

TEACHING STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE PERSISTENCE
OF CONTINUATION HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Thesis

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Nerissa L. Wallace-Smith

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APPROVED BY THE ACTING DEAN OF GRADUATE STUDIES:

Sharon Barrios, Ph.D., Dean

APPROVED BY THE GRADUATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE:

Ann K. Schulte, Ph.D.
Graduate Coordinator

Maris R. Thompson, Ph.D., Chair

Rebecca Justeson, Ed.D.

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my great-grandmother, Ruth Wallace, thank you for teaching me to closely listen to all voices. And to my students; past, present and future- thank you for allowing me to see your resilience and helping me build upon my own.

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ABSTRACT

TEACHING STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE PERSISTENCE
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This study focuses on the characteristics of first generation college students with an emphasis on alternative education graduates of continuation high schools. The purpose of this study is to identify the institutional agents and pedagogies that increase persistence and retention rates of the alternative education graduate population once they enter a higher education institution. Anonymous surveys of 27 continuation high school graduates were collected to identify educational experiences that proved to be beneficial to their persistence through high school and on to higher education.

CHAPTER I

Alternative Education serves a large population of students who can be labeled as having a ‘transient educational’ experience (Aron, 2006). Many of the students who are enrolled in alternative education have specific educational needs such as; requiring a more flexible schedule, fulfilling familial obligations, and opportunities to accrue credits quickly. While many students return to comprehensive high schools to graduate, there is still a significant population that graduates from alternative education schools. While the specific needs of students enrolled in alternative education are well documented in the literature, less is known about why and how these students persist toward graduation and move on to college. The purpose of this study is to address this gap in the literature and offer insight into the persistence strategies and characteristics of support programs that can more effectively assist this specific population in moving toward higher education. For the purposes of this study, the terms ‘nontraditional college student’ and ‘alternative education student’ will be used interchangeably, as well as the terms ‘continuation’ and ‘alternative’ education schools.

INTRODUCTION

Background

According to the California Department of Education, there were 116,710 students enrolled in Alternative Education in 2016-2017; this includes community day schools as well as continuation high schools (CalEdFacts, 2017). There are 23,270 California teachers that serve

these student populations (CalEdFacts, 2017). Continuation schools serve a population of students who could not complete comprehensive or compulsory education due to expulsion, truancy, credit deficiency, juvenile incarceration or need of flexibility for employment or to fulfill familial obligations (Ragland, 2016). If these students are successful in persisting towards continuing in higher education, many of them will be added to the first generation college student population. The field of higher education will undoubtedly need to provide more support services to help these students with navigating the higher education system (Gándara & Bial, 2001; Tinto & Engstrom, 2008). The ability for the continuation education student population to achieve success in higher education changes the outcome of those students' futures by accessing the ability to attain upward socioeconomic mobility through higher education (Bourdieu, 1986; Museus & Neville, 2012). However, in order for alternative education students to truly be successful in higher education, part of the responsibility falls to educational institutions to encourage the persistence of these students through pedagogical and structural changes that meet the needs of this specific population (Schademan & Thompson, 2015). Currently, post-secondary educational options show the most diversity in community colleges. The diversity is attributable to community college open door policy that accepts students who are concurrently enrolled in high school, have completed a high school diploma, or have passed a GED test (Rao, 2007). The community college option has also been proven to offer more affordable tuition and be significantly less academically daunting due to lesser requirements to transition into community college (Hilmer, 1998). Whereas traditional four-year universities require application, transcripts, specific GPA requirements, letters of recommendation, personal statements and one or more of the standardized test scores from the SAT or ACT, community colleges generally only require an application and transcripts. Community colleges have also committed themselves

to understanding remediation needs of their non-traditional student population (Contreras, 2011). Students may come to college not academically ready and in need of remedial or developmental courses that are designed to strengthen any skills needed to succeed in their college coursework. Community colleges are more accessible and flexible to the needs of students from underserved backgrounds and can serve as a pivotal bridge for connecting these populations with opportunities for upward mobility (Bourdieu, 1986; Museus & Neville, 2012).

There are many studies that focus specifically on first generation college students and their experiences engaging in post-secondary education, mostly community colleges. There is also literature that examines college pipelines and the effectiveness of specific programs that alleviate the stress of first generation students as they begin their journey through higher education. However, there seems to be a gap in literature that examines non-traditional high school students and their experience trying to access college education. Many of the studies involving first generation college students examine their experiences from a deficit perspective; the burdens and obstacles they may bring with them through their journey (Ward, Davenport, & Siegel, 2012). This literature does not focus on the assets gained through personal experiences that can help non-traditional high school students and first generation college students navigate college culture.

This study examines the experiences of non-traditional high school students as they transition to a community college campus in Northern California. A goal of this study was to identify patterns among their experiences of transition as well as provide insight into what factors they considered contributed to or hindered their success in continuing their education.

This chapter provides a detailed explanation of the problem for non-traditional high school students in accessing college as well as their perceptions about these experiences. This

chapter also introduces the purpose of the study and the research questions that guided the study and helped shape the way data was collected and analyzed.

