is important to note that the findings are not generalizable due to a small sample size of teachers. In addition, all of the research participants have been employed at the same charter school, located in different communities. While the semi-structured interview methodology has allowed for a deeper collection of data from those specific research participants, it is not representative of the larger population of alternative education teachers. In addition, this researcher was employed within the same charter school network, and used a sample of convenience by reaching out to colleagues that participated in the research process,

which limited the diversity of research participants. In addition, though the researcher was not the direct supervisor of any research participants, and kept all identities anonymous, it is still uncertain to which extent the research participants felt comfortable disclosing their thoughts regarding classroom and school practices during the interview process.

This research did not attempt to include or understand the experiences of students related to belonging within the alternative school context. While student voice and perspective has always been deeply important to this researcher, this study focused on strategies and practices used to increase belonging, which students may not be conscious of, because they may be new to the alternative school setting or still acclimating to a different school climate. This research also did not attempt to include a larger sample size of alternative school teachers, in order to gather a deeper amount of meaningful interview data from the research participants within the given time constraints of the study. This research also did not include the voices of teachers currently working within the traditional public school system or private sector, because it was focused exclusively on understanding school belonging within the alternative context.

This researcher sought to minimize researcher bias by engaging in critical reflection to identify personal biases, beliefs, and interests and examine how they may factor into the data collection and analysis. The researcher approached this research with empathy and reflectiveness, with the goal of developing trustworthiness and understanding the experiences of the participants. This researcher used techniques such as prolonged engagement with the subjects and setting as well as persistent observation in order to collect data that is authentic and true.

Definitions of Key Terms

This research did contain specific terminology related to the practices of education, including terms describing students often enrolled in alternative education settings, and terms related to school climate. This research also included definitions from California State Education Code (California Education Code (EC) Sections 58500-58512) regarding alternative schooling. Select terms are defined in Table 1.

Table 1

Definitions of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Sense of Belonging	A widely accepted definition of school belonging is "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; 80); also using the label school membership
Marginalized populations	These are groups and communities that experience discrimination and exclusion (social, political and economic) because of unequal power relationships across economic, political, social and cultural dimensions.
Minority students	Students who do not belong to a region's or nation's majority racial or ethnic group—may be subject to discrimination, whether sanctioned or passive, that can affect their educational achievement.
Low-Socioeconomic Status (SES)	People who come from families with annual incomes in the lowest 20% nationally (around $40,000), or below 200% of the federal poverty line (Kilduff, 2022). The poverty line varies depending on the number of family members, with smaller families having a much lower poverty line and larger families needing more money to support all of their members, therefore having a higher poverty line.
Students with disabilities	A student with a disability is defined as a student with an emotional, intellectual, or physical disabling condition, which requires assistance to access the educational environment.

Note: Adapted from "The Relationship of School Belonging and Friends' Values to Academic Motivation Among Urban Adolescent Students" by C. Goodenow & Grady, *Journal of Experimental Education, 62*, 1, 60-71, copyright 1993 by Taylor & Francis Online; "How Poverty in the United States is Measured and Why It Matters" by L. Kilduff, 2022, copyright 2022 by Population Reference Bureau, https://www.prb.org/resources/how-poverty-in-the-united-states-is-measured-and-why-it-matters/.

Table 1 (continued)

Definitions of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Alternative school	California *Education Code* (*EC*) sections 58500 through 58512 defines an alternative school as a school or separate class group within a school which is operated in a manner designed to: (a) Maximize the opportunity for students to develop the positive values of self-reliance, initiative, kindness, spontaneity, resourcefulness, courage, creativity, responsibility, and joy. (b) Recognize that the best learning takes place when the student learns because of his desire to learn. (c) Maintain a learning situation maximizing student self-motivation and encouraging the student in his own time to follow his own interests. These interests may be conceived by him totally and independently or may result in whole or in part from a presentation by his teachers of choices of learning projects. (d) Maximize the opportunity for teachers, parents and students to cooperatively develop the learning process and its subject matter. This opportunity shall be a continuous, permanent process. (e) Maximize the opportunity for the students, teachers, and parents to continuously react to the changing world, including but not limited to the community in which the school is located.
School climate	This refers to the quality and character of school life. It is based on patterns of students', parents', and school personnels' experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.
Punitive discipline	This focuses on punishing the harm-doer, often adding to the problem that led to the hurtful behavior. This can include negative consequences for the student because of negative behavior. Losing recess, sitting in the corner, suspension, and expulsion are all types of punitive policies.
School push-out	A series of actions in schools that lead a child to feel disconnected and alienated so the child leaves school or the child is removed from school through formal and informal disciplinary actions such as suspension and expulsion.
School-to-prison pipeline	The causal link between educational exclusion and criminalization of young people is referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline.

Note: Adapted from "Alternative Schools & Programs of Choice Summary, California Education Code (EC) Sections 58500-58512, 2024, https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/eo/as/asprogramsummary.asp.

Summary

The previous sections of this paper explained the foundations for the research, including the background/context, problem of practice and research questions, as well as defined key terms. Also included were the purpose and significance of the study. The previous section

included a description of the Socio-ecological framework of school belonging created by Allen et al. (2016), adapted from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) sociological model of human development, which will serve as the conceptual framework for the study. The following chapter will contain the literature review, which will provide a summary of the research so far regarding school belonging. Following the literature review is an outline of the research design and the specific research methods which will be used for this study. This paper will conclude with a discussion of the research findings and implications for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, the literature relevant to the concept of belonging, alternative education, and teacher philosophy will be explored and discussed as it is related to this research.

Concept of Belonging

Researchers have continued to explore belonging with multiple definitions of the concept, fundamental attributes, and implications for implementation in various contexts. Anant defined belonging as "personal involvement (in a social system) to the extent that the person feels himself to be an indispensable and integral part of the system" (Anant, 1967). Strayhorn (2012) defined sense of belonging as "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g. campus community) or others on campus (e.g. faculty, peers)" (p. 3).

Understanding the Need to Belong

Baumeister and Leary (1995) developed and evaluated the hypothesis that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation. They shared that human beings have a drive to form and maintain lasting, positive, and significant relationships with others. Their hypothesis was tested by reviewing empirical literature of social and personality psychology related to the theory of belongingness, using metatheory and eight requirements of human motivation. Results showed evidence that social bonds form easily, without requiring specially conducive circumstances, and that bonding occurs even under adverse circumstances. Findings showed that people invest a great deal of time and effort in fostering supportive relationships with others.

Results also showed that people generally resist the dissolution of relationships and social bonds, including bad or destructive relationships, and experience distress when those relationships end. Results also showed that concern for belongingness shapes human thoughts, with people interpreting situations and events based on the implications for their relationships and thinking more about relationship partners than other people. Many of the strongest emotions people experienced, both positive and negative, were related to belonging. Being accepted, included, and welcomed generally led to positive emotions while being excluded, rejected, and ignored led to negative feelings. The evidence suggested that one of the basic functions of emotion was to regulate behavior in order to form and maintain social bonds. Deprivation of strong, stable social relationships was linked to a large array of consequences, including mental/physical illness and behavior problems (including criminality and suicide). Relationships which lacked regular interaction offered only partial, incomplete satisfaction of the need to belong. People in relationships without frequent interaction found them valuable but suffered over the lack of direct contact with the other person. Results showed that primary social bonds must be characterized by affectively positive interactions that signified the other's affectionate concern.

Lastly, interaction patterns suggested that people seek a limited number of relationships, consistent with the view that the need to belong is subject to satiation and diminishing returns. Though it has not been proven, it is plausible that the need to belong is part of human biological inheritance (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In school environments, this need has impacted students' ability to be successful, not just academically, but socially and emotionally as well. Children and adolescents have spent more time in school than anywhere else outside of the home, which means that schools influence students' social-emotional and behavioral

development. Eccles and Roeser (2009) highlighted the major developmental effects that schools can have on students of all ages. They explored how the different characteristics and systems within schools impact students in different ways. Level one explored the classroom, the most immediate environment for a student, by identifying teacher beliefs, teachers' general sense of efficacy, differential teacher expectations, classroom climate, teacher-student relationships, classroom management, motivational climate, nature of academic work, and experiences of racial-ethnic discrimination as critical characteristics influencing student development. Level two explored school buildings by identifying factors such as general school climate, academic tracks and curricular differentiation, school size, extracurricular and out of school activities, unsupervised spaces, and school stop/start times. Level three reviewed the impact of whole-school features, including middle-grades school transition, grade-related differences in teacher beliefs, grade-related differences in authority relationships and affective relationships, grade-related differences in grading practices, and the high school transition. Level four studied the effects of schools as embedded organizations in the larger community, and explored macro characteristics such as public vs. private schools, school resources, and reform efforts.

Findings showed that these multiple levels of school organization interact to shape the day-to-day experiences of adolescents and teachers. Change happens at both the individual and institutional levels, meaning that the ideal, developmentally-appropriate change will happen in the school in synchrony as the individual ages. Larger cultural and societal influences also affect interactions within schools (Eccles & Roeser, 2009). Literature regarding practices to enhance school belonging also mentions many characteristics within schools that can influence and impact the development of students. Characteristics of belonging occur at different

organizational levels within schools, and can interact with each other in different ways to impact how a student perceives and experiences belonging within their school.

Osterman (2000) explored students' sense of acceptance within school to address the importance of belonging in educational settings, the extent to which students experience school as a community, and how schools influence students' sense of community. Collecting data from literature reviews using variables that deal directly with students' psychological experiences, researchers found that belonging is important for all ages and at all ages of schooling. The strongest association was between school-relatedness and student engagement. Support from teachers was found to be particularly important, having the biggest impact on student engagement. Different groups based on gender, age, and context may have different needs related to belonging, and may experience belonging in different ways. Results indicated that belonging is an extremely important concept, with a huge impact on human motivation and behavior. Findings in schools demonstrate that students who experience acceptance are more motivated, more engaged in learning, and more committed to school. This commitment and engagement has been linked to student performance and quality of learning. Findings showed that students' experiences within the classroom influenced their feelings about themselves, which also impacted engagement and achievement.

Results also showed that many students experience rejection from peers and adults at school, do not experience belonging at school, and cannot count on those around them at school to meet their emotional needs (Osterman, 2000). These findings are significant because they demonstrate the importance of belonging, and also its connection to similar constructs such as school connectedness, school membership, acceptance, and sense of community. Sense of

belonging impacts student engagement, which can lead to higher academic performance and quality of learning. Despite the evidence of the importance of belonging, many students do not experience belonging or support from peers or adults around them, leading to negative effects and maladaptive behaviors which generally lead to isolation and withdrawal from school. Anant (1967) studied the link between belongingness, anxiety, and self-sufficiency. In this study, three questionnaires were distributed to 138 college students in India, belonging to the four major caste groups. The belongingness score was lower in the sample from India than the study from Canada, possibly due to the difference in affluence and development between the two countries, and the difference in social opportunities afforded to participants, however the self-sufficiency mean score was higher. The only statistically significant correlation was between Belongingness and Anxiety in the Brahmins. The results of this study supported the hypothesis that economic factors play a role in the extent to which belongingness reduces anxiety in members of a society. In affluent societies, anxieties were rooted primarily in interpersonal relationships, while in a non-affluent society, anxieties were directly related to fulfilling physiological needs.

Findings showed that sense of belonging may be an important factor in reducing mental illness, as experienced through strong family ties, village community, and caste group. Though the population studied was in India, findings showed that belonging could have an effect on the anxiety levels of people in a society. Although many people in the United States live in poverty, the United States is still a first world country, and many people experience anxieties related to their interpersonal relationships and fulfillment of emotional needs. These findings illustrate the importance of belonging for all groups, and the positive effects such as reducing mental illness, and reducing the effects of constant frustrations and deprivations. While more research would be

needed, it can be inferred from these findings that students who experience a strong sense of belonging in school would experience less anxiety and be more able to cope overall with the stressors of adolescent daily life than their peers who experience isolation and rejection in school (Anant, 1967). Pittman (2007) also discovered a causal link between university belonging and positive adjustment during the first year of college, while those who did not experience a sense of belonging were more likely to become involved in negative coping, increased stress, and emotional distress. Through a survey of college students, Pittman (2007) discovered underlying factors related to school belonging such as a sense of commitment to the institution, individual commitment to work in this setting, and a sense of one's abilities being recognized by others. Pittman's definition of sense of belonging was more expansive, reaching beyond one's individual relationships with others in the school and more focused on feeling connected to a larger community. Pittman found that smaller class sizes and more meaningful, caring relationships with instructors could lead to a greater sense of belonging amongst students, due to more participation and engagement from students (Pittman, 2007).

Implementation in Schools

In terms of implementation of belonging in schools, Allen and Bowles (2012) identified a theory-to-practice gap, in which although school belonging is understood to be important from a research perspective, practitioners have struggled with incorporating it on a day-to-day basis. Practitioners, theorists, and the general public fail to realize how important social relationships really are to physical and emotional health. Creating and maintaining satisfying social relationships cannot be underestimated. Due to lack of a clear framework or model, schools have struggled to implement interventions related to school belonging. Although belonging is believed

to be important, few research attempts have focused on showing how belonging can be fostered. Allen and Bowles suggested that more research should be done to clearly determine which factors influence belonging, which can have implications for which policies and practices to focus on (Allen & Bowles, 2012). Goodenow and Grady (1993) created the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale has high construct validity and high reliability, (with an internal consistency of a = .77-.88). It is a Likert scale questionnaire consisting of 18 items in which students self-report and the scores are summed to attain the total score. The scale measured student perceptions of the sense of school belonging. This scale can be used to measure and assess school belonging, gathering quantitative data about a topic that can make it challenging to collect numerical data. Another framework aimed at providing tangible ways to assess and implement belonging was created by Allen et al. (2018), who discussed the discrepancies in terminology regarding belonging, and wanted to help school leaders understand and implement practices to increase belonging. The purpose of Allen et al.'s study was to analyze and identify individual and social factors that could contribute to school belonging, providing guidance for school leaders to help support all students. Their research discussed the importance of belonging, particularly for adolescents who are at a pivotal point in their lives, and the many benefits belonging can have on achievement, learner identity, and happiness. Their research discussed individual factors such as age, gender, motivation, self-esteem as well as micro level factors, such as parent, teacher, and peer support.

The meso level factors involved belonging to multiple groups, and factors related to school culture and environment, such as feeling cared for, supported, and emotionally connected. Allen et al.'s (2018) research, which involved a literature review of 51 relevant sources related to

school belonging for adolescents and statistical analysis, stated that the majority of research regarding school environments is focused on discipline. Their study found that teacher support was found to have the strongest effect. Extra-curricular involvement and race were not found to be related. Parent support and personal characteristics were also a factor, but not necessarily one that had implications for schools. Drolet and Arcand (2013) also discussed the importance of trusting relationships on school belonging for adolescents. Their study, conducted in Canada, used a qualitative methodology to center youth experiences and understand perspectives of 12- and 13-year-olds and school staff, and synthesized leading research on belonging. Their research included the adolescent voice which is often missing in research. They interviewed 20 school professionals and 12 middle-class adolescents, as well as six parents. The interviews were transcribed, analyzed, and codes were applied to determine meaning. Results showed the importance of quality adult relationships and sense of belonging as protective factors for adolescents. When the French adolescents were expressing appreciation (or lack thereof) for their school, their comments were related almost exclusively to the relationships they maintained with both the staff and classmates. The teens described their sense of belonging by describing easy-going, accessible, connected relationships with school staff. The adults also highlighted the importance of building a close, trusting relationship with the adolescents, as well as being present and receptive (Drolet & Arcand, 2013).

St-Amand et al. (2017) reviewed the theoretical literature on school belonging with a focus on main determinants and defining attributes, reviewed instruments that measure school belonging, and identified strategies to enhance school belonging. Data was collected using synonyms for school belonging in order to include all relevant material on the subject. Four

defining attributes were found: positive emotions, positive social relations, involvement, and harmonization. A comparative analysis was done on the quantitative instruments measuring the sense of belonging at school, highlighting the strengths and limitations of each. The strategies identified to enhance school belonging included six recommendations based on the theoretical literature review. The first recommendation from the authors was that principals provide their teachers with active listening training to take greater account of students' well-being. Another recommendation was that teachers take on two roles: one providing personal support and the other providing academic support. The third recommendation was that teachers adopt teaching strategies that encourage positive social interaction, such as teamwork and cooperative learning assignments. Recommendation four included implementing social competence programs early on in students' educational journey, focusing on social-emotional intelligence and regulation. For recommendation five, the authors suggested educational activities where students could identify and share common interests, such as building a website for a class project. The author's sixth recommendation was engaging students in a variety of extracurricular activities such as sports, art, and technology in order to help them connect outside the classroom. St-Amand et al.'s (2017) research was significant because it provided specific defining attributes to school belonging, evaluation of survey instruments on the topic, as well as recommendations for implementation. These concrete tools are valuable for practitioners looking to increase belonging within their educational setting.

Preventing Early Exit

Preventing early exit from secondary schools was studied by Goodenow and Grady (1993), who explored the effect school belonging had on academic motivation, persistence, and

academic values. Using the Psychological Sense of School Membership survey (1993, cited in Goodenow, 1993), which is an 18-item scale, with questions created using a 5-point Likert scale, this study surveyed 103 middle school students in a working-class city in the Northeast with a large Hispanic and African American population. Girls were more likely than boys to express a strong sense of belonging, and Hispanic students were less likely than their White peers to assert that they tried hard in school. Higher sense of belonging was correlated to higher expectancy, academic value, academic motivation, and effort/persistence. It was found that many urban adolescents have a poor sense of belonging. Higher sense of belonging was linked to better academic engagement and motivation. Over ¼ of students were absent that day, which school officials said was not unusual, so they were not surveyed (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). This study demonstrated that without a strong sense of belonging, students were more likely to disengage from school, including exiting prematurely. School sense of belonging impacted engagement, motivation, persistence, expectancy, and value. Without these factors in place, students would struggle to be successful in school, which had major implications for student achievement and schooling experiences. These findings were consistent with Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligni's (2013) research which showed that without a strong sense of belonging, students are more likely to disengage prematurely from school, and potentially drop out. Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligni (2013) found that belonging was important and could help high school students continue to see value in school and continue showing up, even if they are experiencing academic challenges. Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligni (2013) sought to explore what happened to belonging throughout the course of students' high school careers. They examined whether school belonging declined over time, and whether belonging was linked to achievement and values.

Results showed that students tended to experience high sense of belonging in primary grades, and then consistent with stage-environment fit theory, belonging tended to drop off because the environment was not meeting the needs of adolescent students (Eccles & Roeser, 2009). Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligni's study tracked 572 students from three diverse high schools in Los Angeles to measure students' belonging, achievement, and values over 4 years of high school, and then used multi-level analyses to examine associations among the data. Results found that although female students reported a higher belonging in 9th grade, their belonging declined throughout the 4 years, whereas male students' belonging stayed roughly the same. This finding was more pronounced among Latin American females. Ethnicity did not play a large factor in sense of belonging. School belonging had no association with GPA, however students experienced higher intrinsic value and higher utility value during the years they experienced increased belonging. These findings suggested that higher belonging is associated with higher academic motivation. School belonging may help high school students continue to enjoy school and appreciate its usefulness, even when they are struggling academically, which signifies that school belonging may be a promising intervention to reduce school dropout.

There are many benefits to ensuring that all students have the opportunity to complete their secondary education and graduate from high school. According to Pleis et al. (2010), high school graduates earned $8,000 more annually, were less likely to experience unemployment or require government assistance, or become incarcerated. In addition, individuals over age 25 who did not complete high school reported being in worse health than those over 25 who did complete high school, regardless of income. Even for those who did not exit high school prematurely, there were health impacts that resulted from a lack of protective factors, including a

poor school climate. A National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Klein, 1997) showed that school connectedness, which is closely related to belonging, was found to be the strongest protective factor to decrease substance use, school absenteeism, early sexual initiation, violence, and risk of unintentional injury. This same study found school connectedness to protect against emotional distress, disordered eating, and suicidal ideation/attempts (Resnick et al., 1997). School connectedness and belonging were also found to be linked to higher educational outcomes (McNeely, 2003), including attendance (Rosenfeld et al., 1998), staying in school longer (Battin-Pearson at al., 2000), and higher grades/test scores (Barber & Olsen, 1997). Finn (1989) studied the reasons that young people, particularly disproportionate numbers of minorities and children from backgrounds of low socio-economic status, exit prematurely from secondary school, prior to graduation and even prior to the legal age of turning 16. Finn's (1989) research focused on the causes of early exit and interventions often in place. The frustration self-esteem model explained that when young people experience school failure, possibly from the school's inability to provide adequate instruction or emotional support, or from an undiagnosed learning disability, it could result in an impaired self-view, which resulted in disruptive behavior such as skipping class or acting out in class. That behavior tended to become more problematic with age until the child eventually stopped attending or was pushed out. The results of Finn's research found that young people with lower self-esteem were more likely to engage in deviant behaviors than their peers, and that the general level of self-esteem for dropouts was lower than that of groups with other educational attainment. Due to this lack of self-esteem, young people often connected with other peers experiencing similar school failure and began to identify with an alternate group that was not participating in school. Students who identified with their school and

experienced belonging within their school environment were less likely to engage in in-school disruptive behavior and more likely to believe in their own academic success.

Interventions such as (a) positive teacher attitudes, (b) teaching practices that involve students, (c) diversified curriculum that meets students' needs, (d) small and separate schools for students at risk to increase participation rates, (e) flexible and fair discipline policies that do not exclude or alienate students, (f) an evaluation and reward structure compatible with abilities/interests of students, and (g) positions of responsibility and decision-making for students have been shown to increase participation and reduce barriers for students who may be at risk of exiting prematurely (Finn, 1989). These findings are significant because consistent with the frustration self-esteem model, students who experienced school failure tended to withdraw from school, exhibiting disruptive and problematic behaviors, due to feeling rejected by schools and teachers. This led to an exclusion or lack of belonging, and a pressure to belong to an alternate group that was not participating in school. If schools implemented successful interventions to increase participation for all students, then all students would feel a sense of belonging, engage in less disruptive behaviors, and believe in their own ability to succeed. Schools who focus on a sense of belonging will likely have less students at risk of exiting prematurely.

Alternative Education and Special Populations

Alternative schools are continuing to grow and expand enrollment of diverse student populations across the country. 39% of public school districts had at least one alternative school or program for at-risk students in grades 1 through 12 representing 10,900 such programs during the 2000-01 school year (Aron, 2006). California, New York, and Washington contain 40% of the nation's alternative schools, with substantial numbers also found in Michigan, Illinois, and

Oregon. Alternative schools are continuing to grow in number and also in size, with 45% reporting enrollment growth over the past several years. Alternative education has been a critical component to addressing opportunity gaps within the U.S. public educational system (Farrelly, 2014). The literature regarding the need for alternative schools, characteristics of alternative schools, and populations served will be discussed below.

The Need for an Alternative

The need for alternatives is clearly shown when drawing on unpublished data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Barton (2005) reported that in 2003, 1.1 million youth aged 16 to 19 did not have a high school diploma (or General Education Development [GED]test) and were not enrolled in school, and another 2.4 million youth aged 20 to 24, were in the same situation for a grand total of 3.5 million youth. While formal schools have been regarded as the vehicles for transmission of official curricula, there is recognition that conventional schools may not provide the means for expanding education beyond a certain point, addressing only certain educational needs and serving some populations. Limitations of formal schooling include that the knowledge taught is often irrelevant to the lives of many learners. The calendar of the school year or start of school day prevents participation for many students (Figueredo, 2003). The alternative models included policies that favor participation of students without qualifications or means to attend conventional schools, organizational arrangements that permit students to learn at times and locations preferable to students who work, an instructional system that operates at lower costs than conventional schools, and curriculum and instruction that takes into account the needs and contexts of the learners.

Reimer and Pangrozio (2020) found that many students who had left school early did so due to complex personal reasons, social and economic factors, or school-related issues such as clashes with authority. However, all students, regardless of their reasons for disengagement, have the right to quality education. This further explains the need for alternative schools with different models of instruction to meet a diverse array of student needs. Reimer and Pangrozio's study reported on a program called Out Teach Mobile Education, which operated out of a van and aimed to engage young people who have been involved with the criminal justice system. The study provided an authentic assessment of the program by the young people who attended through face-to-face interviews, as well as quantitative data. Findings showed that the program had been effective at reframing young people's ideas about learning and themselves as learners. The program had a 93% attendance rate over 21 months, and 27% of students had successfully secured employment (Reimer & Pangrozio, 2020). Many alternative models have experienced success at engaging populations who have not previously succeeded in traditional schools. Farrelly (2014) also found that alternative schools provided an education path leading to a diploma which would not otherwise be possible for the many students who attend. Many students came to value an education for the first time. Students who had believed they were incapable of learning were able to build a relationship with caring, supportive teachers (Farrelly, 2014).

Raywid's 1982 study involved a 31-question survey that was sent to 2,500 alternative secondary schools located across the country, with 1,200 schools responding. A report summarizing the results of the survey found information including why they were started, organizational characteristics, distinctive elements, and a review of the alternative school

experience from students and staff. 90% of staff reported feeling strong ownership of their program, with high morale. Most replying identified teacher-student interaction, human relationships, and instructional activities as their most distinctive features. Most alternative schools (80%) responded that meeting students' unmet needs and responding to the truancy-dropout crisis was their primary reason of origin. Bruin and Ohna (2013) also found that alternative schools were able to meet the needs of previously disengaged students and allow them to achieve academic success. Bruin and Ohna's (2013) three-year study was framed using a sociocultural theoretical approach, with the purpose of reducing the marginalizing practices of institutions. These interviews collected students' inclusive perspectives, and highlighted student voices. Results showed that many students were not able to keep up academically in traditional schools and expressed not being able to fit in. Participation in the alternative course provided a turning point in their educational journey and gave them hope for future success. Students shared testimonies of failure and loneliness, of not receiving the support they needed and giving up. Many of the students expressed feeling an improved quality of life since beginning to participate in the alternative course that accommodated their need for more time to learn. This course had changed the course of students' lives; they had felt acknowledged by their teachers and peers, and discovered new talents and confidence within themselves (Bruin & Ohna, 2013). Alternative models that are built around non-traditional structures give students an opportunity to create new identities for themselves as learners and also belong to the larger school community that they may have been previously excluded from.

Characteristics of Alternative Schools

There are many different models of alternative education, with some operating in non-traditional spaces, at non-traditional times, and creating more personalized instruction for students. One of the most common themes found when reviewing the literature on alternative education was that many students who had attended shared experiences of positive, caring student-teacher relationships. Broadbent and Papadopoulos's (2013) qualitative data using semi-structured interviews to evaluate an alternative secondary system from the perspective of students found that caring relationships were important, based on listening to young people and giving them hope for the future. Holistic, whole child instruction was also a factor, including students' culture and context. The study also found that the small size of many alternative schools makes a difference, allowing for more personalized approaches and time for authentic relationship-building (Broadbent & Papadopoulos, 2013). Farrelly (2014) also found that the most significant positive attributes of the alternative schools were personalized instruction, individual attention, and strong student-teacher relationships. In the conventional education system, the students' career objectives had been dominated by law enforcement and indicated inadequate social capital acquisition, resulting in negative experiences (Farrelly, 2014). Raywid (1982) found that in alternative settings, students reported warm, positive feelings of staff, including statements such as "teachers really care" and were more likely to trust them as collaborators and facilitators, reported more academic success than in previous schools, and greater feelings of happiness than in previous schools. Students perceive themselves to have more control over their lives in the alternative school, with an environment that is less regulative and oppressive. It can be inferred that students in alternative schools experience a high sense of

belonging, since teacher-student relationships and positive school environment are key factors influencing school belonging. Reimer and Pangrazio's (2020) findings also involved strong practices within the alternative setting, including small and flexible classes that needed to accommodate students' commitments, circumstances, and schedules with a relevant and personalized curriculum. Educators built trusting relationships with students where they were given choices and their voices were heard. Data from the Out Teach Mobile Education program found that the students valued that the learning environment did not replicate a school, or classroom environment, since many had experienced a long history of challenges at school. The alternative program was effective at reframing young people's ideas about learning and themselves as learners. The participants interviewed expressed feelings of enjoyment while discussing their participation in the program. This alternative model, while not serving as a blueprint that can be applied elsewhere, has demonstrated effectiveness and implications for other practitioners attempting to meet the needs of justice-involved students (Reimer & Pangrazio, 2020).

Smyth et al.'s (2013) case study of two low-SES students who had been enrolled in an alternative education program in Victoria, Australia revealed interview data which included emphasis on personalized learning, small-group instruction, skills for social living, work experience, and applied learning. The participants described pedagogies that were engaging and relational in the alternative setting (Smyth et al., 2013). Many alternative programs are able to provide strong relationship building between students and staff, job shadowing, support services, and community involvement. Many programs also experience more autonomy for students and staff in terms of governance and oversight. Thus, alternative schools may provide a better option

for minority and low-SES youth, or youth with significant barriers to traditional schooling (Aron, 2006).

Although Alesech and Nayar's (2020) research did not take place in the alternative setting, their study was focused on how schools either foster or hinder a sense of belonging in students with disabilities. Many of the characteristics found to promote belonging, such as an individualized approach, teacher characteristics which involve a caring and inclusive approach, and effective teaching practices which involve engaging and including all students, including those with disabilities and special learning needs, are commonly found in the alternative setting (Alesech & Nayar, 2020). Due to these strong relational practices, it can be inferred that students in alternative schools may experience a greater sense of belonging than they did in the conventional school system. Many alternative schools have employed models of instruction that meet the needs of non-traditional students. For example, The School District of Philadelphia offers "Twilight Schools" for students who have unenrolled prematurely that include service learning and employment opportunities, take place at non-traditional hours, operate in ten-week cycles, and provide childcare. These alternate placements, along with incentives and support services, may make it possible for special populations, such as teen parents, to complete their education. Cohen (1998) also found that alternative programs with a "youth development" approach, combining education with vocational training and wrap-around services, may experience greater success in meeting the needs of non-traditional students (Cohen, 1998).

Even in developing countries, numerous attempts have been made to create alternative models of education to meet the needs of the population to expand access to more people. Developing countries recognize that the current global economic changes require higher levels of

educational attainment, which in turn contributes to the growth of the economy. In India in 1989, the government established the National Open School to expand secondary education to students without access to traditional schools. The school has enrolled more than 260,000 students to date, and more than 60% of students belonged to disadvantaged groups, such as girls, members of scheduled castes and tribes, and people with disabilities. Though the school is committed to instructional quality, with instructional material developed by experts and strong ties to other secondary schools who provide additional support, many still consider it to be a second-rate school. South Korea employed a distance education model to expand access to students living in rural communities, and the school experienced much success, with graduation rates only 12% lower than traditional schools, with many students coming from low-SES backgrounds and spending years out of school. Indonesia, Malawi, Philippines, Mexico, Brazil, Honduras have also implemented alternative models of education using radio, television, or distance learning materials to expand access to all students (Figueredo, 2003). While there is no one size fits all model, alternative models can and do work depending on the circumstances, and should continue to be explored in order to expand educational opportunities for students without access to the conventional school system. As more students experience the need to work, to take care of children or family members, or health issues that may prevent them from attending traditional school, it is advisable to expand alternative models of education to allow more students to complete their education and join the workforce.

Special Populations Served

There are many special populations of students served by alternative schools. Most researchers and the US Department of Education agree that alternative education serves students

labeled “at-risk” of educational failure (Lehr et al., 2009). These students may be disruptive, truant, involved with the juvenile justice system, failing academically, pregnant, or already parents. (Carver & Lewis, 2010). They are disproportionately students of African American, Latino, or Native American descent, have low socioeconomic status (SES), and often have special needs (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; Fairbrother, 2008; Loutzenheiser, 2002; Smith, 2003). In Farrelly’s (2014) study, the students who attended alternative school were disproportionately male students of color (in this study Latinos) who qualified for free or reduced cost federal lunch, had extensive discipline records, and received special education services.

Smyth (2014) reported that less than 50% of males from low-SES backgrounds complete secondary education in Victoria, Australia, which was compared to the “school push-out” of the most difficult students in the United States. Due to growing concern of children from low-SES families to leave high school prematurely, the Family Support Act of 1988 required each state to mandate participation in education for parents under 20 receiving government assistance, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The Welfare Information Network maintained that states should include additional support to encourage school success for low-SES teen parents including case management, tutoring, placement in alternative settings, and additional support to reduce barriers (such as childcare), otherwise mandated participation would result in only a slight increase in school enrollment/attendance (Cohen, 1998). Many alternative placements include these wrap-around services in addition to education that are able to meet the needs of special populations, such as low-SES teen parents.

Aron’s (2006) data regarding populations in alternative schools showed that youth who did not successfully transition to independent adulthood by age 25 fell into one of the following

groups: (a) those who did not complete high school; (b) youth deeply involved in the juvenile justice system; (c) young, unmarried mothers; and (d) adolescents in the child welfare system. Aron's report showed that half of all black students in the country did not graduate from high school and for boys the graduation rate was an astonishing 43%. Rates among Hispanics and American Indians were also low at 48% and 47%, respectively. Minority youth are especially in need of new and better options. Urban school districts, districts with high minority student populations, and districts with high poverty rates were more likely than other districts to have alternative schools (Aron, 2006). Traditional schools have often not been able to meet the needs of minority, low-SES students and special populations, who might end up leaving school entirely if not given the opportunity to enroll in an alternative school. Reimer and Pangrazio's (2020) study regarding justice-involved youth who participated in the Out Teach Mobile Education program found that only 15% of the youth had returned to being incarcerated during the 21-month period, compared to the general statistic of 30% returning within a 12-month period. The research of Snodgrass et al. (2020) regarding traditional school re-entry for justice-involved youth found many challenges such as being denied readmission to school, stigmatization by educators, struggle to catch up academically due to disrupted education, and increased likelihood of not returning or dropping out after being institutionalized (Snodgrass et al., 2020). Special populations, such as justice-involved students, may benefit from the individualized, caring, approaches of an alternative school.

While many alternative schools have experienced tremendous success in working with special populations, there are implications for school leaders to create spaces that meet the needs of all learners within conventional, traditional schools. School leaders should work to improve

relational practices amongst students and staff, and reduce exclusionary discipline practices that ultimately lead to the removal of high-need students. School leaders should also consider not only test scores, but student goal attainment and the satisfaction of basic psychological needs as measures of success (Farrelly, 2014).

Educator Philosophy

Educator philosophy has an impact on the extent to which students can feel a sense of belonging at school. Reports of anxiety and depression among our school-aged students are at an all-time high (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). One out of every five students report that they are bullied at school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), and the reasons most often cited by students include physical appearance, race and ethnicity, gender, disability, religion, and sexual orientation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). In addition, schools across the nation are suspending, excluding, and expelling students with disabilities, students of color, and LGBTQ students at a significantly higher rate than their nondisabled, white, and cisgendered peers (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2016). There is a need for change in education policies and practices, including emphasizing relational approaches and inclusive pedagogy.

Caring and Relational Practices

Poplin and Weeres (1994) found that participants feel the crisis inside schools is directly related to human relationships. Most often mentioned were relationships between teachers and students. Where positive things about schools are noted, they usually involve reports of individuals who care, listen, understand, respect others and are honest, open, and sensitive. (p. 12). Findings showed that students desired authentic relationships where they were trusted, given

responsibility, spoken to honestly and warmly, and treated with dignity (Poplin & Weeres, 1994, p. 20). Schools hold themselves accountable for improving test scores, academic achievement, and graduation rates. However, schools should also hold themselves accountable for adopting a relational approach to school reform (Baker et al., 1997).

Tichnor-Wagner and Allen's (2016) comparative case study examined the prevalence of caring practices in two higher performing and two lower performing urban high schools and the contextual factors that helped or hindered the extent to which students felt cared for. Findings showed that higher performing schools demonstrated caring communities, where interpersonal relationships and high expectations were present. Strong leadership support, caring as a core value, and abundant curricular/extra-curricular structures to facilitate relationship building were found to be best practices for fostering a caring community. A relational approach to education fostered caring connections to others and to meaningful academic work (Baker et al., 1997). The ethic of care manifested itself in reciprocal, interpersonal relationships between students and teachers (Noddings, 1984; Valenzuela, 1999), and was best nurtured in schools with a strong sense of community and commitment to meeting students' academic and social needs (Ancess, 2003; Baker et al., 1997). Relatedness, "the need to feel belongingness and connectedness with others," was found to be essential for students to internalize positive school-related behaviors such as engagement, which could then lead to positive outcomes related to performance and graduation (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 73). Research has shown that in a variety of contexts, caring teachers in caring schools has positively impacted students' social development, academic achievement and attainment, and future aspirations (Ancess, 2003). Other case studies of successful urban high schools serving low-income or minority students or students at risk of

dropping out further revealed that a school-wide ethic of care—emphasizing respectful, trusting relationships and academic rigor—led to higher levels of student engagement, social and emotional competence, academic achievement and attainment, and reduced dropout rates (Ancess, 2003; Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Carter, 2012; Johnson, 2009; Pang et al., 2000; Schussler & Collins, 2006). In uncaring contexts, students exhibited less attachment and belongingness to school, lower achievement, and higher dropout rates (Valenzuela, 1999). These findings are significant because creating a culture of care has been found to be directly tied to school belonging (Tichnor-Wagner & Allen, 2016).

Therefore it is important that teachers and school leaders operate from an ethic of care, focus on interpersonal relationships, and nurture students as well as hold them accountable. This has an effect on student engagement, academic achievement, and school completion rates. In Cornelius-White's (2007) study, the author reviewed about 1,000 articles to synthesize 119 studies from 1948 to 2004 with 1,450 findings and 355,325 student, and focused on teacher relational variables and treated student and learning variables as outcomes that were facilitated by relational practices, including teachers' honoring of students' voices, adapting to individual and cultural differences, encouraging learning, thinking, and having learner-centered beliefs. The meta-analysis found that person-centered teacher variables had an above-average finding-level association with positive student outcomes ($r = .31$), with wide variability ($SD = .29$). A positive, learner-centered teacher-student relationship was found to be more effective than a classical approach. Person-centered education was associated with large increases in participation, satisfaction, and motivation to learn, as well as a reduction in dropping out, disruptive behavior, and absences (Cornelius-White, 2007). Educators who focus on creating positive, learner-

centered teacher student relationships are more likely to have positive student outcomes. Student participation and motivation to learn are discussed in literature related to school belonging. Creating a positive, learner centered environment can help to increase belonging for all students.

Duncan-Andrade (2009) linked caring relational practices to a concept called critical hope, and its significance to urban communities of color. Duncan-Andrade explained that critical hope demands a committed and active struggle "against the evidence in order to change the deadly tides of wealth inequality, group xenophobia, and personal despair" (West, 2004, pp. 296–297). Three elements of critical hope were explored: material, Socratic, and audacious. Material hope involved connecting pedagogy with events that directly affected students' lives, such as making cards and raising money for a student whose family member passed away. Socratic hope involved building a teacher-student relationship as the result of pedagogy that prioritized the humanization of students above all else. Teachers who fostered Socratic hope were willing to take risks, make sacrifices, and give support above and beyond that which was required to their students. Effective teaching was found to depend most heavily on one thing: deep and caring relationships. Duncan-Andrade's (2009) essay stated that the adage "students don't care what you know until they know that you care" is supported by numerous studies of effective educators (Akom, 2003; Delpit, 1995; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994). In fact, research shows that students will resist learners from educators that they feel do not authentically care about them. These findings support the idea that deep, caring relationships between teachers and students, particularly in urban communities, matters. There needs to be more emphasis on creating caring communities in schools, and more opportunities for teachers to reflect on their own philosophies, and their own practice of caring for their students. Causton et

al. (2020) wrote of educating from a place of radical love and compassion to promote inclusion and belonging for all students. Using Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Restorative Practices (RP), their approach encouraged educators to focus on student's strengths, gifts, and talents, brainstorm and enact strategies that illuminate and create deeper connections between teacher and student, implement strategies that illuminate and create deeper connections between a student and their peers, purposefully plan to ignite the student's creativity and sense of self-worth, and problem solve daily to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of the learner (Causton et al., 2020). This emphasis on improving relational practices in classrooms can increase a sense of belonging for all students.

Kreber et al. (2007) conducted a study to advance conceptual understanding of authenticity in teaching. "Authenticity" was understood as being somehow associated with a sense of empowerment, self-actualization, and individuation, and as such, linked to larger questions of human existence and agency in the world. Carusetta and Cranton (2005) found that authentic university educators showed consistency between values and actions (also see Chickering et al., 2006), related to others in ways that encouraged their authenticity, and engaged in critical reflection on teaching practice. They defined authenticity as "being conscious of self, other, relationships, and context through critical reflection" (Carusetta & Cranton, 2005, p. 288). Kreber et al. (2007) wrote that authentic teaching was closely linked to care; Zimmerman (1986) explained that when we act inauthentically, we have essentially forgotten to care. Inauthenticity could include teaching even though someone does not enjoy their work, manipulating things for selfish reasons such as pursuing recognition through awards or publishing rather than to help students learn, grow, and develop. Cranton (2001) included that the authentic teacher operated

from a code of professional morals and ethics, and made decisions based on the best interest of the learner. These findings reveal the significance of authentic caring on the part of the educator. Authentic educators operate in a way that prioritizes relational practices and promotes belonging for all students. If more educators operated with a philosophy of authenticity, schools would become places of authentic connection between people, and not just achievement.

Inclusive Pedagogy

Person et al.'s (2021) qualitative study employed a maximum entropy analysis, and results emphasized the importance of the Community Cultural Wealth model, culturally sensitive teachers, and community-connected leaders. Educational settings that valued student's and families' community cultural wealth could increase the number of students that made it through the educational pipeline successfully (Yosso, 2005). Educational leaders noted the need for teaching strategies that meet the diversity of learners in terms of culture and language. A participant highlighted the need to educate school staff "about the way our community members live." Findings showed the critical need to have teachers who were prepared and committed to work in urban schools (Person et al., 2021). Educators, particularly educators working with minority populations who may not mirror their own cultural background, need to employ the Community cultural wealth model, implement strategies to be culturally sensitive, and connect to the communities in which their students live. Students are more likely to complete school when their culture is valued, and they feel a sense of belonging. School leaders who wish to increase school belonging should encourage more training around culturally sensitive practices and ways to highlight students' cultures. Moll's "funds of knowledge" (2015) approach positioned the teacher, particularly teachers who may not have lived in the communities where they taught, as a

learner as they explored and took possession of the "funds of knowledge" that existed in students' households.

The purpose of this was to shape a pedagogy that connected to students' experiences and engaged them academically. Through the practice of conducting interviews and observations with their students' families and sharing knowledge with their study group, the teachers built "relational agency"—the capacity to work with others, colleagues, students, family members, and allies in the community—to access resources to mediate existing pedagogical constraints and promote desired change. The goal was to have "funds of knowledge" inform pedagogical practices, and initiate relations of trust with students' families. Strategies such as the use of family dialogue journals, participatory action research, and other collaborative, authentic projects were used to create meaningful learning experiences tied to students' lives and cultures. Learning and pedagogy that is tied to students' experiences and cultures is more likely to be engaging. This can lead to an increased sense of belonging for students who have not had their own cultures or experiences be "seen" or included in the traditional school curriculum. This may also provide an opportunity for students with different abilities and funds of knowledge that haven't been historically valued by schools to have their skills highlighted and contribute something positive to their peers and the classroom space. Kreber et al. (2007) found similar results with collaborative learning which showed that with an authentic teacher, learning was facilitated in an atmosphere of mutual trust, where the teacher was acting in congruent ways, believed in students, and, in interacting with students, also became a learner. Authentic teachers engaged in constructive developmental pedagogy, in which teachers were interested in and respectful of students' present conceptual understanding, were able to relate the subject to the students'

experience, and, last, were inclined to engage in community with students in their construction of knowledge (Kreber et al., 2007). The authentic teachers created vital connections between themselves, their students, and their subject or context.

Duncan-Andrade (2009) and Causton et al. (2020) both highlighted the need for inclusive pedagogical practices that educate all learners within the classroom space. Audacious hope required educators to acknowledge that challenging student behavior is a valid expression of pain, and help them heal rather than remove them from the classroom ecosystem (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). Audacious hope is directly linked to belonging because it involves the practice of keeping all students within the classroom community and collaborating to find solutions, rather than excluding students based on their challenging behavior. Causton et al. (2020) discussed structures and practices that impeded belonging for many students including pull out programs for students with disabilities and English language learners, separate classrooms for students with behavior problems, and ability grouping. They contrasted those concepts with inclusive structures and practices that fostered a sense of belonging to help educators cultivate relationships, facilitate collaboration, encourage friendships, and celebrate diversity. Implementing inclusive policies that align with educators' values, rather than ineffective, zero-tolerance policies was found to be important (Causton et al., 2020). Depending on the school's values, there may be a need for educators to advocate for structural change in schools to increase belonging for students with the highest needs.

Since the implementation of inclusive pedagogy can have a positive effect in meeting the needs of diverse learners, it is necessary for school leaders to adopt tools and strategies to train and develop teachers accordingly. There is a need for various frameworks, including the

Framework of Educator Mindsets and Consequences (Filback & Green, 2008), which has stated a series of orientations that reflect educators' potential beliefs about the learners they work with, equity, and equality. Each mindset also has an explanation for each orientation, and the consequences that happen as a result. Filback and Green's framework was focused primarily on an educator's recognition of societal structures and barriers that impact students' achievement, and their perception of their role as an educator to help all students succeed. This framework is valuable because it can be used to uncover information about an educator's philosophy, and the impact it could have on their work. It could be used to initiate discussions and dialogue amongst school staff, or provide training for teachers regarding practices related to equity and inclusion.

School Practices

Urban school educators and leaders have made policy, created structures, and conducted practice in ways they believed were in the students' best interests. However, the data tells us this hasn't been effective for many students (Lazo, 2018). The educational system is continuing to leave students behind, and many students are struggling to form positive identities and find acceptance within schools. There are implications in the literature that can be drawn from the concept of belonging, alternative education contexts, and knowledge of educator philosophies that can inform practices to ensure that schools truly meet the needs of all students.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The literature review presented in the previous chapter has explored previous research related to sense of belonging, alternative education, and educator philosophy. In gathering and synthesizing current research on educator philosophy and school belonging, an opportunity emerged to contribute to the scholarship. Limited research has been conducted regarding sense of belonging within the alternative school context, particularly with teachers who work with marginalized populations. Furthermore, there has been limited research regarding the impact that teacher philosophies can have on building and strengthening a sense of belonging in their students. This qualitative study sought to explore the experiences and perceptions of teachers working within the alternative education context related to sense of belonging. Using semi-structured interview questions, this research examined how teachers build community and foster belonging for high-need students in alternative education settings.

This chapter will reiterate the research questions introduced in Chapter 1 and provide a rationale for the qualitative approach that was used to conduct the research. The method, participants, and setting will be described in detail, as well as the instrument which was used for data collection. After outlining the analysis plan for data collected via the instrument, the chapter will conclude with a discussion of the study's validity, limitations, and delimitations. In closing the chapter, a timeline will be provided which will list the deadlines used to complete the research project within the appropriate time frame.

Research Questions

In order to achieve the purpose of determining which teacher practices contribute to a greater sense of belonging for high-need students, both within the classroom and school-wide, the following research questions will guide this qualitative study:

1. What are alternative school teachers' perceptions of sense of belonging in their context?
2. What support do teachers employ in their classrooms to build and increase students' sense of belonging in an alternative education setting?
3. What are teachers' perceptions of school-wide practices that foster students' sense of belonging?

Allen and Bowles (2012) identified a theory to practice gap, in which although school belonging is understood to be important from a research perspective, practitioners have struggled with incorporating it on a day-to-day basis. Practitioners, theorists, and the general public fail to realize how important social relationships really are to physical and emotional health. Due to lack of a clear framework or model, schools have struggled to implement interventions related to school belonging. Although belonging is believed to be important, few research attempts have focused on showing how belonging can be fostered. Allen and Bowles suggested that more research should be done to clearly determine which factors influence belonging, which can have implications for which policies and practices to focus on (Allen & Bowles, 2012). Their research discussed the importance of belonging, particularly for adolescents who are at a pivotal point in their lives, and the many benefits that belonging can have on achievement, learner identity, and happiness. These research questions sought to uncover concrete practices that could be used as a

framework for all educators to improve a sense of belonging for all students in their school setting.

Rationale for Qualitative Approach

This study used a qualitative approach in order to delve into the experiences of teachers working in alternative education settings. The qualitative approach was the best way to answer the research questions posed above because it was the most effective way to solicit and record teacher's perceptions of their experiences (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The individual details of each teacher's experience varied based on school site, teacher education received, prior teaching experience, educational philosophy, individual student needs, and a host of other factors. Particularly without a whole school vision for how to implement belonging, teachers have incorporated different practices and support to meet their students' needs. Thus, a descriptive phenomenological investigation was most appropriate to uncover teachers' experiences of belonging in their setting, and determine which practices they find to be most effective in building community for high-need students. A qualitative data collection method, such as a semi-structured interview with open ended questions, was used as the protocol for gathering data. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) presented semi-structured interviews as an appropriate instrument for gathering qualitative data. The semi-structured interview approach uses a set of questions as a guide but allows the researcher to seek clarification (Doody & Noonan, 2013). This approach provided the most personal setting to gather narratives and testimonials that reflect teachers' experiences and perceptions of school belonging. This approach allowed for the participants to share experiences that they identified as relevant to the

research topic, or share stories of particular students they have worked with over the years that were of significance to them.

While a quantitative approach such as a survey might have allowed for a larger sample size of participants, leading to more generalizable data, the narrative data allowed for thick descriptions of teacher experiences related to student sense of belonging in alternative schools. The rich and descriptive stories shared by the teachers has provided a counter-narrative to the dominant drop out ideology often given regarding the students who have been pushed out of traditional schools. The qualitative data also serves to inform professionals working with high-need students in traditional settings about the effectiveness of practices utilized by experienced educators in alternative settings.

Method

To answer my research questions, I conducted an interview study of 9th-12th grade teachers working in two different alternative education settings in the greater Los Angeles area. The theoretical/conceptual frameworks that have been chosen, which are the socio-ecological framework of school belonging (Allen et al., 2016) and the critical hope framework (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) were used to craft the interview protocol. In the sections that follow, I will provide details about the participants, setting, data collection, and analysis plan.

Participants

The study held three requirements for its participants. Participants must have worked within the alternative high school setting. Since the study aimed to analyze teacher experiences within the alternative education context, particularly to understand the perceptions of teachers working with a high-need population that has experienced push-out from traditional settings, it

was necessary to limit participation to individuals employed within alternative high schools. Those working within alternative high schools have had a unique responsibility to serve students who have transferred from other traditional schools or experienced gaps within their schooling, and prepare them for graduation, post-secondary studies, and the workforce. Participants were also required to be primarily student-facing, teaching, and/or facilitating content in a classroom. This study was open to teachers of any content area, with any degree or credential, as long as the majority of their contracted time was spent delivering or facilitating content to and with students in the classroom setting. Unlike academic counselors, administrators, and other school staff who may have met with students one-on-one or in small group settings, and may also have played a role in developing school belonging and building community, the role of a teacher has been predominantly student-facing, in the classroom setting, teaching and facilitating academic content to a whole group. Thus, the majority of their role involved interacting with students, and their inclusion in this study was appropriate. Participants must also have had a minimum of three years of teaching experience by summer 2023, consecutively in the same school. The purpose of this criteria was to ensure that participants had spent enough time implementing various practices and observing their results within their professional setting. This was also to ensure that participants have worked with multiple cohorts of students with varying experiences and needs within the alternative school context. This also ensured that teachers have worked within their school context for at least three years, and have likely experienced changes in school-wide practices, including distance learning, and the return to in-person learning post-COVID.

Besides these three criteria, there were no limitations for participants. Demographics on ethnicity and gender were collected and will be reported on in the upcoming analysis in order to

inform recommendations for future research to be made in the study's final chapter. Demographic data for this study was only collected after participants had responded to the recruitment email and agreed to participate in the study.

The research participants were teachers at multiple alternative education charter school sites in the greater Los Angeles area. They were chosen mainly due to their proximity to the researcher. Recruitment emails were sent out to the teachers that this researcher was interested in interviewing detailing information about the purpose of the study, what the research would entail, and asking for their participation. For those who responded to the email and expressed interest in participating, further information was shared regarding the risks and benefits of participating in the study, as well as the steps that would be taken to protect their identity. The researcher obtained written consent from all participants prior to beginning the research. A copy of the participant recruitment letter can be found in Appendix A. More information regarding the recruitment process will be discussed below.

Setting

The setting of this study was of utmost importance since it served to dictate the study's research participants. I used a hybrid of convenience, snowball, and purposive sampling from a charter school. A letter granting permission to conduct the study from the school's superintendent can be found in Appendix B. Taking advantage of my professional and social networks, having been a teacher in the alternative education setting for 12+ years, this researcher wrote a recruitment email that was sent to contacts who were current alternative high school teachers as of June 2023. In the recruitment email, this researcher communicated the research topic, that any and all participation was voluntary, and the criteria for selecting participants as

described in the previous section. This researcher informed potential participants of the date on which they must affirm their interest via email, and the date by which they would be contacted if they are selected for an interview: within two weeks of the deadline for responding to the recruitment email. A copy of the informed consent form was included in the initial recruitment email for their reference, and can be found in Appendix C. A copy of the Research Participants' Bill of Rights was also provided to participants, and is included in Appendix D.

I instructed these contacts to pass the recruitment email along to their own contacts who met the requirements for the study to the best of their knowledge. The recruitment of additional potential subjects—or snowball sampling—included the experiences of alternative high school teachers outside my professional or social network, and led to the inclusion of multiple perspectives on the research topic. Once a pool of interested participants had formed, this researcher selected participants from a variety of content areas, also attempting to select participants who represented the diversity of race, ethnicity, and gender of teachers in the United States. This researcher also selected the maximum number of participants available to be interviewed within the time constraints of the project.

Data Collection

As previously stated, data collection for this project was gathered via a semi-structured qualitative interview. Once I identified and collected commitments from 8-10 participants, I scheduled each participant for a one-hour interview. The research participants were notified that they were selected via email. A copy of the email has been included in Appendix E. Each participant was given the chance to create a pseudonym which was used in the completed study. Interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform for convenience and privacy for both the

researcher and participants. Interviews were recorded by the researcher, with permission from the research participants. Notes regarding participants' body language, facial expressions, and nonverbal cues were also written down by the researcher following the interview. The audio recordings were transcribed using a website called Temi. The transcription was checked for accuracy along with the audio recording, due to the fact that dictation software does not always achieve perfect accuracy of the content recorded. Though the software's spelling errors will be corrected, the grammar or dialogue collected from any party was not corrected unless a component was otherwise incomprehensible. In this case, the researcher consulted with the research participant in question during member checking before correcting any grammatical errors.

The interview questions were separated into three topics: 1. The subject's background and motivations, 2. The subject's perceptions of students' experiences related to belonging, 3. The practices they perceive to influence and impact school belonging. All interviews closed with a uniform question: *Is there anything else related to sense of belonging that you'd like to share that you think would be relevant to this research?* Throughout the interview, the emphasis was placed on teachers' experiences, perceptions, and narratives.

The transcribed interviews were printed in order for the researcher to take notes, jottings, and identify codes. The coding process involved a reading mode (Yin, 2016) to analyze the interview data and look for patterns. Findings were identified by reading and reviewing the interview transcriptions, and developing themes that emerged from the interview. Narrative data was manually coded using different colored highlighters in order to develop meaningful themes.

Study Procedure/Instrument

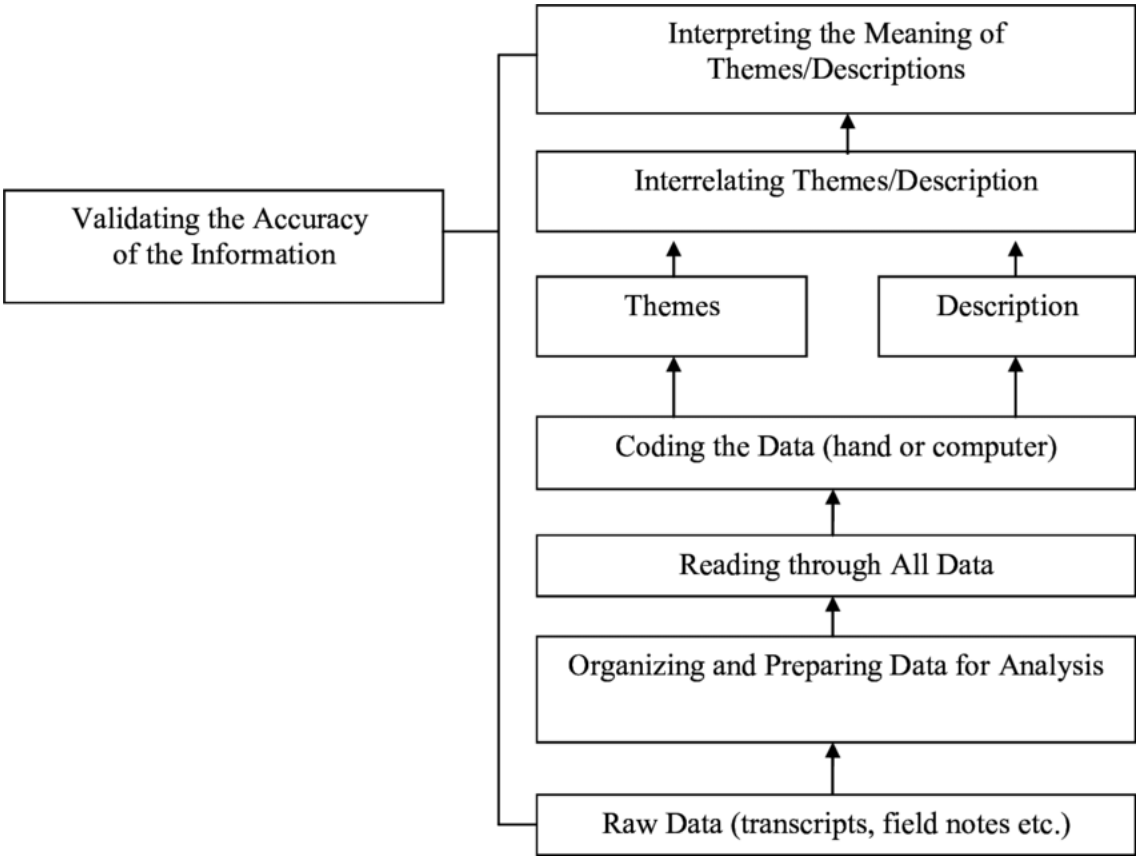
For this research, a semi-structured interview consisting of open-ended questions was used to collect data. In addition to this, a list of follow-up and probing questions were used in the event that they were needed. Information from the literature review and theoretical frameworks were used to formulate the interview questions. The interview protocol, including follow-up and probing questions, can be found in Appendix F.

Analysis Plan

Once data had been collected and transcribed, the transcriptions and audio files were stored on a secure laptop. The audio recordings were destroyed after six months in order to protect the identity of those involved in the study. The data analysis process followed Creswell's (2014) Model for Qualitative Data Analysis, which is a logical deductive approach to analyzing qualitative data, and approaches the grouping of data based on common themes (Creswell, 2013). Figure 2 depicts Creswell's (2014) six step model for qualitative data analysis.

Figure 2

Creswell's Model for Qualitative Data Analysis



Note: Adapted from *Research and Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (4th Ed.) by J. W. Creswell, 2014. Copyright 2014 by SAGE Publications. Used by permission.

As shown in the figure, the process involved taking raw data such as interview transcripts, organizing, and preparing the data for analysis. Once the interview transcripts were organized and prepared for analysis, the researcher conducted member checking with each participant, and gave them the opportunity to review the interview transcript, approve their pseudonym, and make changes. The member checking email has been included in Appendix G. The next step involved reading and reviewing the data to look for patterns and emerging themes/categories. The coding process involved both in-vivo and values coding (Saldaña, 2014;

Strauss, 1987). This researcher used the subjects' responses, particularly that which described their experiences, including their values, attitudes, or beliefs that impacted their work as a teacher. Additionally, this researcher looked for themes based on words expressed by participants, including patterns and frequencies of statements made by the research participants. This included language regarding teachers' practices and strategies used in building community and belonging with students. Once the individual language had been gathered from each interview, the researcher identified codes based on the narrative data. The researcher then looked for interrelating themes, and interpreted the meaning of the themes, including the perceptions of school belonging and relevant practices to build and increase community that were trending amongst participant testimonies. The researcher used the socio-ecological framework of school belonging (Allen et al., 2016) and the critical hope framework (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) to identify and organize the themes into relevant findings. The researcher organized classroom and school-wide practices influencing belonging, utilizing the different layers of the socio-ecological framework of school belonging model, and uncovered the teacher practices that were linked to the concept of critical hope. The interview transcripts were manually coded by the researcher and multiple colored highlighters were used to identify and keep track of broad categories and themes.

Limitations

There were three limitations to this study: small/limited sample size, reliance on participant memory, and the role of the researcher as an insider. Due to the small sample size of this study, the findings were not generalizable to the larger population of alternative education teachers. The diversity of the research participants was also limited due to the use of a sample of

convenience and proximity to the researcher, as well as all of the participants working within the same alternative charter school network. Beyond this, the researcher did not provide an instrument to corroborate the data provided by the participants in the interview sessions. Each participant provided their own perceptions of events, student experiences, as well as classroom and school practices, through the prism of their own memory. Memories do vary, and individuals tend to recall certain details with greater accuracy as do others. This researcher relied on participants' recollections and interpretations of their experiences with no method to corroborate if their version of events was complete or accurate.

In addition, though the researcher was not the direct supervisor of any research participants, and kept all identities anonymous, it is still uncertain to which extent the research participants felt comfortable disclosing their thoughts regarding classroom and school practices. Beyond this, the researcher's positionality as a teacher with 12+ years of experience within the alternative education context made her an insider, sharing an identity, language, and experiential base with the group. While being an insider can have benefits, allowing for more openness, acceptance, and trust from research participants, researchers that are insiders may also struggle with role confusion or conflict (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). In this research, I evaluated the experiences, beliefs, and perceptions of teachers both as a researcher and as a teacher myself, who was familiar with the research setting and participants prior to beginning this study. I was challenged to remain objective in evaluating the experiences, beliefs, and perceptions of teachers, especially if they differed from my own. I was also challenged to determine which practices were effective in building and strengthening school belonging based on the data collected from the participants, without my own judgment influencing the findings. Although my

membership status in relation to the participants did not seem to have an impact on the interviews in a negative way, it is still important to note that the researcher in this study was an insider in this research context.

Validity/Trustworthiness

This researcher sought to minimize researcher bias by engaging in critical reflection to identify personal biases, beliefs, and interests and examine how they factored into the data collection and analysis. The researcher approached this research with empathy and reflectiveness, with the goal of developing trustworthiness and understanding the experiences of the participants. This researcher used techniques such as prolonged engagement with the subjects and setting as well as persistent observation in order to collect data that was authentic and true. Although this researcher was not in a position of supervision or authority over any of the subjects, there is still a chance that subjects may have been hesitant to share information that they believed may affect their employment. As a colleague of the subjects, this researcher took steps to protect subjects' confidentiality and ensure that their responses would not be used against them in any way. This researcher also conducted member checking after completing a preliminary draft of data analysis before concluding analysis and finalizing the manuscript. Participants had the option to participate in this validation method 2 months after completing their interview. This technique was used to validate qualitative results by allowing participants to co-construct the knowledge gathered by the study (Birt et al., 2016). With this method, research participants were able to engage with, and add to, interview data as well as interpreted data, in order to check for accuracy and resonance with subjects' experiences. This technique served to

highlight and center the voices of teachers, and ensure that their narratives were thoroughly and accurately documented.

The researcher's positionality as a teacher in the alternative education context added trustworthiness to the study as rapport with research participants had already been built prior to the study. The researcher had demonstrated commitment to the field of alternative education, as well as a commitment to highlighting teacher voice and practice that had been shared across the network.

Delimitations

There were three delimitations in designing this study: lack of randomization, lack of external validity, and exclusion of student experiences. To gather meaningful interview data from the research participants within the given time constraints of the study, this study focused on highlighting the experiences of teachers who fit the participant criteria, meaning that they were employed in alternative high school settings, served in a primarily instructional role, and had 3+ years of experience at the same school site. Although this participant pool was appropriate for a qualitative, phenomenological study (Creswell, 2009), it was not randomized given the convenience, snowball, and purposive sampling methods employed by this researcher. The research participants were all teachers employed by the same alternative charter school network and did not necessarily represent the diverse landscape of the United States. The design also lacked external validity since it did not accurately generalize the experiences of millions of teachers across the country. This research did not include the voices of teachers currently working within the traditional public school system or private sector. It was focused exclusively on understanding school belonging from the perspective of teachers within the alternative

context. The exclusion of student experiences was also a delimitation in this study. This research did not attempt to include or understand the experiences of students related to belonging within the alternative school context. While student voice and perspective has always been deeply important to this researcher, as well as valuable to the literature regarding school belonging, this particular study focused on strategies and practices employed by teachers to increase belonging, which students may not have been conscious of, due to being new to the alternative school setting or acclimating to different school climate.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Study Background

The purpose of this study was to uncover teachers' perceptions of sense of belonging as it applies to their context, as well as to identify classroom and school-wide practices that they perceived to be effective in building a sense of belonging with their students. The structured interview questions asked teachers to identify classroom and school-wide practices that they have utilized in their context. Teachers also reflected on their experiences with building a sense of belonging with their alternative school students, many of whom have been disenfranchised by the traditional school system. Three research questions guided the study:

1. What are alternative school teachers' perceptions of sense of belonging in their context?
2. What support do teachers employ in their classrooms to build and increase students' sense of belonging in an alternative education setting?
3. What are teachers' perceptions of school-wide practices that foster students' sense of belonging?

Findings included a list of classroom and site practices used by alternative school teachers to build a sense of belonging with students, as well as implications regarding what student belonging looks like and teacher observations of students' previous negative schooling experiences. The findings from the research questions can be summarized into three statements:

1. Student belonging is observable, impacted by previous schooling experiences, and fostered through caring, relational practices.

2. Teacher/classroom practices that foster belonging involve layers of Socratic, audacious, and material hope.
3. Schoolwide practices that foster belonging involve layers of Socratic, audacious, and material hope.

To answer the research questions, I conducted, via the Zoom online platform, semi-structured interviews with eight alternative high school educators in the greater Los Angeles region. In order to ensure that enough data would be gathered in order to adequately answer the research questions, all participants were required to be employed in the alternative school context, be in a primarily student-facing instructional role, and have at least three years of teaching experience as of June 2023. Demographic information regarding the study's participants are listed in Table 2 below. Participants are listed in the order that they were interviewed:

Table 2

Study Participant Demographic Descriptions

Participant Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Gender	Content Area	Total Years of Experience in Alternative Education
Armando Hernandez	Hispanic/Latino	Male	Social Studies	6-10 years
Elena Magaro	Hispanic/Latina	Female	Math/Science	11-15 years
Lionel Gerson	African American	Male	Electives	11-15 years
Andres Ramos	Hispanic/Latino	Male	Math/Science	6-10 years
William Smith	African American	Male	Vocational	20+ years
Malorie Solache	Phillipina/Latina	Female	Social Studies	11-15 years
Ray Solado	Latino	Male	English	11-15 years
Mark Tenent	White	Male	STEM/Electives	11-15 years

I utilized a strictly qualitative approach to examine teachers' experiences and highlight teachers' practices that they wanted to share. I collected the qualitative data for this study through semi-structured interviews via the Zoom online platform in order to minimize the burden on practicing educators during the school year while still maintaining personal contact through the face-to-face video chat feature.

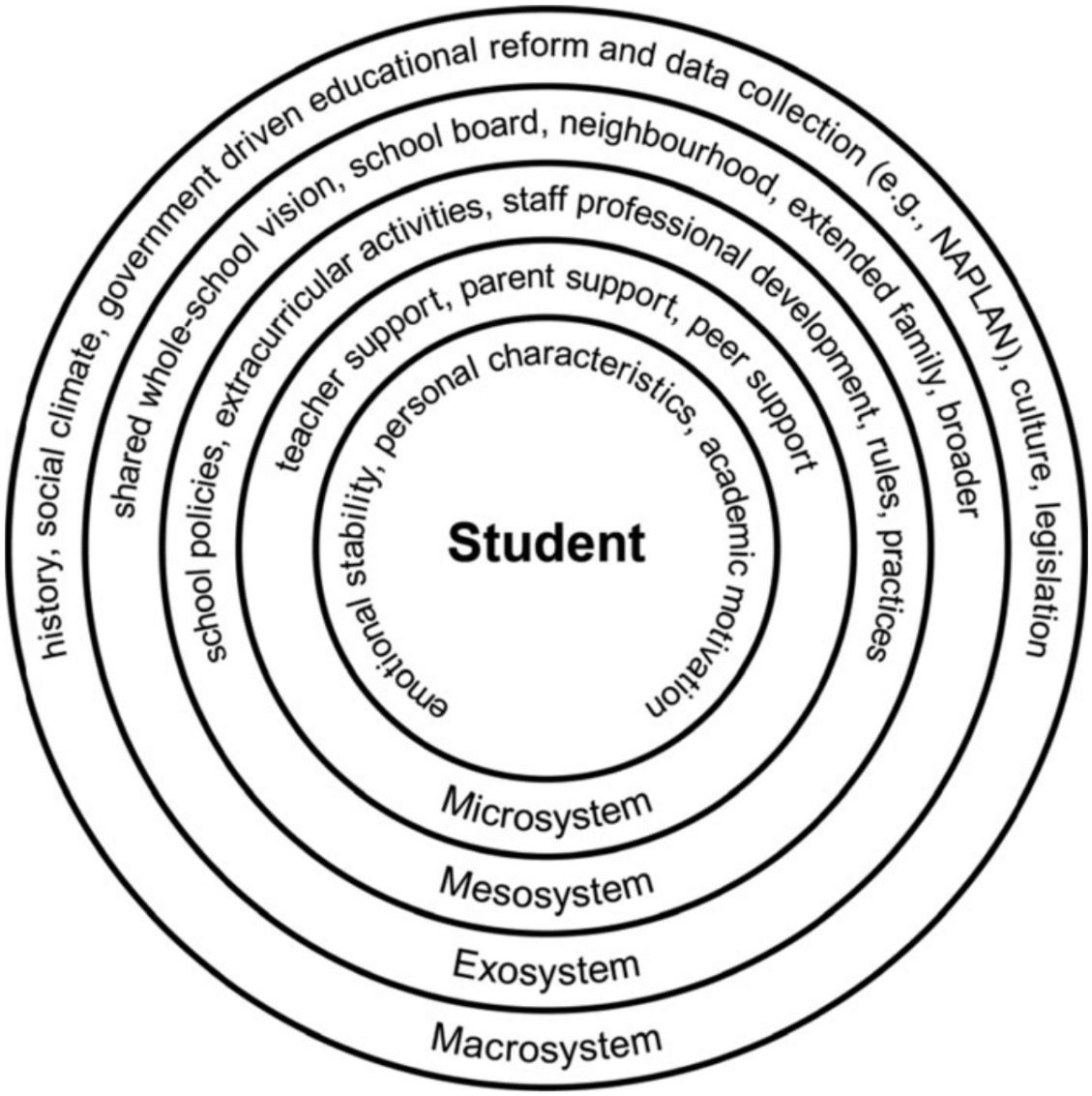
To address the first research questions, I used in-vivo, and values coding (Saldaña, 2014; Strauss, 1987) utilizing the subjects' responses, particularly that which described their experiences, including their values, attitudes, and beliefs that may have impacted their work as a teacher. Additionally, I looked for themes based on words expressed by participants, including patterns and frequencies of statements made by the research participants. This included language regarding teachers' practices and strategies used in building community and belonging with students. Once the individual language had been gathered from each interview, codes were identified based on the narrative data.

To address the second and third research questions, I used descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2014) to summarize each participants' description of their experiences. The transcribed interviews were printed in order to take notes, jottings, and identify codes. The coding process involved a reading mode (Yin, 2016) to analyze the interview data and look for patterns. Findings were identified by reading and reviewing the interview transcription, then developing themes that emerged from the interview. The narrative data was manually coded using different colored highlighters in order to develop meaningful themes. The data analysis process followed Creswell's (2014) Model for Qualitative Data Analysis, which is a logical deductive approach to analyzing qualitative data and approaches the grouping of data based on common themes

(Creswell, 2013). I looked for themes, including interrelating themes, and interpreted the meaning of the themes, including the perceptions of school belonging and relevant practices to build and increase community that were trending amongst participant testimonies. I used the socio-ecological framework of school belonging (Allen et al., 2016) and the critical hope framework (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) to identify and organize the themes into relevant findings. I, then, organized classroom and school-wide practices influencing belonging utilizing the different layers of the socio-ecological framework of school belonging model (Figure 3) and uncovered the teacher practices that are linked to the concept of critical hope (Table 3). This chapter is organized into three sections of findings based on each research question for clarity and ease of information.

Figure 3

The Socioecological Framework of School Belonging



Note: Reprinted from "Fostering School Belonging in Secondary Schools Using a Socio-Ecological Framework" by K. A. Allen, D. Vella-Brodrick, & L. Waters, 2016, *Educational and Developmental Psychological, 33,* p. 97-121, copyright 2016 by Springer Science+Business Media, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-016-9389-8. Used by permission.

Table 3

The Three Elements of Critical Hope

Critical Hope: Enemies of Hopelessness	
Material Hope	Characterized by an understanding that quality teaching is one of the most important material resources they have to offer. Reflects a teachers' work both inside and outside the classroom.
Socratic Hope	Characterized by educators who desire to stand in solidarity with the children and families in the communities they serve. It reflects a recognition that a teacher's most powerful pedagogy is simply the way they live their life.
Audacious Hope	Audacious hope stares down the painful path; and despite the overwhelming odds against us making it down that path to change, we make the journey again and again. There is no other choice. Acceptance of this fact allows us to find the courage and the commitment to cajole our students to join us on that journey.

Note: Adapted from "Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete" by J. M. R. Duncan-Andrade, 2009, *Harvard Educational Review, 79,* p. 186-190, copyright 2009 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College, https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.2.nu3436017730384w.

Research Question 1: What Are Alternative School Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Sense of Belonging in Their Context?

The findings from this research question have been organized into four identifiable themes based on narrative data collected from the participants. Findings included reflections regarding what student belonging looks like, the sensitivity of trauma of past schooling experiences, the impact of teacher philosophy and student care, and the significance of belonging for all people.

Belonging Is Observable, Impacted by Previous Schooling, Fostered Through Care

Belonging Is Observable

All eight research participants expressed that they observed multiple ways in which their students demonstrated a sense of belonging in their context. Andres Ramos described that sense

of belonging is not established right away. In his example, he explains the process in which he as a teacher has observed his students adapt to a new environment and begin to belong:

> Because we have students that come in at different times of the year, you get to kind of see that process continuously occur. So, if a student begins with us at the beginning of the term, and they go through our orientation, Mental Toughness period . . . it happens a lot quicker. And if a student comes in mid-year where they don't necessarily get that full experience, you still do see it happen as they start to get more comfortable, because there's always that initial phase where students are coming in, they're really trying to feel it out and figure out what this space is all about. I don't know what their past experiences have been at school. I don't know what their situation is. What we try to offer to all students as they come in is . . . open-mindedness, flexibility with their situation, checking in with students consistently. And these are all things I think contribute to students developing that sense of belonging. Things that students have mentioned or have done is they may want to hang out in your classroom during lunch, right? Because they feel comfortable there. They may ask to stay after school a little bit longer just to finish up some things if they feel comfortable enough. A lot of students may just not want to leave right away. Usually when we go on field trips, I think I noticed, or have culture building activities, you usually start to see this, I guess, breakthrough with a lot of students where they get a lot more comfortable with classmates and with their instructors, kind of outside of the classroom space. Experiences, I think, go a long way as well. (Andres Ramos)

In Andres Ramos' example, he discusses observable behavior by students such as spending extra time in the classroom or talking to school staff outside of class time, such as during field trips or culture building activities, which was an experience spoken to by other participants as well, including Ray Solado, who expressed that his students feel comfortable to approach him with questions or gravitate to certain classrooms outside of instructional time where they can be themselves.

> So maybe you have one or two that, you know, they just like to be loud. And that's okay, because in my classroom, you know, it's lunchtime, you can be loud because that's you. And I have another kid who's reading the comic books. And you be you, and I think I see that in our space, too. When students kind of, like, gravitate to certain classrooms, they go to my class or Cren's class or Hernandez's class, and it's always the same cluster that I think they just kind of, like, pick their space. But that's belonging. When they can be comfortable, really. When they can be comfortable to ask

> for help, to be themselves in joking ways with their peers, when they can just feel safe. (Ray Solado)

Students spending time in the classroom spaces outside of instructional hours is an observation that the teachers made that they linked to the students experiencing an increased sense of belonging in their context. Ray Solado describes the phenomenon of students spending time in his classroom during lunch and other times and expressing themselves in different ways, including being loud which might not be acceptable behavior during instructional time. He expresses that students "pick their space" to hang out and be comfortable to be themselves. Other participants, such as Malorie Solache, expressed that she could tell her students enjoyed coming to school and felt safe there because they were so close to staff. She told a story of a young student who initially wanted to enroll in Independent Studies rather than come on campus, but after spending two weeks in the program, she decided to stay enrolled on campus. Malorie Solache expressed that she can tell her student feels a sense of belonging because the student chose to come on campus and has stated that she loves going to school. Mark Tenent also expressed that he can tell his students feel belonging because they keep showing up, which they didn't do in their previous schools, and they begin to take ownership of the space, either by decorating for holidays or coming up with ideas for school activities such as spirit week or field trips, as well as bringing up concerns regarding school culture to staff. He shared a story in which a student approached him and asked him to address concerning behavior from a classmate in a restorative way, rather than letting the concerning behavior persist and having the classmate be addressed by her peers in an aggressive way. Taking the initiative to bring a concern to staff shows an investment on the part of the student that they care about situations involving other students and how they are handled, even if the situations don't directly affect them. Similarly,

William Smith shared some of the changes he has witnessed in his students as they begin to experience a sense of belonging:

> I have had participants tell me, like, man, nobody's ever supported me like this. Nobody's ever really checked in with me on a daily basis . . . And when they come here, they feel loved and appreciated. And these are some things that they don't face outside of the program. And that lets me know that the Westgate program is a place that they can feel comfortable and feel like they belong because they're not being judged like the outside elements or outside people judge them as being who they are and where they come from . . . For instance, like a few participants just recently, throughout the three cohorts, I've seen them progress and come out their comfort zone and start speaking out and feeling more confident within themselves to speak out. And when I first met them, they was very humble, very shy, kind of standoffish and never really spoke out. But as the time progressed, then they start speaking out and it just lets me know that they start building more self-confidence within themselves throughout the program so that lets me know that they was taking some of the things that we was offering throughout the program and they start incorporating it within themselves. (William Smith)

William Smith's example, as well as the examples shared by the other research participants, show that there are observable behaviors of students that let their teachers know that a sense of belonging is being developed. Some behaviors shared include showing up every day, taking initiative and making the space theirs, hanging out in the classroom during lunch and after school, asking questions and their teacher for help, stating that they love coming to school, as well as coming out of their comfort zone and exhibiting more confidence over time. These were all behaviors that teachers identified as students exhibiting a sense of belonging.

Belonging Is Impacted by Previous Schooling

Similar to the previous section in which all eight participants expressed that they perceived their students felt a sense of belonging in their context, all eight participants also expressed that they felt their students didn't feel a sense of belonging in their previous school

settings. The following are a short summary of quotes taken from the interview transcripts that express the teachers' experiences with their students' lack of belonging in previous schools.

> Because at their traditional school, nobody gives a f**k. They told me that. 'Mister, you're the first person that actually gives a f**k.' I'm like, thank you. I give a f**k a lot. Now do your work. (Armando Hernandez)

> And so, that approach alone, they're just kind of like "You didn't come at me like the teachers in my other school" . . . I always tell them, yeah, you have trauma from your other school. It's real and it's legit, because when I walk, I have a U in my classroom, and I don't like walking behind them because they feel very anxious and very weird about it. (Elena Magaro)

> The other day somebody said—it was an interview or I'm trying to remember the conversation—but I remember the girl was saying that she was lost, there's too many people, and, like, she was just a number. I get that a lot, where it's just like they don't care, are just a number or they don't know their teacher, just stuff like that. (Lionel Gerson)

> But, yeah, we had our exit interviews today and a lot of students did mention . . . or what I interpreted as this difference in their previous schools to our school, that they feel a lot more comfortable. I think that was a key word that I picked up on that really contributed to them being able to succeed in their class. (Andres Ramos)

> Quite a few participants just share with me the reason why they didn't make it in traditional school is because they felt like the teachers were there just to get a paycheck. They didn't appreciate them. They weren't even concerned about none of the obstacles or trials that they go through in order to get to school every day. (William Smith)

> I just feel like they get lost in the shuffle if they're absent. I don't know if, like us, we're, like, calling them, calling their mom, making sure they come, motivating them. I don't know if that's how it works at a conventional high school, but never have I—even dating back to my first year—never have I remembered a student telling me their glory days from the high school that they went to. I don't think I have. So I don't know if any of our students who came from a high school had great experiences there. (Malorie Solache)

> I think it's similar to when anybody wears a hoodie and sometimes you put it over. You're almost like Dr. Doom from *Spider-Man*. You're just trying to hide or you're trying to disappear, but it's like no, you're right there. I think it's the alternative to escaping to have your phone or your music and creating this little corner for yourself where you can kind of almost coexist, coexist in two spaces, the classroom space and then your own mental space, or wherever that is for you. So, I think it is done as a

> place to maintain that sense of comfort and not knowing how to engage or even open up to the dynamics of a classroom. But I think also it probably means too, that maybe teachers saw that and thought, "Well, that's Juanito always in his headphones, I'm gonna leave him alone" . . . and then he just gets pushed further away and not even attempted to bring him to the class dynamics. I think that's what happens sometimes. (Ray Solado)

> I think really the big problem for most of our young people is they didn't feel seen at their previous school. We don't necessarily have a ton of bad students. We just have ones who never felt like they were worth the teacher's time, and so they never asked for it. Then they fell behind and they thought, well, maybe this isn't for me because I don't know what I'm doing. So I think there's just a lot of that. But if you don't get seen by your teachers, how do you feel like you belong in there? (Mark Tenent)

The research participants perceived that the majority of their students had not had positive experiences in their previous schools, and perceived that they experienced a lack of belonging. Some of the common themes included teachers and school staff not caring about their students or not taking the time to build personal connections. Others spoke to overpopulated schools and large class sizes leading to an impersonalized, even anonymous experience where students with high needs are not given enough attention. Other teachers spoke to the effects that this can have on students, with them withdrawing or disengaging from the classroom setting. Even though these teachers had not known their students prior to them coming to the Westgate school, there had been enough statements made as well as observable behaviors to be able to interpret that the students had not felt a sense of belonging in their previous schools. Due to the lack of belonging and even trauma in previous school settings, these educators had to adopt additional practices in order to shift their students' educational narratives away from their past experiences and allow them to have renewed hope of being a successful student and belonging to a school community.

Belonging Is Fostered Through Care

Every single one of the participants communicated a teaching philosophy consistent with prioritizing caring, relational practices and elements of critical hope. Many teachers, such as Armando Hernandez, Andres Ramos, and Ray Solado spoke to the importance of quality and relevant instruction that is inclusive of students' cultures and experiences. Ray Solado stated that

> And so my philosophy is providing these opportunities where they can see themselves in these texts and see themselves as also contributing to the narrative of that story with their own narratives, and to provide these opportunities where they can really be able to speak on these texts because the content is of a matter that resonates with them. (Ray Solado)

Ray Solado's example, along with the other educators who mentioned similar practices, shows that material hope, an element of Duncan-Andrade's (2009) framework of Critical Hope, is a pillar of the teaching philosophy. Material hope is characterized by an understanding that quality teaching is one of the most important material resources a teacher has to offer, and reflects a teacher's work both inside and outside the classroom. Andres Ramos shared that his philosophy is "building on what students bring to the classroom, and they need to be comfortable in the classroom." Similarly, Mark Tenent stated that his goal as an educator is to "break the cycle of poverty and encourage metacognition." These quotes demonstrate the unique ways that these teachers are giving material hope to their students through their curricular choices and instructional practices.

Other educators shared the importance of caring, relational practices in their teaching philosophy. Elena Magaro quickly shared that her practices stem from the belief that "every student can learn." Similarly, Lionel Gerson shared that "everyone is here for a purpose, and everyone deserves love and respect." William Smith shared similar sentiments in his statement

that “we have to understand where a participant is coming from and believe in them.” Malorie Solache confidently stated that “the basis of any of my students’ success in my classes is our relationship.” Without being prompted to speak to any relational practices, these educators chose to include the significance of deep, caring relationships with their students as an important component of their philosophy. Elena Magaro shared a sentiment from one of her students speaking to her caring philosophy:

> Yeah, I mean, one of the things that the students pointed out this week as they were doing their senior presentation is it’s like how I call them love. I’m like, “Hey, love.” Or “Hey, mijo, mija.” And they’re just like, “No one ever calls me that, or no one ever gives those type of endearments.” And so I think the student pointed out, it makes me feel warm inside. And I think that that helps a lot with them feeling comfortable and safe in the classroom, just knowing that that kind of love comes out of my language. (Elena Magaro)

Lionel Gerson also spoke to the importance of relational practices and consistent relationship building, even amongst students who may no longer be enrolled in the school due to personal struggles. He stated:

> Some of the students, we have, like, a secret handshake, and we weren’t planning . . . it just started happening. Continue to reach out to them. Even just sending a text, even if they’re coming in every day, to just reach out to them. They’re in your mind for a reason, right? Just reaching out to them. I didn’t realize I did this, but one person gave me a compliment the other day, and he said, yeah, I wasn’t even in the program anymore. You just checked on me. Then I came back. (Lionel Gerson)

Lionel Gerson’s quote shows the impact that relationship-building can have on a student’s ability to persist in their educational journey despite experiencing personal struggles, and their decision to return to a specific school once they choose to continue working towards their diploma. Armando Hernandez spoke to the importance of the educator not just in providing instruction but in creating the right conditions in order for all students to succeed. He stated:

> Everybody in this space creates those conditions. Every adult in that space creates the conditions. If there's somebody in there that doesn't believe in our young people, if there's anybody in there that they don't give a f**k about our young people and our young people read that s**t quick, then our young people tell us, "You know what? F**k that person." Very outright. We have to create the conditions. So if somebody doesn't fit our program, or they don't fit the needs of our young people, probably if you talk to Sori, or you talk to Mark, they'll tell you, they're not gonna be in our program for too long. (Armando Hernandez)

Armando Hernandez' quote shows the commitment of his alternative school to the elements of Socratic hope, which are characterized by educators who desire to stand in solidarity with the children and families in the communities they serve. It reflects a recognition that a teacher's most powerful pedagogy is simply the way they live their life. His quote shows that when an educator approaches their work with a philosophy that includes caring, relational practices and a commitment to critical hope, the practices that contribute to a successful educational space are implemented naturally and intentionally. When all school staff share that philosophy, it allows for a consistent space where conditions are regularly created to strengthen the entire school community.

Belonging is Important for Educators Themselves

Through the semi-structured interview process, participants had significant thoughts, feelings, and reflections on the importance of belonging for all people (students and fellow faculty and staff), as well as themselves as educators. Armando Hernandez spoke to some of the challenges educators have faced with their own sense of belonging in returning to teaching from the COVID pandemic lockdown:

> I think it's been harder to regain the stamina now than before the pandemic, because we went through it, too. We went through it with our young people, and we felt it with them. We went through it with them. And we're still trying to recover. We're still trying to figure that out. And I think with us as educators, that space of belonging also applies to us too. We have to be responsive to ourselves, too, and where we're at

> mentally, emotionally, physically, to be able to do this with young people. And with us, we have to be understanding of where we stand. Do we feel like we belong? Do we feel like we're connected? Do we feel like this is the time to change? And I think with everything that has happened over the last couple of years, and we've seen it within our network, people have decided, you know what? It's time to change. (Armando Hernandez)

Armando Hernandez' point speaks to the nationwide teacher shortage that our country has experienced post-COVID, with many teachers choosing to leave the field because perhaps they haven't felt supported in their role, or the conditions haven't been created in order for them to feel that they belong at their school, or even in the field of education. Other participants spoke to the importance of creating a safe, caring community. Elena Magaro said in referring to her students that "they say this is like their second home." Andres Ramos stated that students "need to feel like they're part of a community and that other people want to see them succeed." Mark Tenent spoke similar words in saying "When people get seen, when someone notices if they're having a good or bad day, it matters." Ray Solado also expressed the importance of having a community based on love. He stated: "Sometimes the pedagogy of love is just really having that person that they can go to for that hug, that support, that reassurance. Because if it weren't for that kind of safety zone, these kids wouldn't be there at any of our programs." Similarly, William Smith spoke to the importance of educators allowing students to show up as their true selves and not conform to some idealized image of what a student should be. As an alumni of the Westgate school who also spent 23 years there as an educator, he stated, "People need to know that they can belong without having to step out your character." He went on to say:

> I grew up wanting to feel a part of something, so I joined a gang and so on and so forth. And when I got introduced to the Westgate program, it just let me know . . . you can be yourself and still be a part of something without having to step out your character and try to be someone that you're not. My message would be, you always belong. Just be

> yourself and continue to do what you do, and you will find that place where you belong. (William Smith)

All of the educators interviewed expressed that they felt able to create a sense of belonging in the alternative school context where they are employed, and were given the freedom to be able to teach in a way that is aligned with their philosophy and implement the practices that they perceive to be most effective for their students. As Malorie Solache put it, "I'm grateful for our school. . . . I'm so lucky to be one of the people who likes going to work every day." Many of the research participants became emotionally moved due to the statements they shared, expressing joys and challenges in fostering a sense of belonging with their students who have had negative educational experiences in previous settings. Some participants expressed the reality of navigating school settings post-COVID, attempting to create welcoming, caring communities while remaining committed to their philosophies and to the field of education.

Research Question 2: What Support Do Teachers Employ in Their Classrooms to Build and Increase Students' Sense of Belonging in an Alternative Education Setting?

The second research question aimed to identify classroom practices that alternative school teachers use in their settings to build belonging with their students.

These findings in Table 4 are coded according to the Microsystem layer of the socio-ecological framework of school belonging, since they are indicative specifically of teacher practices (Allen et al., 2016), and organized according to the element of Critical Hope they relate to (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

Table 4

Microsystem Layers of Critical Hope

Material Hope	Socratic Hope	Audacious Hope
-provide relevant curriculum (7)	-implement a countercultural curriculum (4)	-greet students as they enter and give feedback as they exit (4)
-implement student-centered collaborative instruction (3)	-create space for student discussion (2)	- have hard conversations instead of removing students from class (5)
	-set community agreements (1)	

Note: Adapted from "Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete" by J. M. R. Duncan-Andrade, 2009, *Harvard Educational Review, 79,* p. 186-190. Copyright 2009 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College (https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.2.nu3436017730384w).

Microsystem: Material Hope

Findings in this area showed that the teachers interviewed used two main practices to foster a sense of belonging in their classrooms, which were (i) providing relevant curriculum, and (ii) implementing student-centered, collaborative instruction. Armando Hernandez, Elena Magaro, Andres Ramos, William Smith, Malorie Solache, Ray Solado, and Mark Tenent all spoke to the inclusion of relevant curriculum within their classroom spaces. William Smith shared his efforts, stating that "Everything I share through my curriculum, I try to make sure that the participants understand it and grasp it. And if they don't, I'm willing to sit down one on one to make sure they obtain the knowledge." Armando Hernandez explains some of the challenges with keeping curriculum relevant to his students' lives:

> I think that a lot of the hardest thing is to keep up with relevance. The only thing I would say the quality is there; it's just the relevancy and willingness to adjust to that in the new social, and I'm going to go with the new social, political, economic and cultural leaders, and understanding those things from your community, that takes some research time. But fortunately for me, I live in the community, so I understand what's going on in the community, so I can respond a lot easier. But that's not all teachers. Some of the work requires an additional level of work to really understand what is going to be not only relevant but is going to feel genuine. (Armando Hernandez)

Armando Hernandez' example shows that he as a teacher invests extra time to update his curriculum as there are social, political, economic, and cultural shifts in society, or in the community, so that it is genuine and meaningful for his students. Andres Ramos also spoke to his efforts to ensure that his curriculum is relevant:

> And that's always a challenge because we have students that come in with varying skills and comfort levels when it comes to academic rigor, and also different age ranges. Some of them may just have a lot more life experience and know how to do certain activities a lot easier than other students. So I think that's always a balancing act. But the goal is to make sure that any assignment isn't just busy work. Rather, they're getting something out of it or it's contributing to them developing a skill that they're going to use later on in their final project. Um, and the second goal that I have is really to make these assignments relevant so that they leave my class with understanding how to look at things through this specific perspective. It's through a science perspective, because that's the majority of the courses that I teach, but also them understanding that that's only one way of looking at the world. What we call something in science, somebody in a different field of study may call something different, but they're probably the same thing. And I think that's a big thing for students to see, that looking at things from a science perspective is just one way of looking or understanding. It's not the right way or it's not the only way. I think that has been helpful in being able to find some relevance in science courses. (Andres Ramos)

Elena Magaro, a math teacher, discussed the ways in which she evaluates whether or not her curriculum is quality and relevant:

> At the end they finish a project and like, let's say a couple of them do really well and they're able to reflect or apply it to like a real-world situation or something that we're talking about. I think that's when I feel like, okay, good, we're making connections outside of the class in the real world. (Elena Magaro)

With Elena's example, when her students are able to apply the skills and knowledge that they have learned in her class to a real-world situation, she is able to conclude that her curriculum has been relevant and meaningful to their lives. In addition to quality and relevant instruction, many of the teachers also spoke to the importance of implementing student-centered, collaborative instruction with plenty of opportunities for students to connect and use their voices.

Andres Ramos stated “I think group activities play a huge role because it allows students to get to know each other and to be able to talk within the classroom setting with each other.” Lionel Gerson also spoke to the importance of class discussions and student-led projects:

> The other thing is I like to do discussions as part of it. So I’m not just teaching top down. I like having discussions, right? So it could be on the subject or it could be off the subject, but I always like to include where . . . I like, brainstorming with them, like, even if we’re coming up with a project. Okay, what do you think? So I like to get their buy-in because I love the sense where I step back and they have it and they’re running with it. One example of that, we did a documentary a couple of years ago and it was all them. No, it wasn’t a documentary, it was a short film. 100% them. All I gave was suggestions. But they created it in the class. They brainstormed, they assigned different roles, and they did it. And at the end of the day, they felt good about their creation. (Lionel Gerson)

Elena Magaro spoke to her practice of incorporating partner work, collaboration, and reciprocal teaching amongst her students to build their leadership skills and increase their sense of belonging:

> I think the big one is making friends and building connections with other students. And it happens just like in small little moments. . . . I don’t know. Yeah, in the classroom sometimes I’m like, oh, you missed the notes from yesterday. Can you partner up with this person? And then next thing you know, they’re like, talking. Or the other person takes initiative and helps them and be like, “Oh, this is how we did.” I always ask for, is it okay if you guys partner up? And sometimes, one of them, they’re like, yeah, really shy and don’t talk. But then the other person makes that initiative to make them feel comfortable. So I think that we definitely have a good sense of community here where we tell—like, I always tell the students that I’m not the only teacher in the classroom. And so sometimes I’m going to ask them to step it up if I need them to step it up, and I would appreciate it very much. And I told them, even if you call me while you’re teaching someone else, it’s fine. At least you’re helping me with half the work. And they rise to the occasion if I give them a challenge. (Elena Magaro)

Elena’s example shows that her students understand that it’s not only her responsibility as a teacher to ensure that everyone in the class learns. By using a community approach, everyone can support one another’s learning and ensure that the whole class succeeds rather than focusing on themselves as an individual. She encourages all students with varying personalities to engage

and connect with one another as human beings as well as with the course instruction. By incorporating relevant instruction and a collaborative, student-centered approach, teachers can draw on the principles of material hope in order to foster a sense of belonging in their classroom.

Microsystem: Socratic Hope

Findings in this area showed that the teachers interviewed used three practices to foster a sense of belonging in their classrooms, which were (i) implementing a countercultural curriculum to the dominant, traditional school curriculum which may portray communities of color and their histories in a negative way, (ii) creating space for student discussion, and (iii) setting community agreements. Ray Solado expressed the importance of texts that reflect minority cultures and "providing opportunities where students read and are able to engage with texts that represent their backgrounds, with authors that could represent themselves in terms of racial background, bilingualism, plots, in stories that might reflect possible personal experiences." Armando Hernandez discussed his approach to curriculum in his classroom:

> You can't just teach them that our people have been subjected, have been degraded, have been killed, lynched. Cause then, to a certain extent, then they're like, well, what the f**k is the point of living then, if my people are going to continue to be oppressed? You have to teach them there is a possibility for something more. (Armando Hernandez)

Armando's example shows how simply teaching the history of oppression cannot be the end goal. If the history of a social group only focuses on oppression with no possibility for change, it's easy for students belonging to that group to become discouraged and deflated. Teachers need to go beyond and give hope to their students that change and action can take place to create a more socially just world. Andres Ramos also explained how he provides a counter-cultural narrative and gives his students space to debrief challenging topics:

> Especially since I picked up the U.S. History courses, I try not to sugarcoat a lot of the material, because I think that students need to be able to understand the events that have occurred historically and that continue to occur today, and how they connect to each other. And it's the same with science. How do we have a lot of the understanding that we have now? And how has science been used not only in a progressive way, but also in an aggressive manner and to harm a lot of people. I think pretty much all of my courses incorporate a lot of reflection and criticism of our society to the point where there are some times where I really just try to open up a space for discussion and say, "How are you all feeling today?" It's kind of tough to listen to the atrocities of American slavery at 08:00 a.m. on a Tuesday, but those are things that we kind of come in and start with. So I always try to add a debrief at the end of the class where students can kind of just share-out how they feel and things like that. (Andres Ramos)

Andres Ramos' example shows that in addition to implementing curriculum that has not been "sugarcoated," it can be helpful to give students space to debrief the information, not just from a cognitive or academic perspective, but also to be able to process some of the emotions that may emerge from examining painful topics. Other teachers such as Malorie Solache also described delivering a curriculum that provides a different narrative than the traditional school curriculum. She explained that the way she teaches some historical events may paint a certain dominant race in a negative light. However, she does not shy away from the truth as she believes it is important. She gives students the chance to learn the real history of events, analyze, and decide their own opinion for themselves. William Smith also discussed the need to discuss real issues impacting communities of color and give students a chance to talk within the classroom about topics that are important to them, even if they are not directly related to the curriculum:

> There's been various times when we have to kind of veer off topic a little bit because something pops up in the class and I feel like it's a need to discuss it. Even though it's not pertaining to vocational training, but it's pertaining to their everyday lives and things that they deal with on a daily basis. For one, it was like the Fentanyl thing that was going around in the community and things like that. A few of the participants came in and kind of shared information that they had a friend that OD'd on Fentanyl. . . . That was just a discussion that kind of made its way into the classroom. . . . Um, kind of talked about that, and different participants shared their experiences with different types of drugs and how they kind of overcame that obstacle. I shared some information

> about some things I encountered growing up as a kid as far as drug addiction and things like that. And it kind of gave them an outlook or a better perspective on how to handle themselves when they are amongst friends that's indulging in different drug activity and things like that. . . . Yeah, it's a sad cause because it's really affecting a lot of our young adults. So it's good; the more knowledge that they have the better for them, so they can better be prepared for whatever situation that comes about out here in these streets . . . So, yes, I will always make space in whatever setting I'm in to talk about personal issues. And things like that and come up with ways to overcome those issues. Because I think that's real important. (William Smith)

William Smith's statement shows that just because a topic is not included in the traditional class curriculum doesn't mean that it isn't important. Creating space for student discussion can help create a space where students feel safe, listened to, and validated. The third practice involved setting community agreements together as a class. Mark Tenent spoke to the process in which he does this with his students:

> I do respect agreements at the beginning of each class or at the beginning of each term when we start, because I want the young people, as soon as they come in, to realize that it's not a matter of me creating rules. Because if you don't buy into those rules, those rules don't matter. . . . So let's talk about what we all want from a classroom, what we need from a classroom, and even if we don't, I know Timmy said we have to follow up with that, and that is true. But at the same time, if you have people from the beginning thinking about what it is they want from a classroom, they'll . . . I won't say obviously not all of them, but a fair number of them will act with that in mind as they go. And at least you can point it out. Like, if someone is just way out of pocket, you can just be like, hey, this is not exactly what we talked about. You don't have to get into "You weren't following the rules." It's like you set these expectations. I didn't. I had nothing to do with it. So there's only really two things that you just absolutely cannot do in my classroom. Other than that, whatever the standards are in the classroom, it's up to them. So I think that's a part as well. It's like, well, this is yours. What it is you want from me and what it is you want from each other, you've talked about. So there's a sense that you have to live up to that. It makes it easier. (Mark Tenent)

Mark's example speaks to the importance of creating buy-in with his students using a collaborative approach where all students contribute to creating the class norms and expectations rather than a top-down approach to rules that are only created by the instructor. He explains that his community agreements provide a framework for class expectations and give the teacher a set

of something to reference when an agreement is broken. He as a teacher is able to set certain non-negotiable expectations for his classroom, but by allowing the class to contribute to their respect agreement and give input, it makes it more likely that their class agreements will be followed.

Microsystem: Audacious Hope

Findings in this area showed that the teachers interviewed used two main practices to foster a sense of belonging in their classrooms, which were (i) greeting students as they enter and giving feedback as they exit, and (ii) having hard conversations instead of removing students from class. Andres Ramos, Elena Magaro, Ray Solado, and William Smith all stated the importance of greeting and checking in with students regularly as well as providing feedback at the end of a class session. Elena Magaro stated:

> So I greet them at the door and I say goodbye to them. So hi and bye at the door every single day. And so that for them is just kind of . . . and then even if, like, let's say I won't, this hardly happens, but if I'm not at the door, they come to me and they're just kind of like "Miss, where's my fist bump?" Right? So they make sure and I make eye contact with them and then I give feedback as they're leaving. Like, "Oh, you did really good today." Or even if they need just feedback and constructive feedback. And I'm like, "Oh, tomorrow let's put our cell phone away." Or "Tomorrow, make sure you ask me questions." Or "Tomorrow, make sure you take notes." (Elena Magaro)

Elena's statement demonstrates that this practice of greeting and checking in with students is valued and appreciated by students. She gave the example of students coming to ask her for a fist bump on a day where she isn't able to make it to the door to greet them. This shows that this is a practice the students look forward to and expect when coming to her class. She also explains that giving feedback upon exit from class is a great way to acknowledge student progress or encourage improvement for the next class session. Either way, it shows the student

that the work they did that day was noticed by their instructor. William Smith also spoke to how he incorporates giving praise and positive feedback as a regular part of his practice:

> And I also give them praise, appreciation. I appreciate them when they do a good job, or I appreciate them when they come and ask for help. Things like that, letting them know even the best people need help at times, and it takes a real person to step out their comfort zone and come ask for that help. So I just show a lot of appreciation and acknowledgment from the tasks and performance that they display on the site and in the classroom as well. (William Smith)

William's example shows that a teacher can give praise and appreciation to all students, not just the ones that are completing the work or doing "a good job." Students can be praised even when they ask for help with a difficult task, or when they need extra support from their instructor. This practice demonstrates to students that their teacher appreciates them unconditionally whether they are able to complete the work in class that day or not. This can help students feel a sense of belonging even when they might fall short of meeting their teacher's expectations and may help them to remain committed to trying again the next day, knowing that they will have support from their teacher.

Many teachers spoke to the practice of having hard conversations with students regarding behavior rather than removing them from class. Repeatedly being removed from class can certainly impact a student's sense of belonging, especially if they begin to feel that their teacher does not want them in the class. William Smith spoke to his philosophy regarding challenging behavior, stating that "I don't think no student is problematic, even though they can seem that way. I think a lot of times, participants are not just ready for some of the things we have to offer." Mark Tenent shared his reasoning for keeping students in class even when they might not be producing academic work that day:

> I look at a body of work, so if they're out of character having a bad day, I'm not going to kick them out of class. I'm not going to ask you to do any work that day because I already know what's going on. We'll find a way for you to fix that, for you to do it at a different time. But at least you'll be in. You'll be able to hear me explain it, if there's anything for me to explain. But I'm not going to kick someone out for having a bad day. We'll just talk about, okay, let's pick that up tomorrow. (Mark Tenent)

Lionel Gerson also spoke to some of the strategies that he uses to address behavior issues and create opportunities for all students to remain engaged while teaching a classroom of diverse learners:

> Okay, I would say definitely 100% committed to keeping them. And even if I have to adjust the way I do it, and I try to do it where it's not singling out one person, but try to adjust how I'm doing the classroom so that they're included. For example, behavior issues. And thank God, has it been too much. But one of the biggest issues is the phone. And so I'm like and I'll look up, I was like, all right, I'll give you 5 seconds to put away the phone, because I don't like it out when I'm talking. You hear that? And then I'll look back down. But it's only two students that I have to deal with doing that. But I try to make it to where they're not singled out. And then there's one young man who . . . actually not just one, but it's a few of them, where I had to reflect last year. I'm like, okay, I need to do more hands-on, out of your seat stuff in my classroom. So the ones who it's harder for them to focus, they have to do something hands-on. I would say a couple of years ago. Now it's like, okay, so I have to build that in, to where—again, not singling anybody out—but try to make it as much as possible to where everybody's benefiting. (Lionel Gerson)

Lionel's example shows that, although it may take more intentional work and shifting of instructional practices, it is possible for teachers to address challenging behavior in the classroom and give students a chance to get back on track without sending them out of the space. Elena Magaro also spoke to the practice of keeping students in as much as possible, and only removing them in very rare cases after having multiple hard conversations regarding behavior:

> And so when I heard it from multiple students, then I had to make a difficult decision and be like, "I need to remove you from this classroom because it affects other students." So it's not necessarily because I felt like I was unable to work with that person. It was just because they chose not to. After multiple talks. After multiple attempts for me trying to work with him, he was just kind of like, having way too much fun and not allowing learning to go on. And so I think that was a very difficult decision.

> But I think that, again, when it affected the students and those who wanted to learn and who found the topic interesting, then I needed to do that. But when I dealt with it, it was tough. It was the hardest because then I feel like I failed. (Elena Magaro)

Elena's example demonstrates her commitment to working with all types of students and creating an effective environment where all students can learn. She expressed the impact that removing the student had on her. She felt like she failed when she had to remove a student from her class, because that's not usually a part of her practice. She spoke to the process she engaged in with the student, utilizing multiple talks and attempts to work with them, and only removed them after those attempts were ineffective.

Research Question 3: What Are Teachers' Perceptions of School-wide Practices that Foster Students' Sense of Belonging?

These findings in Table 5 are coded according to the Mesosystem layer of the socio-ecological framework of school belonging, since they identify specific school rules and practices (Allen et al., 2016), and are organized according to the element of Critical Hope they relate to (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

Table 5

Mesosystem Layers of Critical Hope

Material Hope	Socratic Hope	Audacious Hope
-implementing a community building class (5)	-create space for student discussion (2)	- offering flexible schedules (2)
-holding regular check-ins (2)	-provide mental health support for all students (2)	-maintaining a policy leadership council (3)
-hosting end of term gathering/outing (5)	-maintain countercultural policies (2)	-hosting activities (6)
	-setting community agreements (2)	-publicly recognizing student improvement (2)

Note: Adapted from "Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete" by J. M. R. Duncan-Andrade, 2009, *Harvard Educational Review, 79*, p. 186-190. Copyright 2009 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College, https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.2.nu3436017730384w.

Mesosystem: Material Hope

The findings that contributed to a sense of belonging as well as provided material hope to students were (i) implementing a community-building class, (ii) holding regular check-ins, and (iii) hosting an end of term gathering/outing. Staff such as Lionel Gerson, identified the community-building class, sometimes referred to by other names, as being beneficial to creating a sense of belonging amongst students. Lionel stated:

> One thing I do, like, Ms. Rose did a really good job to share with advisories, and that's one thing I did kind of fail at this year, but it was such a sense. They did activities, they did games, they did all kind of stuff and it was cool. But then when you look at the retention, it was mostly those students who was in her advisory. So I do see the benefit of it. (Lionel Gerson)

Lionel's example shows the connection between his colleague's advisory class and student retention. He noted how Ms. Rose, who did a good job incorporating community building activities in her advisory, had a lot of students who remained enrolled and engaged in school throughout the course of the year, compared to students enrolled in other advisory classes.

His quote demonstrates the impact that the community building class had on students' continuing to show up. Ray Solado also spoke to the practice of incorporating the community building class:

> Yeah. It may not be everyday activities. We might have a day where it might be a guest speaker talking about college as a pathway. On a different day, we have people from the county talking about Delete the Divide, which is like an initiative that is helping families to get certified in technology training, to help them be more job ready in the workforce. Other days, it's more like, look, guys, a lot of folks are missing out. Too many classes. We got people out of class too many times. It becomes, like, a pep talk session, so it kind of varies week to week. (Ray Solado)

Ray's example showed the multitude of topics that could be addressed within the community-building class, which is a 30-minute period each day designed for human connection and addressing any number of topics that extend beyond the traditional academic curriculum. William Smith also expanded on the purpose of the community building class, referred to as "T-circles" within his context:

> T-circles are a group of participants. They are in different groups themed with colors. Green and gold, purple and blue. And yeah, they come together and they complete community action projects. Like I said, on certain days, they have rivalry, like fun games, like seated basketball, working as a team within their team to accomplish certain goals. So, yeah, T-circles is something that's developed to create teamwork amongst the participants. Whether it's a fun rivalry culture or it's just a sense of 'we all one' atmosphere. Those are some things that I feel that allow participants to feel a sense of belonging. (William Smith)

William Smith's example of T-circles demonstrated the benefit of community-building activities that contribute to a positive school culture and increase the sense of belonging amongst students. Andres Ramos and Elena Magaro highlighted holding regular check-ins as a practice that was beneficial to their students, with Andres speaking to the number of different staff members who check in regularly with students, including counselors, teachers, and support staff. Andres stated that:

> We have check-ins every Monday that I think also play a role. It's something that we've implemented this year, and they're not too long. They're about 15 to 20 minutes before lunch. So it's not just necessarily one practice, but all of those things play a certain role. What makes one student feel a sense of belonging may not do the same thing for the next student. It's important to have this multifaceted approach. (Andres Ramos)

Andres Ramos' example speaks to the fact that different students will connect with different staff. By having multiple staff members in various roles check in regularly with students, it is more likely that students will experience a sense of belonging with at least one staff member on campus. Lionel Gerson also highlighted the practice of checking in with students, even when they are no longer enrolled in the program:

> Continue to reach out to them. Even just sending a text, even if they're coming in every day, to just reach out to them. They're in your mind for a reason, right? Just reaching out to them. I didn't realize I did this, but one person gave me a compliment the other day, and he said, yeah, I wasn't even in the program anymore. You just checked on me. Then I came back. And it was like, I didn't realize I did that. But I would just say, just continue the . . . always relationship building. And even when they're graduated. Or have disconnected, if there's a way to . . . just always let them know how to ask them how they're doing. (Lionel Gerson)

Lionel Gerson's example shows that a student who wasn't enrolled in the school appreciated being checked on and decided to come back to re-enroll later on. This demonstrates a sense of belonging that the student experienced based on Lionel's practice of regularly checking in with his students, including those who have disconnected.

End of term gatherings, as well as end of term outings were also identified as practices that increased students' sense of belonging. Armando Hernandez identified these practices, stating "Then we have an end of the term potluck. We try to do some kind of trip every term, at least once every trimester we try to have a trip."

Andres Ramos also cited these practices and the impact it made on his students:

> Yeah. So at the end of every term, we'll have a potluck. So we have our holiday one in the winter, and then right before spring break, we'll have, like, a spring potluck on the last day. And then today, it wasn't like a full-on potluck, but it was a recognition breakfast thing that we had today for graduates and then for students who did very well this term. So all that makes it then just having events throughout the course of the year where students can kind of just hang out, I think that makes a big difference. . . . So all of those things and then field trips make a big difference. We did a few college trips this year and went to a few museums and that made a big difference as well. (Andres Ramos)

Andres Ramos states a couple times that these practices made a difference for his students, creating spaces for students to just hang out during the school day, and giving opportunities to increase their sense of belonging with the other people within the school. Malorie Solache also spoke to the impact of field trips and outings on creating a strong connection amongst people within the school, stating, "We just had a senior outing and it was the whole staff and our graduating seniors. And that was super fun. We went bowling, arcade, we ate out. Again, we're such a tight knit family that we do a lot of things together." Malorie's example demonstrates that the time spent together as a group outside of academic time was fun for both students and staff, and created a "tight knit family" atmosphere that could impact student sense of belonging at school in a positive way.

Mesosystem: Socratic Hope

Findings showed that there were four school-wide practices identified by the participants as being effective in fostering a schoolwide sense of belonging amongst their students. The findings included (i) creating space for student discussion, (ii) providing mental health support for all students, (iii) maintaining countercultural policies, and (iv) setting community agreements. Lionel Gerson and William Smith spoke to the importance of creating space for student discussion:

> But we always try to ask them to lead stuff or to make suggestions. We try to go off of their input because they know what their needs are, and what's fun for them better than we do. So try to get them leading or organizing or at least giving input of what they want to do and then making sure we implement it and not just let it pile up on a post-it note somewhere. (Lionel Gerson)

> With everybody, see how everybody's doing and any issues anybody is willing to discuss, we discuss it that morning and just let everybody know that this is an open forum and this is the time when we share how we're feeling. And things we're going through, and we discuss it before we get our day started, just to try to keep everybody in good spirits and good strides. (William Smith)

These participants both perceived that their school-wide practice of allowing students to discuss issues that are important to them or give input regarding their needs was effective in increasing belonging amongst all students. Other teachers mentioned the importance of mental health support, such as one on one case management for students. Armando Hernandez said that "We have our case manager. So every young person is supported by a case manager. We have our clinical therapist now, so they're supporting with our young people that need more intense support on a daily basis." Andres Ramos said "Then we have the MSW interns who will support you when it comes to just your personal well-being and anything that you may need as well from outside of the school so that you can do well in the school." Schools provide support beyond just academics for students, and also assist in meeting social-emotional needs, as well as mental health resources. Whether it's through case management, therapy, or MSW interns, providing mental health support was identified as a practice that fosters a sense of belonging for students.

Andres Ramos also spoke to maintaining countercultural school policies, such as the practice of allowing students to return and re-enroll multiple times until they graduate.

> You're going to be able to come back. You're going to be able to do all these things. I can think of maybe one example that has gone awry and the student hasn't come back, but just one off the top of my head, but because the majority of the students do come back. I can give you one example. We have a student who graduated last year. He

> graduated when he was 21, and he began with us when he was 16. And there were a few times that he had been removed and come back. And he felt a sense of belonging enough to want to come back and to feel comfortable. So that speaks to that culture that we try to develop here where, hey, this is your space. When you're ready. That's what this is meant to do. It's meant to provide you multiple opportunities to complete your high school diploma. (Andres Ramos)

Malorie Solache also discussed this open-door philosophy as part of her school's practice. Malorie stated:

> I have some students that have been coming since 2018 that graduated this year. That's five years. And when they didn't come in with zero credits, they came in with . . . as maybe a freshman or sophomore, but they stuck with it. They stuck with it. And they weren't embarrassed. They didn't feel like, oh, my gosh, it's been two years. Forget it. I'm giving up. We motivate them. (Malorie Solache)

Although some students may take longer to finish school due to unexpected life circumstances, this open-door re-enrollment policy within the alternative school setting has allowed Andres' and Malorie's students to complete their high school diploma, even if it has been later than expected. Andres spoke to the connection that the student felt which caused him to want to come back to their school setting after being removed multiple times. Malorie spoke to the reduction in stigma that her students felt in continuing to pursue their education even though their expected graduation date may have already passed. This is different from the traditional high school trajectory, which is typically completed in four years, and enforces traditional expulsion practices in which returning is often not possible.

Ray Solado spoke to the practice of setting community agreements. His school refers to them as a Respect Agreement. He stated:

> Respect agreements. Any time there's something that happened or space that requires, like, intervention in the tribe class, we do that as well. So if, let's say, some scuffle happens between two members or, like, a near fight breaks out. Rather than put that to the side, we want to bring it to the table and talk about that and what happened and have them explain, like, well, how was that disrespectful to the space? How was that

> disrespectful to each other? And have them be the ones to tell you what they see and what they report on. That way they take agency and ownership in those ideas, too. . . . Yeah, because if they see something that shouldn't be happening, they'll call it out. They say, hey, you said remember, you said you're not going to do this. Oh, you're right. Okay, let me take this worksheet or whatever. Right? Because you have those that will be very passive about it. But then you have those who will very much follow through and hold you accountable, as they should to these agreements. Because if we hold them accountable, I think it's fair to say that in a reciprocal way, they can hold us accountable as well. Anytime that we fall short of these agreements. (Ray Solado

Lionel Gerson also spoke to having a respect agreement as part of his school's practices. He discussed the process in which they create the agreements together with both students and staff:

> Okay. So we do a respect agreement together. Normally, how we do it, we'll kind of . . . everybody kind of break and take a section, like the whole room to all take a section so they can have smaller groups and hopefully open up the conversation in smaller groups or people feel more likely to open up and say something instead of a larger one. (Lionel Gerson)

The process of creating a respect agreement builds a sense of belonging in the way that it is drafted with everyone's input. Staff members and students are all on equal footing, and each voice is able to contribute as well as provide accountability to when agreements are broken, rather than traditional top-down rules that are enforced only by staff or school leaders, or can unfairly target minority students, low-income students, or students with disabilities.

Mesosystem: Audacious Hope

Findings in this area showed that the teachers perceived four school-wide practices related to be effective in fostering a sense of belonging with their students in the alternative school setting: (i) offering flexible schedules, (ii) maintaining a policy leadership council, (iii) hosting activities, and (iv) publicly recognizing student improvement. Malorie Solache discussed the benefits of offering schedules that meet the demands of students' lives and can allow even

non-traditional students, such as students with jobs or children, to feel that they can still belong in school:

> I think especially for the adults, I think our leniency on their schedule. On their schedule. I think a lot of times they think, oh, if I can't make it, then I'll get kicked out. I think just letting them know, listen, we understand your situation. We understand your life. We understand that you have a family. We understand you have a job. We are not your typical high school. We will be here and we will work with you. It might take you longer to earn the credits, but understand that we are doing our best to cater to you. Because we understand that a lot of times school isn't the priority. And it's understandable. . . . So that's . . . that's a new concept for a lot of them that don't . . . They've never experienced that. We hold on to them until they're done. (Malorie Solache)

Armando Hernandez also spoke to the importance of flexibility in working with young people with high barriers.

> We get there's something going on in your life. We get that. Why haven't you shown up for a week? Oh, because you've been jumping from couch to couch for the last week. Why are you not doing your work? Because essentially, school doesn't mean sh*t right now. Because in about a month, I'm gonna be kicked out of my house. So I got to get a job. I got to get transportation for myself. . . . I'm not going to press you on whatever you're supposed to be doing in class. Right now, you finishing up this final doesn't mean as much as it means for you to get that ID for you to get the job, in order for you to get the housing, and any other help that you need for yourself. That's what our programs do. We understand. Right? We get it. Why are you not doing your work? Because right now, doing your work doesn't matter because your dad lost his job, your mom is the only one working, and you have people living in your house that don't pay rent. So now you feel like you got to work. Right. We understand that. Why? Because we've worked with the population for a long time. We've heard this case once, twice, ten times. For them, it feels like I'm the only person that has gone through this or has been going through this. No, you're one of many young people who have gone through this situation. And we have had to work with them. We as a community have a support system. We have to figure it out. (Armando Hernandez)

Armando Hernandez' example speaks to the importance of flexibility with assignment due dates as well as in terms of teacher expectations. His example demonstrates that in their school setting, staff understand that school can not always be the first priority for a student due to the other demands of their life, and instead of being punitive, they offer that young person

flexibility in being able to access the program when they are able to. Interview participants William Smith and Mark Tenent also identified the Policy Leadership Council as a practice that increased belonging within their school. The Policy Leadership Council is a student council that informs school policy, plans events, assists with hiring of staff, and advocates for students' needs. Mark Tenent spoke to the work of the Policy Leadership Council, called the "YPC" at their school:

> So especially the last two years we've had a group of students, or I guess a small group, really, who decided to . . . what I love about them is they create the world they want to see. They don't just accept the world as it is. We kind of decorated for Christmas the first year back, but they made a big deal of it. They decorated for Halloween. They're the ones who brought the spirit week back and to do a number of different spirit weeks. They were the ones who were like, hey, YPC has to do something other than just exist. That was honestly, that was why we went up to Big Lake, because we had a group of people who wanted to be involved, who wanted YPC to be something more than just kind of this name that exists. So, for me, Big Lake was a reward for all of the work they've done. I think there's . . . that you kind of see in their actions, that that's what they want. (Mark Tenent)

Mark's example shows that their school's Policy Leadership Council planned a number of events that they thought their fellow classmates would enjoy, and took ownership of the physical space, decorating for different holidays. William Smith described how the Policy Leadership Councils at the various alternative school sites he worked at increased a sense of belonging for the students who participated:

> Another thing is the youth policy committee that every Westgate I worked at had that gave participants the opportunity to feel like they're a part of something, which they will be advocating for the program as a whole, for their peers to better the program. So just opportunities like that. (William Smith)

William Smith's example shows that the Policy Leadership Council can give the participants a group to belong to within the school that can make a positive difference for not only themselves, but the entire school population. Another practice identified by six of the

teachers as an effective school-wide practice was hosting activities. The activities varied greatly based on the different school sites. However, they were all fun, recreational activities that any student could participate in regardless of age or ability built into the school day outside of instructional time. They included playing music or showing movies at lunch, having scavenger hunts, obstacle courses, holiday-themed games, women's/men's groups, etc. Ray Solado gave an example of an activity that his students participated in that he perceived to show a sense of belonging:

> So, like, scavenger hunts, we do that at the site. We'll have scavenger hunts that's based on the theme. We'll do, I think it was called, like, Camouflage, where we gave out butterflies, like, cut out butterflies. But your goal is to make it blend in somewhere we can't see it. And so students had to then get markers, color it whatever color, but then put it somewhere where we couldn't be able to find the butterflies. And the one butterfly we couldn't find was the winner, who was able to really camouflage that butterfly. And what happened was, in my classroom one day, I'm like, "Why are you guys standing here? They're up to something." But I'm also like well, I need coffee. So I left my class, I came back, and then they were like, "Oh, mister we put a butterfly in a class." And I'm like, I don't see it. Yeah, they walk away. And then somebody in the class says, "Hey, mister, look up." And you know, like, the ceiling lights have like, a dome, kind of like a half dome shape. Well, one of those guys, I think they got on my desk and put a white butterfly in that white dome area of the light, and it was really damn hidden. And I thought, that's really good. But that speaks to that comfort, safety, belonging that they know, hey, I can do this, because Solado, he won't say anything. And no, I thought it was hilarious. I thought, this is really good. I'm glad I didn't fall off my desk, because I would have been really bad and have to explain that to the directors. But that's an example of what we do in our space, like those kinds of activities. (Ray Solado)

Ray's example shows that his students felt comfortable to joke around with him by hiding a paper butterfly in his classroom space during an activity because they had developed a sense of belonging, speaking to the comfort and safety that his students felt with him. He went on to explain his reaction, that he thought the students' actions were hilarious, allowing them a moment to connect as human beings beyond just their work together as teachers and students.

The last practice identified in the area of audacious hope was publicly recognizing student improvement. Andres Ramos discussed how his school site incorporates this practice regularly by saying, “But we recognize students. We make sure that students are aware that one, we appreciate them being there on a daily basis. And two, that we notice we notice when they’re doing well, when they’re showing up consistently. And that’s something that we like to recognize.” Armando Hernandez also spoke to recognizing student improvement as a practice utilized within his school site, stating, “And then we have of course, with those awards, we have the MVP award. So MVP, most improved and then Revolutionary award. So you have a young person that has completely been resilient and transformative.” These examples identified by teachers demonstrate that recognizing student improvement can have a positive impact on sense of belonging, particularly with students who may not have fit into the traditional school system, or been recognized according to traditional school measures of success.

Conclusion

This study sought to answer three questions:

1. What are alternative school teachers’ perceptions of students’ sense of belonging in their context?
2. What support do teachers employ in their classrooms to build and increase students’ sense of belonging in an alternative education setting?
3. What are teachers’ perceptions of school-wide practices that foster students’ sense of belonging?

The first research question gathered anecdotal evidence related to alternative school teachers’ experiences of their students’ sense of belonging. Findings showed that student

belonging was observable by the teachers, including changes in student behavior and comments made by students towards school staff. Findings also showed that lack of belonging in previous schools had an impact on students' experiences in their current setting. Findings also showed that a teacher philosophy that prioritized caring, relational practices consistent with critical hope also had an impact on student sense of belonging. Findings in this area also showed the need for teacher reflection on belonging, including the creation of space for additional commentary from the teachers related to the topic for them to share experiences in their own words. The second research question resulted in findings that were coded according to the Microsystem layer of the socio-ecological framework of school belonging, since they are indicative specifically of teacher/classroom practices (Allen et al., 2016), and organized according to the element of critical hope they relate to (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). Findings linked to Socratic hope included implementing a countercultural curriculum, setting community agreements, and creating space for student discussion. Findings linked to audacious hope were greeting students as they enter and giving feedback as they exit, and having hard conversations instead of removing students from class. Findings linked to material hope included providing relevant curriculum and implementing student-centered collaborative instruction. The third research question resulted in findings that were coded according to the Mesosystem layer of the socio-ecological framework of school belonging, since they identified specific school rules and practices (Allen et al., 2016), and were organized according to the element of critical hope they related to (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). Practices in this area linked to Socratic hope included creating space for student discussion, providing mental health support for all students, maintaining countercultural policies, and setting community agreements. Practices linked to audacious hope included offering flexible

schedules, maintaining a Policy Leadership Council, hosting activities, and publicly recognizing student improvement. Findings identified by the research participants linked to material hope included implementing a community building class, holding regular check-ins, and hosting end of term gatherings/outings.

By examining teachers' experiences with sense of belonging in the alternative school setting through the layers of the socio-ecological framework of school belonging (Allen et al., 2016) and Critical Hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009), it is clear that there is a need for increased focus on practices that foster a sense of belonging for all students within traditional school settings, as well as specific practices identified by alternative school educators that can be implemented both in the classroom and at a school-wide level to ensure that all students can experience belonging. The final chapter of this dissertation explores next steps and provides recommendations both for practitioners and for future research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to uncover teachers' perceptions of sense of belonging as it applies to their context, as well as to identify classroom and school-wide practices that they perceived to be effective in building a sense of belonging with their students. This research sought to address the current dropout crisis in the United States, which has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous research has shown that a student drops out of high school every 26 seconds (Miller, 2015). In both middle and high schools, drop-out rates were higher when there were high numbers of low-socioeconomic status children attending the school (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Minority students, low-income students, and students with disabilities are pushed out of school at the highest rates (Huang & Cornell, 2018). Students with high needs are often unable to make connections within their school, or are "pushed out" because schools are an unwelcoming place for many students who eventually give up on their education (Fine, 1987). These students struggle to find other educational spaces in which they can belong, and be academically successful. Sense of belonging within schools has been linked to a number of positive outcomes, including academic motivation (Goodenow & Grady, 1993), social adjustment (Goodenow, 1992), and retention (Alexander et al., 2001).

This research sought to investigate how the concept of belonging impacted the experiences of alternative school teachers. Through qualitative interviews, this study sought to uncover the strategies that teachers use to create belonging among their students and help them heal from negative schooling experiences. This study also sought to identify the impact that

school-wide policies, rules, and practices can have on school belonging. This research attempted to highlight the voices and experiences of educators working closely with a marginalized population, and allowed them to tell their stories in their own words. This study identified themes related to school belonging that could inform implications for future research.

This study sought to provide a framework for educators working with students who have experienced school push-out, or have never felt that they belonged at school. Most importantly, this research identified practices to improve the experiences of high-need students within traditional schools. This study uncovered tangible strategies that can be used to increase a sense of belonging, and retain all students within secondary school until they graduate. Three research questions guided the study:

1. What are alternative school teachers' perceptions of sense of belonging in their context?
2. What support do teachers employ in their classrooms to build and increase students' sense of belonging in an alternative education setting?
3. What are teachers' perceptions of school-wide practices that foster students' sense of belonging?

To answer the research questions, I conducted, via the Zoom online platform, semi-structured interviews with eight alternative high school educators in the greater Los Angeles region. I utilized a strictly qualitative approach to examine teachers' experiences and highlight teachers' practices that they wanted to share. I collected the qualitative data for this study through semi-structured interviews via the Zoom online platform in order to minimize the burden on practicing

educators during the school year while still maintaining personal contact through the face-to-face video chat feature.

To address the first research questions, I used in-vivo, and values coding (Saldaña, 2014; Strauss, 1987) utilizing the subjects' responses, particularly that which described their experiences, including their values, attitudes, and beliefs that may have impacted their work as a teacher. To address the second and third research questions, I used descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2014) to summarize each participants' description of their experiences. The data analysis process followed Creswell's (2014) Model for Qualitative Data Analysis, which is a logical deductive approach to analyzing qualitative data, and approaches the grouping of data based on common themes (Creswell, 2013). I looked for themes, including interrelating themes, and interpreted the meaning of the themes, including the perceptions of school belonging and relevant practices to build and increase community that were trending amongst participant testimonies. I used the socio-ecological framework of school belonging (Allen et al., 2016) and the critical hope framework (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) to identify and organize the themes into relevant findings. I, then, organized classroom and school-wide practices influencing belonging utilizing the different layers of the socio-ecological framework of school belonging model (Figure 2) and uncovered the teacher practices that are linked to the concept of critical hope (Figure 3).

Findings for the first research question included reflections regarding what student belonging looks like, the sensitivity of trauma of past schooling experiences, the impact of teacher philosophy and student care, and the importance of belonging for educators themselves.

The second research question aimed to identify classroom practices that alternative school teachers use in their settings to build belonging with their students. Those findings are

coded according to the Microsystem layer of the socio-ecological framework of school belonging, since they are indicative specifically of teacher practices (Allen et al., 2016), and organized according to the element of Critical Hope they relate to (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

The third research question sought to identify school-wide practices that alternative school teachers perceived to have a positive impact on student sense of belonging. The third research question resulted in findings that were coded according to the Mesosystem layer of the socio-ecological framework of school belonging, since they identify specific school rules and practices (Allen et al., 2016), and were organized according to the element of Critical Hope they related to (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). The findings from the research questions can be summarized into three statements:

1. Student belonging is observable, impacted by previous schooling experiences, and fostered through caring, relational practices.
2. Teacher/classroom practices that foster belonging involve layers of material, Socratic, and audacious hope.
3. Schoolwide practices that foster belonging involve layers of material, Socratic, and audacious hope.

This chapter discusses the summary of the findings, and recommendations for teachers and school leaders, and invitations for future research in the area of student sense of belonging.

Summary of the Findings

The summary of the three findings are discussed in the order they are introduced above. Based on these findings, the section culminates with a graph that displays the teacher/classroom practices and schoolwide practices that the teachers perceived to be effective in fostering a sense

of belonging with all students. The chapter concludes with specific, practical recommendations based on each of the three findings.

Belonging Is Observable, Impacted by Previous Schooling, Fostered through Care

This study identified that students' sense of belonging was observable by teachers. Teachers identified various student behaviors such as spending extra time in the classroom outside of instructional hours or talking to school staff outside of class time as being indicative that students have experienced an increase in belonging at school. Teachers also identified students showing up to school every day, stating that they love coming to school, and taking initiative and making the space theirs (such as decorating for holidays or coming up with ideas for school activities) as observable student behaviors that are correlated with an increased sense of belonging. The teachers also identified the changes in student behaviors such as coming out of their comfort zone or exhibiting increased confidence that they witnessed over time as students' sense of belonging grew in their school setting.

It is important to note that the teachers observed visible responses from their students when implementing practices to help foster a sense of belonging. When attempting to implement practices that foster students' sense of belonging, educators should look for these observable behaviors in order to evaluate the effectiveness of their practices, and to discern whether or not sense of belonging is being increased over time.

The study also found that students' sense of belonging was impacted by their previous schooling experiences. All of the research participants expressed that their students who had been pushed out of traditional school settings had not felt a sense of belonging in their previous schools, and that many had past trauma from their schooling experiences. Some themes included

teachers and school staff not caring about their students or not taking the time to build personal connections as well as overpopulated schools and large class sizes leading to an impersonalized, even anonymous experience where students with high needs are not given enough attention. Other teachers spoke to the demoralizing effects that this can have on students, with them withdrawing or disengaging from the classroom setting. The alternative school teachers had to adopt additional practices in order to shift their students' educational narratives away from their past experiences and allow them to have renewed hope of being a successful student and belonging to a school community. These findings indicate that teachers who are working with students who have had past trauma and negative schooling experiences should be treated with sensitivity that can allow them to heal and rebuild their identity as a student.

The study also found that a teaching philosophy consistent with prioritizing caring, relational practices and elements of critical hope was necessary in order to build and foster a sense of belonging with all students. All of the research participants communicated the strategies that they incorporate on a daily basis in order to build authentic relationships with their students and provide them with support to endure the challenges of their lives beyond just the classroom setting. The respect that the teachers had for their students as human beings was clear from the qualitative statements they made throughout the interviews. These findings show the impact that relationship-building can have on a student's ability to persist in their educational journey despite experiencing personal struggles, and their decision to return to a specific school once they choose to continue working towards graduation. When all school staff share a philosophy that prioritizes care, it allows for a consistent space where conditions are regularly created to strengthen the entire school community.

All of the educators interviewed expressed that they felt able to create a sense of belonging in the alternative school context where they are employed, and were given the freedom to be able to teach in a way that is aligned with their philosophy and implement the practices that they perceive to be most effective for their students. It was identified that the COVID-19 pandemic placed a strain on many people's sense of belonging, including educators, and that there is an increased need to create safe, caring communities for educators themselves. It was also identified that when people do not perceive that they belong to their school community, they may turn to other negative outlets in order to fulfill that social-emotional need, such as joining a gang. This is consistent with previous research that identifies belonging as a fundamental human need. Belonging is a yearning for a place in one's group and affectionate relationships with people, with the need for love and belonging being so essential that a lack of this need being met often results in maladjustment (Maslow, 1943).

These findings show that educators seeking to enhance students' sense of belonging should focus on observing student behaviors, display a sensitivity to past schooling trauma, adopt a teaching philosophy based on caring, and relational practices, and remember the importance of belonging for all people. Specific recommendations for educators implementing these practices are to follow.

Belonging as a Teacher Practice of Critical Hope

Findings in the area of material hope showed that the teachers interviewed used two main practices to foster a sense of belonging in their classrooms, which were (i) providing relevant curriculum, and (ii) implementing student-centered, collaborative instruction. Providing relevant curriculum not only engages the students in a meaningful way and keeps up with the shifting

political, social, and cultural shifts in society, but it also prepares them for real-world experiences that they are likely to encounter outside of the classroom, such as in a job. The teachers also spoke to the importance of implementing student-centered, collaborative instruction with plenty of opportunities for students to connect and use their voices. Teachers identified class discussions, student-led projects, partner work, and reciprocal teaching as methods that can be used to encourage students with varying personalities to engage and connect not only with the course material, but with one another as human beings.

Findings in the area of Socratic hope showed that the teachers interviewed used three practices to foster a sense of belonging in their classrooms, which were (i) implementing a counter-cultural curriculum as opposed to the dominant, traditional school curriculum which may portray communities of color and their histories in a negative way, (ii) creating space for student discussion, and (iii) setting community agreements. The teachers interviewed spoke to utilizing texts that reflected minority cultures and backgrounds, as well as giving students hope and tools to challenge dominant power structures that they encounter in their lives. Findings also showed that creating space for students to discuss, process, and potentially heal from painful topics and issues affecting their communities was crucial to fostering a sense of belonging within the classroom setting. Findings also showed that creating community agreements utilizing a collaborative approach where all students contribute to creating the class norms and expectations can provide a framework for behavior and give the teacher something to reference when an agreement is broken.

Findings in the area of audacious hope showed that the teachers interviewed used two main practices to foster a sense of belonging in their classrooms, which were (i) greeting students

as they enter and giving feedback as they exit, and (ii) having hard conversations instead of removing students from class. These practices show students that their improvement and behavior are noticed, valued, and appreciated by their instructor, and that their membership within the class is vital. Although it may take more intentional work and shifting instructional practices around, it is possible and necessary for teachers to address challenging behavior in the classroom and give students a chance to get back on track without sending them out of the classroom. Repeatedly being removed from class can certainly impact a student's sense of belonging, especially if they begin to feel that their instructor does not want them in the class. Specific recommendations for teachers implementing these practices within the classroom setting are to follow.

Belonging as a Schoolwide Practice of Critical Hope

The findings in the area of material hope that contributed to a sense of belonging as well as provided material hope to students were (i) implementing a community-building class, (ii) holding regular check-ins, and (iii) having an end of term gathering/outing. The community building class was scheduled into the school day, and consisted of community-building activities designed for human connection to take place. Results showed that the teachers with an increased investment in facilitating the community-building class had students with better attendance and retention throughout the course of the school year. Teachers identified that the community building class had a positive effect on school culture. Holding regular check-ins with multiple school staff members was identified as a school-wide practice that had a positive impact on students' sense of belonging. By frequently checking in with academic counselors, support staff, teachers, it is more likely that students will create a caring, positive relationship with at least one

staff member on campus. Checking in regularly with students who were no longer enrolled was also found to positively impact the students' willingness to return and re-enroll in the school in the future. End of term gatherings, as well as end of term outings were also identified as practices that increased students' sense of belonging. These practices were found to be effective in creating spaces for students to just hang out during the school day, and giving opportunities to increase their sense of belonging with the other people within the school. These practices demonstrate that the time spent together as a group outside of academic time can be beneficial for both students and staff, and can create positive experiences that impact school culture in a positive way.

Findings in the area of Socratic hope showed that there were four school-wide practices identified by the participants as being effective in fostering a sense of belonging amongst their students. The findings included (i) creating space for student discussion, (ii) providing mental health support for all students, (iii) maintaining countercultural policies, and (iv) setting community agreements. Similarly to the findings in the Microsystem layer, teachers perceived that their school-wide practice of allowing students to discuss issues that are important to them or give input regarding their needs was effective in increasing the sense of belonging amongst all students. Also identified was the importance of providing mental health support, whether that be through one-on-one case management or more intensive services. Schools provide support beyond just academics for students. Meeting social-emotional needs, as well as providing mental health resources, was found as a way to increase students' sense of belonging. Maintaining countercultural policies, such as a re-enrollment policy, acknowledges that not all students fit into the mold of a traditional student. Some students may take longer to finish school due to

unexpected life circumstances. This practice can create a reduction in stigma that students may feel in continuing to pursue their education even though their expected graduation date has already passed. This is different from the traditional high school trajectory, which is typically completed in four years, and enforces expulsion practices in which returning is often not possible. Also similar to the findings of the Microsystem layer, teachers perceived that the school-wide practice of setting community agreements was effective at fostering a sense of belonging amongst all students. The process of creating community agreements builds a sense of belonging in the way that it is drafted with everyone's input. Staff members and students are all on equal footing, and each voice is able to contribute as well as provide accountability to when agreements are broken, rather than traditional top-down rules that are enforced only by staff or school leaders, or can unfairly target minority students, low-income students, or students with disabilities.

Findings in the area of audacious hope showed that the teachers perceived four school-wide practices related to be effective in fostering a sense of belonging with their students in the alternative school setting: (i) offering flexible schedules, (ii) maintaining a policy leadership council, (iii) hosting activities, and (iv) publicly recognizing student improvement. It was found that offering flexibility in the form of school schedules that meet the demands of students' lives was necessary, and allowed even non-traditional students, such as students with jobs or children, to feel that they can still belong in school. It also acknowledged students with high barriers, such as homeless or foster youth focused on survival, that may not be able to have school as a top priority due to the other competing demands of their life. Flexible schedules and due dates allowed non-traditional, high-barrier students to still access schooling when they were able to.

Maintaining a Policy Leadership Council was identified as a practice that could not only inform school policies from a student lens, but could give the participants a group to belong to within the school that can make a positive difference for not only themselves, but the entire school population. Another practice identified by the teachers as an effective school-wide practice was offering fun, recreational activities that any student could participate in regardless of age or ability. They included playing music or showing movies at lunch, having scavenger hunts, obstacle courses, holiday-themed games, women's/men's groups, etc. The last practice identified in the area of audacious hope was publicly recognizing student improvement. Often, negative student behavior is addressed publicly in front of other students or staff, resulting in a poor self-image and lack of belonging. Recognizing student improvement in a public setting can have a positive impact on sense of belonging, particularly with students who may not have fit into the traditional school system, or been recognized according to traditional school measures of success. These findings resulted in the creation of a new framework which will be discussed below.

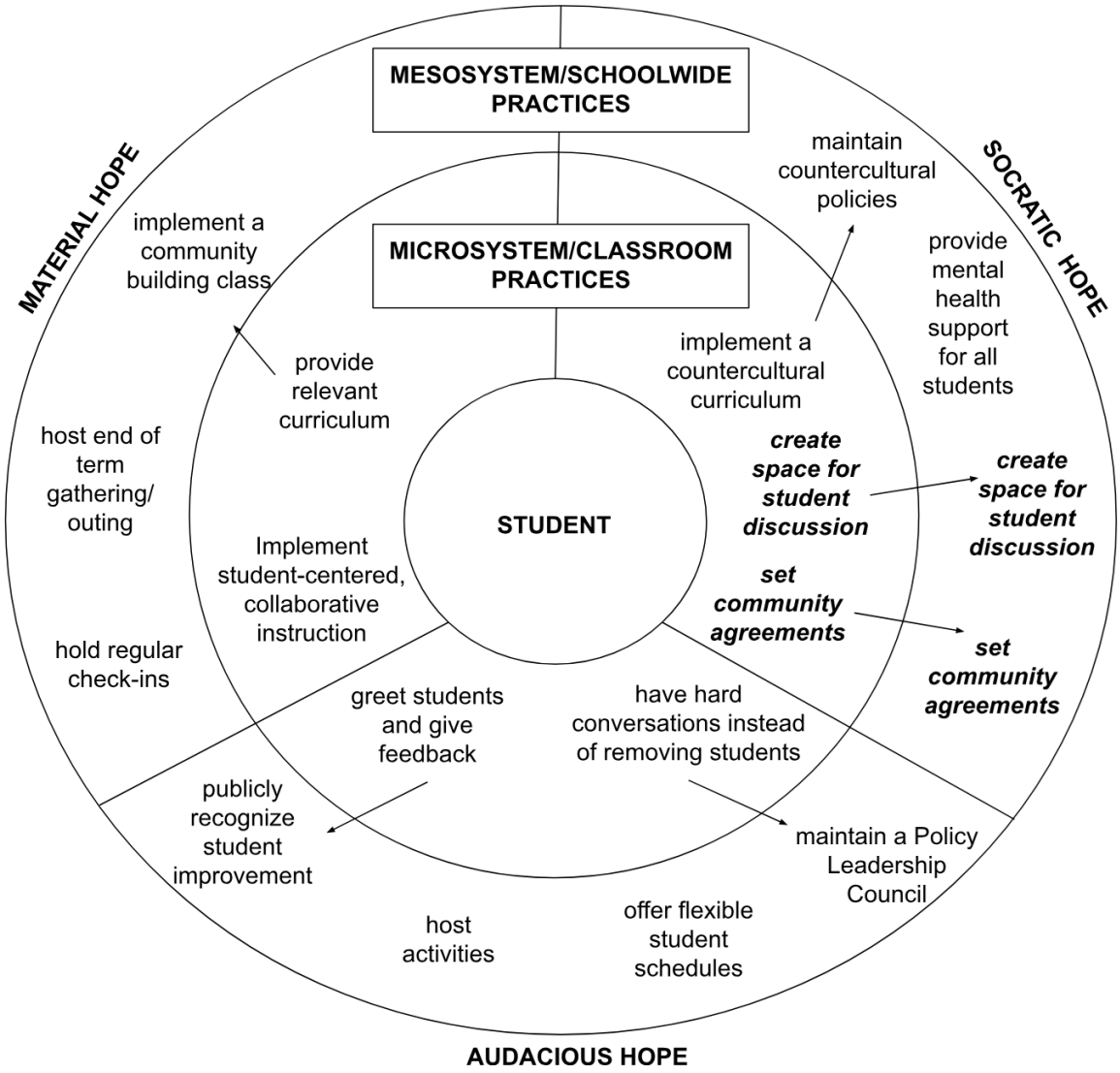
Critical Hope Praxis for School Belonging

In Chapter 4, I organized participants' qualitative data in accordance with the Microsystem and Mesosystem layers of the socio-ecological framework of school belonging, (Allen et al., 2016), which provided a structure for the different practices to be identified as either teacher/classroom practices or school-wide practices, and linked according to the element of critical hope they relate to (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). However, while the framework provides themes that influence school belonging at the student level in adolescence in educational settings, it does not provide much detail for practitioners in terms of how to implement these practices

effectively in a way to meet the needs of all students. It also does not take into account the post-COVID climate in which students and staff are more disconnected than ever, continuing to feel the effects of not belonging to a physical school community for over a year. This framework also does not focus specifically on practices that are effective in fostering a sense of belonging with marginalized students who have not previously fit into the traditional school system, or may have had negative school experiences resulting in trauma. Figure 4 illustrates my Critical Hope Praxis for School Belonging, which synthesizes effective teacher/classroom practices and schoolwide practices linked to elements of critical hope that have been identified by alternative school teachers in fostering a sense of belonging for all students.

Figure 4

Critical Hope Praxis for School Belonging



Note: This original figure includes both new information and adapted material from other sources, "Fostering School Belonging in Secondary Schools Using a Socio-Ecological Framework" by K. A. Allen, D. Vella-Brodrick, & L. Waters, 2016, Educational and Developmental Psychological, 33, p. 97-121, copyright 2016 by Springer Science+Business Media, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-016-9389-8; "Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete" by J. M. R. Duncan-Andrade, 2009, *Harvard Educational Review*, 79, p. 186-190, copyright 2009 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College, https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.2.nu3436017730384w.

The Critical Hope Praxis for School Belonging identifies key practices utilized by alternative school teachers with their students who have not previously been successful or experienced a sense of belonging in traditional schools. Each practice is linked to an element of

Critical Hope. The practices within the microsystem layer can be used by classroom teachers in a variety of educational settings including public, private, charter, traditional, and alternative in order to meet the needs of all students, including those who may have high barriers or not fit into the traditional model of education. Classroom teachers who have a knowledge of their student and community strengths and needs should use their professional judgment to identify which of the above practices may be effective within their context. The practices within the mesosystem layer can be utilized by school leaders in order to foster a sense of belonging for all students within the school. School leaders should take into consideration the specific needs of their school setting, capacity of their staff, financial resources, and student population when identifying which practices may be effective and realistic in creating a sense of belonging in their school context. The arrows between the microsystem and mesosystem layers show parallel practices that can be used synergistically both in the classroom and schoolwide to promote belonging.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, a sense of isolation has permeated our society, particularly among students who have experienced a shift towards remote learning or a disconnection from school altogether. The once vibrant community atmosphere within schools has given way to a more solitary educational experience. Many students, having grappled with the challenges of virtual classes and the absence of physical interaction with peers, find themselves disengaged from traditional approaches to schooling. As we navigate this post-pandemic landscape, there is a pressing need to re-establish schools not just as educational institutions but as thriving communities of learners and companions. Creating environments that foster collaboration, social interaction, and a sense of belonging is essential to rekindle the enthusiasm for learning and ensure that students can develop not only academically but also

socially and emotionally. The post-COVID era calls for a reimagining of education, emphasizing the importance of the school community in shaping well-rounded individuals equipped to face the challenges of the future. It is crucial for our educators to shift their focus from achievement and "learning loss" to investing in community building for students, recognizing that fostering a supportive and connected educational environment is essential for holistic development. Schools should be envisioned as places of hope, joy, and life-giving experiences, where students not only acquire knowledge but also flourish emotionally and socially, creating a foundation for lifelong learning and fulfillment. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that schools serve as essential institutions meeting a myriad of needs for students, extending beyond academics to encompass social, emotional, and developmental aspects crucial for comprehensive growth. The expectations for schools must undergo a transformative shift, evolving beyond conventional academic metrics to encompass a broader focus on holistic development for a more well-rounded education. As such, a sense of belonging for students in schools is paramount, as it profoundly influences their well-being, engagement, and overall academic success. The effective practices employed by alternative school teachers should be integrated into traditional schools, as this approach has the potential to retain more students, mitigating the risk of push-out and fostering a more inclusive and supportive educational environment. Specific recommendations for educators seeking to implement these practices in their context are to follow.

Recommendations for Practitioners

This section discusses recommendations for teachers, school leaders, and policy makers based on the Critical Hope Praxis for School Belonging shown in Figure 4 in order to provide guidance for implementing changes that will prioritize a sense of belonging for all students.

These recommendations serve as an invitation for educational leaders to consider as they help students navigate school belonging in the post-COVID landscape.

Recommendations for Classroom Teachers

Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping not only the academic but also the social and emotional landscapes of their classrooms. To cultivate a thriving and inclusive learning environment, teachers should consider implementing the impactful practices identified by this study that have been linked to school belonging and critical hope. As experts in their context, they could review the practices to determine which could be effective in their context with their specific student population. They could start by setting community agreements that empower students to actively contribute to the classroom culture. Providing a counter-cultural narrative to the dominant school curriculum challenges traditional norms and promotes diverse perspectives, fostering a richer understanding of the world. Teachers could also embrace student-centered, collaborative instruction to enhance engagement and foster a sense of ownership over the learning process. Simple gestures, such as greeting students and providing constructive feedback, can help to create a supportive atmosphere. Teachers can also ensure that the curriculum is relevant, and resonates with the experiences and interests of their diverse student body. Furthermore, teachers can create space for open discussions about topics that matter to students, encouraging a sense of belonging. Lastly, when faced with challenges, teachers can opt for having hard conversations instead of resorting to removing students from class, as this approach allows for growth, understanding, and the preservation of a positive learning community. By integrating these practices, educators can create classrooms that not only educate but also inspire, empowering their students to thrive academically and personally.

Recommendations for School Site Leaders

School site leaders play a crucial role in shaping the culture and inclusivity of their educational institutions. It is imperative for them to regularly review existing policies and practices, ensuring that they are designed to be more inclusive of all students. Instead of emphasizing conformity, leaders should shift their focus towards fostering a sense of belonging rather than encouraging students to merely fit in. The current educational system often expects all students to conform to a traditional model, overlooking the diverse needs of high-barrier students, which can hinder their ability to thrive and succeed. Prioritizing a sense of belonging rather than achievement and high-stakes testing can create a school environment where every student feels valued and accepted for their individuality. Considering the complex task of cultivating belonging, school site leaders might contemplate hiring a Belonging or School Culture coach. In recent years, many schools have created new positions such as Restorative Justice coaches, or Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) specialists. A Belonging or School Culture coach could offer valuable insights, strategies, and guidance in fostering an inclusive atmosphere, ultimately contributing to a positive and supportive learning environment and campus climate for all students.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

Policy makers have a unique opportunity to redefine the role of schools within our communities by allocating increased funding to transform them into vibrant community centers. Beyond their academic function, schools can serve as hubs for social interaction, recreational activities, and lifelong learning. Investing in such a holistic approach would not only enhance educational outcomes but also strengthen the social fabric of neighborhoods. By creating spaces

that cater to various community needs, policymakers can foster a sense of belonging, encourage collaboration, and address multifaceted challenges faced by both students and the broader community. This shift towards a community-centered model reflects a forward-thinking investment in the well-being and development of society as a whole. So often, the responsibilities placed on schools are increased without additional funding offered in order to ensure that sustainable change can be created. By allocating additional funding to schools, policy makers can help them to meet the needs of not just students, but their families and communities in the current post-COVID era.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from this study suggest various spaces in which future research is needed. This study highlights and uplifts the voices of eight teachers who practiced in the alternative secondary school setting in Southern California, but further conversations with a greater number of educators across the United States would be needed to effectively generalize the findings. The Critical Hope Praxis for School Belonging has the potential to develop into a more reliable framework for implementing teacher/classroom and schoolwide practices in a variety of educational contexts, but more studies with greater numbers of participants and opportunities for triangulation with quantitative data would be recommended to increase the model's validity.

Future studies may expand the research participants to include teachers within the traditional school system, conducting a comparative analysis between alternative and traditional school settings to explore how a sense of belonging differs and the impact of various practices in both contexts. Future research could also be extended to include student perspectives by conducting interviews or surveys to understand how students perceive and experience the sense

of belonging in alternative educational environments. Future studies could also explore longitudinal approaches, examining the long-term effects of alternative teachers' practices on students' sense of belonging, tracking changes over time, and identifying key factors that contribute to sustained positive outcomes. Additionally, future research could explore the impact of professional development programs for teachers that specifically target strategies to enhance student sense of belonging, assessing the scalability and sustainability of these initiatives.

Lastly, the study recommends future research in educators' sense of belonging post-COVID. Participant anecdotes and reflections revealed that recent years have affected many educators' sense of belonging, affecting various aspects of their professional and personal lives. As schools continue to navigate the complexities of the pandemic, understanding and addressing some of the ongoing challenges experienced by educators is crucial to supporting teachers' sense of belonging and overall well-being within the educational community. Recognizing and mitigating the unique stressors faced by teachers during this time is essential for not only fostering a positive and supportive school environment but also ensuring that passionate and experienced educators are able to remain in the field for years to come.

Conclusion

This study sought to uncover teachers' perceptions of sense of belonging as it applies to their context, as well as to identify classroom and schoolwide practices that they perceived to be effective in building a sense of belonging with their students. By placing alternative school teachers at the center of the research and by privileging their voices in the analysis, this study determined that conducting qualitative research in this manner is the most effective way to pinpoint classroom and schoolwide practices that foster a sense of belonging for all students,

including those who have been marginalized and pushed out of the traditional school system. Findings show that there are promising practices that can be utilized by educators in various contexts to increase a sense of belonging and improve educational outcomes for all types of students. However, this study and its findings suggest that future research exploring the effects of these practices as well as students' perspectives regarding these practices is needed in order to strengthen our understanding of the intricate dynamics that shape student sense of belonging. There is potential for these practices to empower educators to create more inclusive environments, ensuring the future of education incorporates the diverse voices and experiences of every student.

APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER

DATE:

Dear Participant,

You have been selected to participate in this study due to your experience working as a teacher for three or more years in the alternative high school setting. As a participant in this study, your contribution will assist those seeking to understand the strengths and challenges of students in alternative high schools, and inform practices to help all students feel a sense of school belonging.

The aim of this study is to determine which teacher practices contribute to a greater sense of belonging for high-need students, both within the classroom and school-wide. The following research questions are posed in an effort to gain insight into the strategies used in order to build community for all students:

1. What are alternative school teachers' perceptions of sense of belonging in their context?
2. What support do teachers employ in their classrooms to build and increase students' sense of belonging in an alternative education setting?
3. What are teachers' perceptions of school-wide practices that foster students' sense of belonging?

Identifying strategies that alternative school teachers use to build community and strengthen belonging for all students may provide a guide for other schools and districts to follow. Exploring the experiences and practices employed by alternative school teachers may improve the conditions in other educational settings. This includes settings in which many students end up excluded or pushed out. Finally, the identification of strategies and practices used by experienced

teachers in alternative high schools may help transmit these techniques to other educators, or those new to the field.

Your participation in this study should take approximately 1-2 hours of your time and will consist of:

- one interview lasting 45-60 minutes in length
- one follow up session to review the interview transcript, check for accuracy, and provide any additional reflection

If you have any questions please feel free to reach out to my dissertation committee chair, Dr. Lauren Casella. She can be reached at Lauren.Casella@lmu.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the IRB Compliance Office at Loyola Marymount University.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study.

With gratitude,

Celine Massuger

APPENDIX B

PERMISSION FOR STUDY

SCHOOL HEADQUARTERS
155 W. Washington Blvd., Ste. 944
Los Angeles, CA 90015
O 213.741.2600 F 213.741.2628
www.youthbuildcharter.org

OFFICIAL CORRESPONDENCE
2202 S. Figueroa St., #728
Los Angeles, CA 90007

April 10, 2023

Re: Consent for Research

From: Dr. Rudy Cuevas, YCSC Superintendent

YouthBuild Charter School of California recognizes the value of high-quality research for improving education and serving the needs of future generations. This letter certifies that YouthBuild Charter School of California grants Celine Massuger, a doctoral candidate at Loyola Marymount University, permission to commence research related to promising teacher practices to include all students in the alternative charter setting.

I am aware that Ms. Massuger intends to conduct interviews with faculty and/or administrators from YouthBuild Charter School sites and interpret interview data during the Summer of 2023. The research will include protocols that intend to:

• Protect students and employees from risk of harm, violations of rights, and loss of privacy • Protect the educational process from unwarranted distractions and interruptions
• Protect resources, including data, from misappropriation for private or unjustified use

It is understood that a purposive sample of schools will aim to reflect the ethnic, socioeconomic, and geographic diversity of Los Angeles County. Faculty/staff of YouthBuild Charter School who are invited to participate will be given the option to decline involvement in this research. They will also be given a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality. The interviews will contain questions about educator philosophy, classroom practices, and school-wide practices related to students' sense of belonging. I also understand that Ms. Massuger intends to conduct optional member checking 2-3 months post-interview as a method of validating qualitative results. The interview and the research will not be focused on or include individual student information.

YOUTHBUILD
CHARTER SCHOOL OF CALIFORNIA

SCHOOL HEADQUARTERS
155 W. Washington Blvd., Ste. 944
Los Angeles, CA 90015
O 213.741.2600 F 213.741.2628
www.youthbuildcharter.org

OFFICIAL CORRESPONDENCE
2202 S. Figueroa St., #728
Los Angeles, CA 90007

For the purposes of publishing the findings, I authorize the identification of YouthBuild Charter School of California as the context/location of participating schools. However, it is understood that no school, or individual, will be named directly, and that pseudonyms will be used for confidentiality purposes.

YouthBuild Charter School of California supports this research and anticipates receiving a comprehensive final report and copy of your dissertation. Thank you for your support and service to the field of education.

Sincerely,

Rudy Cuevas

Dr. Rudy Cuevas, YCSC Superintendent

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT

Loyola Marymount University
Informed Consent Form *(Template)*

[This represents a sample template, so some information may vary. Please tailor the form to fit your study as applicable. Be sure to delete this instruction statement, in your final submitted version.]

TITLE: **[**Building Community and Belonging: Reflections from Alternative Secondary Teachers in the Field**]**

INVESTIGATOR: **[Celine Massuger, Educational Leadership, Loyola Marymount University School of Education, 562-230-9389]**

ADVISOR: (if applicable) **[Lauren Casella, Educational Leadership, Loyola Marymount University School of Education, 310-258-8748]**

PURPOSE: You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to investigate which teacher practices contribute to a greater sense of belonging for high-need students, both within the classroom and school-wide. You will be asked to complete one interview ranging from 45-60 minutes in length, and one follow-up interview to review the interview transcript, check for accuracy, and provide any additional reflection. The interviews will be audio recorded.

RISKS: Risks associated with this study include: potential emotional discomfort, including nervousness. The researcher will take steps to create a comfortable environment and ensure rapport has been built. Research participants are able to skip any interview questions at any time to minimize any discomfort. Participants are also able to create a pseudonym to protect their identity.

BENEFITS: **Benefits include the opportunity to share personal experiences and share best practices related to building and fostering student sense of belonging. This can benefit new teachers as well as the larger field of education. This study will aim to highlight the experiences and voices of educators, as well as to create more equitable practices for all students, including those who struggle to belong in schools.**

INCENTIVES: **[**Participation in the project will require no monetary cost to you. A $10 Starbucks gift card will be provided to you for your participation in the study.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your name will never be used in any public dissemination of these data (publications, presentations, etc.). All research participants will have the opportunity to create a pseudonym. Demographic information such as participants' race/ethnicity, gender, and content area taught will be collected. All research materials and consent forms will be stored in a locked cabinet which only the researcher will have access to. When the research study ends, any identifying

information will be destroyed. Steps will be taken to ensure that all of the information you provide will be kept confidential.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW: Your participation in this study is *voluntary*. You may withdraw your consent to participate at any time without penalty. Your withdrawal will not influence any other services to which you may be otherwise entitled, your class standing or relationship with Loyola Marymount University.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request. The primary investigator for this project can be reached at 562-230-9389 or cmassuge@lion.lmu.edu. The summary of results for this study will be available to participants in May 2024.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT: I have read the above statements and understand what is being asked of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason, without penalty. If the study design or use of the information is changed I will be informed and my consent reobtained. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that if I have any further questions, comments or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may contact Dr. David Moffet, Chair, Institutional Review Board, Loyola Marymount University, 1 LMU Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90045-2659 or by email at David.Moffet@lmu.edu.

_____ _____

Participant's Signature Date

CONSENT TO USE IDENTIFYING INFORMATION:

I give my permission for my chosen pseudonym name**,** institution, demographic information, affiliation, direct quotes, etc. to be used in any presentations, publications, or other public dissemination of the research findings of this study.

_____ _____

Participant's Signature **Date**

APPENDIX D

BILL OF RIGHTS

LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Experimental Subjects Bill of Rights

Pursuant to California Health and Safety Code §24172, I understand that I have the following rights as a participant in a research study:

1. I will be informed of the nature and purpose of the experiment.

2. I will be given an explanation of the procedures to be followed in the medical experiment, and any drug or device to be utilized.

3. I will be given a description of any attendant discomforts and risks to be reasonably expected from the study.

4. I will be given an explanation of any benefits to be expected from the study, if applicable.

5. I will be given a disclosure of any appropriate alternative procedures, drugs or devices that might be advantageous and their relative risks and benefits.

6. I will be informed of the avenues of medical treatment, if any, available after the study is completed if complications should arise.

7. I will be given an opportunity to ask any questions concerning the study or the procedures involved.

8. I will be instructed that consent to participate in the research study may be withdrawn at any time and that I may discontinue participation in the study without prejudice to me.

9. I will be given a copy of the signed and dated written consent form.

10. I will be given the opportunity to decide to consent or not to consent to the study without the intervention of any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress, coercion, or undue influence on my decision.

APPENDIX E

NOTIFICATION OF SELECTION FOR STUDY

Hello! Congratulations!

You have been selected as a participant in my qualitative study. Thank you for your interest and willingness to participate! Here are your next steps:

1. Please use this link to schedule a 60-minute interview session over Zoom. If you would prefer an in-person interview and are local to Los Angeles, please email me directly and we can schedule a time and location to meet. Interviews will take place between now and July 30.

2. Attached, please find the Experimental Subjects Bill of Rights and the Informed Consent Form for this study. Please read the Bill of Rights and read and sign the Informed Consent Form; email the Informed Consent Form (with an electronic signature or scanned with a wet signature) to me before your scheduled interview session.

I am still accepting participants for this study, so please feel free to share this opportunity with any interested colleagues or acquaintances who might be willing to share their experiences.

Thank you again for your willingness to engage in this project. Do not hesitate to email me directly with any questions or concerns. I look forward to speaking with you!

Sincerely,

Celine Massuger, M. Ed
Doctoral Candidate
Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership for Social Justice
School of Education (SOE)

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Tell me a bit about your professional background including your time spent working in the alternative education setting.
    A. Can you tell me more about that?
    B. What parts of your professional background prepared you to teach in an alternative education setting?
2. Why did you choose to teach this population of students?
    A. What about this population specifically interests or appeals to you?
    B. Do your educational experiences mirror those of this population in any way?
3. To what extent do you perceive that your students experience a sense of belonging at your school? Provide some examples that demonstrate evidence.
    A. How does this example demonstrate your students' experiences with sense of belonging?
4. To what extent do you perceive that your students experienced a sense of belonging in their previous schools? Provide some observations or examples that demonstrate evidence.
    B. How does this example demonstrate your students' experiences with sense of belonging?
5. How would you describe your philosophy as an educator? What impact do you think your philosophy has on your students?
    A. Is there a particular theory or framework that influences your philosophy?
    B. How does your teaching philosophy reflect your values and beliefs as an educator?
6. What practices do you employ in your classroom to increase students' sense of belonging? How are these practices evaluated to determine effectiveness?
    A. To what extent do you feel that you provide quality and relevant instruction?
    B. To what extent do you feel that your course curriculum examines painful aspects of an unjust society?

C. To what extent do you feel your classroom practices involve a commitment to all student learning rather than disposing of "problematic" students?

7. What practices are employed schoolwide to increase students' sense of belonging? How are these practices evaluated by school staff to determine effectiveness?
    A. How often are these practices utilized?
    B. How have students responded to these practices?
8. Is there anything else related to sense of belonging that you'd like to share that you think would be relevant to this research?
    A. Could you please tell me more about that?

APPENDIX G

MEMBER CHECKING EMAIL

Dear ___,

Hope all is well. As we wrap up this summer and enter another school year, I'd like to take the opportunity to thank you again for your generosity in participating in my dissertation study. With 8 participants from programs across the Southern California area, I had hours and pages of valuable raw data to work through and I am immensely grateful for your invaluable insight as I prepare to finish my project in the next few months.

As promised, I wanted to touch base with you as part of the member checking process. As a reminder, member checking is completely optional for this study. If you would like to respond to any of these questions or provide any commentary, you are free to do so before October 1, 2023. You are also welcome to ignore this request entirely and I will proceed with the information I have included below. I have included the following information in italics, and information that you may supply in bold.
1. Your pseudonym - would you prefer a different pseudonym?
2. Follow-up questions (if applicable) - answer questions if desired
3. Quotations to be attributed to your pseudonym in the study - provide any clarification or changes as desired (please note that, in my work with the raw interview transcripts, I used my best judgment in making certain grammatical changes and eliminating/adjusting certain speaking mannerisms only if they obstructed meaning or clarity; for example, repetition of words and phrases, and the use of the words, "um" and "like" if they did not directly contribute to the meaning of the quotation. I will also be working with an editor as part of the pre-publication review process who might suggest additional grammatical changes to the direct quotations, but participant voice and meaning will be prioritized and preserved first and foremost.)

As always, if you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at this email address. I will also be in touch when my final dissertation is available for viewing in its entirety on ProQuest. I wish you a wonderful school year.

Sincerely,

Celine Massuger, M. Ed
Doctoral Candidate
Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership for Social Justice
School of Education (SOE)

APPENDIX H

PERMISSIONS

Email Permission from Kelly-Ann Allen to use her figure, The Socioecological Framework of School Belonging (Figures 1 & 3)

Celine Massuger <[redacted]> Mon, Mar 25, 2024 at 4:37 PM
To: [redacted]

Good afternoon Dr. Allen,

My name is Celine Massuger and I am a doctoral student at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California. I have completed a qualitative study regarding teacher's perceptions of student sense of belonging in the alternative school context. I wanted to ask for permission to use the figure of your framework in my dissertation. I am happy to share my dissertation draft including the visual of the figure for your consideration. Please let me know if this might be possible. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Celine Massuger

Kelly-Ann Allen [redacted] Mon, Mar 25, 2024 at 4:49 PM
To: Celine Massuger [redacted]

Dear Celine - happy to provide. Was it this one you required? This is probably higher res. for you to use.

Kelly

Email Permission from John Creswell to use his Model for Qualitative Data Analysis (Figure 2)

Celine Massuger [redacted] Mon, Mar 25, 2024 at 5:22 PM
To: [redacted]

Good afternoon Dr. Creswell,

My name is Celine Massuger, and I am a doctoral student at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California. I am currently in the process of publishing a dissertation and wanted to ask for your permission to use the attached image as a figure in my Chapter 4 when describing my process for analyzing data. I would be happy to share the document where the image is contained for your consideration. Please let me know if it might be possible to use your image. Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,
Celine Massuger, Ed.D Candidate
Loyola Marymount University

Creswell-Model-of-Qualitative-Data-Analysis.jpeg
35K

Creswell, John [redacted] Sat, Mar 30, 2024 at 7:40 PM
To: Celine Massuger [redacted]

Celine, Sorry that I am getting back to you late. Yes, use the diagram - it does not appear to be exactly like my qualitative data analysis diagrams. If you use it, simply say "Adapted from Creswell, year..." Thanks. John

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