Statement of the Problem

Much of the existing literature on the college pipeline and first generation college students focuses on student characteristics and types of programs that positively influence the college pipeline (Ross & Kena, 2012). However, many of these studies leave out a significant portion of the population, such as students in alternative education and instead focus on the limitations or disadvantages of the first generation population. What is missing from these studies is a better examination of the K-12 program elements that are working, including students from alternative education. The definition of nontraditional college students extends beyond that of the National Center for Education Statistics; a student who is over the age of 24, of a minority race or gender, resides off campus, may be employed, and enrolled in a non-degree or occupational program path (NCES, 2015). I argue that non-traditional students should also include students of appropriate college age who have been in non-traditional schooling situations prior to post-secondary education. This includes students who may have attended alternative education environments as in a community day school, continuation school, or juvenile court school. Many of the statistics about this particular population are not reported due to the transient nature of the students between schools or districts (Aron, 2006). However, the population is completely overlooked in this classification of non-traditional students. While alternative education students have many of the same characteristics and can be categorized as first

generation students, they do have additional educational needs that will be outlined and addressed in the following sections.

Characteristics of First-Generation College Students

Vincent Tinto and Jennifer Engle in their 2008 study *Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-Income, First-Generation Students* identified the following characteristics for first generation students:

Demographically, low-income, first-generation students are more likely than their advantaged peers to: be older, be female, have a disability, come from minority backgrounds, be non-native English speakers and have been born outside of the U.S., have dependent children and to be single parents, have earned a high school equivalency diploma, be financially independent from their parents. Low-income, first-generation students are also more likely than their most advantaged peers to: delay entry into post-secondary education after high school, attend college closer to home, live off-campus, attend part time, work full time while enrolled. (Tinto & Engle, 2008)

According to the Post Secondary National Policy Institute (PNPI), “48% of first-generation students enrolled in a two-year school, compared with 32% of students whose parents had at least a bachelor’s degree.” and “...only 11% of low-income, first-generation college students will have a college degree within six years of enrolling in school, compared to about 55% of their more advantaged peers who were not low-income or first-generation students” (Post Secondary National Policy Institute, 2016) The 37% difference between students enrolled in a two-year school, and students who receive a degree within 6 years of enrollment shows that there are significant factors that impede the success of these students in the typical timeframe of their counterparts. Continuing in education beyond the designated program time can cause significant financial hardship as financial aid may not be offered past the expected completion time (Bettinger, 2004). Studies show that access to financial aid greatly affects persistence in students.

As financial factors are already a source of concern for many first generation students, the likelihood of persisting toward graduation lessens when students encounter financial obstacles.

Deficit Perspective

Counterstories methodology is rooted in critical race theory which stems from the assertion that institutions inherently structure their systems to confer advantages to a majority group. The counterstory methodology is used to research and express the views and experiences of the minority group (Bell, 1992b; Delgado, 1989). When critical race theory is applied to the analysis of college pipelines it forces one to focus on how students from a specific race, class, and gender disproportionately experience obstacles in persisting toward graduation. In this methodology, minority experiences are centered in order to call into question the need for program improvement, instead of looking at their perspectives as a strength that can be merged into the creation of pedagogies or theories of instruction. “Currently, many teacher education programs draw on majoritarian stories to explain educational inequity through a cultural deficit model and thereby pass on beliefs that students of color are culturally deprived” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) Instead, the focus in the literature should be on the individual qualities, characteristics and strengths that minority students encompass that contribute to their resilience and persistence in navigating educational systems. Much of the literature that speaks about first generation and at risk youth lends itself to examining what these students lack in comparison to their counterparts instead of examining what qualities lead them to success despite obstacles. First generation students and at risk youth tend to have life experiences that can become transferable skills in higher education. Ideal characteristics of college students would include, time management, self-advocacy, focused goals and often, financial literacy (Byrd &

Macdonald, 2005). These same characteristics may draw on life experiences that first generation and at risk youth have had to deal with prior to being a student in a higher education institution.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the experiences of alternative education students who have transitioned to a post-secondary school. The study sought to begin to develop an understanding of the students' unmet needs with hopes to examine and change pedagogical practices or implement programs that may begin to help this specific type of non-traditional student through their educational careers. The following questions shaped my analysis of the literature and helped form survey questions for participants in this study:

1. What are the characteristics of institutional educational agents that foster trust and relationships with students who attend alternative education schools?
2. What pedagogical strategies or institutional resources are beneficial to improving persistence of alternative education graduates in higher education?

This study identified the characteristics of first generation college students as well as characteristics that are aligned with students who are susceptible to dropping out of school. However, these characteristics do not prove to be completely consistent with the alternative education population of students. The data collected for this study examined the experiences of alternative education graduates enrolled in college via stories collected about their lived experiences, which included their perspectives on the obstacles they faced in secondary and post-secondary educational arenas, as well as the understanding of pedagogical practices and resources they brought to navigating their educational journeys.

This qualitative study utilized constant comparative analysis approach (Creswell, 2007) and focused on collecting and analyzing the stories of students who graduated from an alternative education school and have transitioned into higher education at a community college or vocational program. The study drew from participants at Bishop High School, which serves as a pseudonym for one alternative education high school in Northern California. As a teacher researcher, I knew all of these students personally as most had been students in my high school English class when I began student teaching. All of the participants were graduates from high school within the last 3 years. The study survey was sent to all students I had contact with post-graduation and reported information is only from students who elected to participate in the study.

Importance of the Study

Ideally this study will contribute to the literature on alternative education students as well as the practices and approaches of educational opportunity programs working with students in alternative education high schools, community colleges, and four year universities. I would hope that this study highlights the lack of information about non-traditional high school students and their educational needs and encourages other researchers to begin analyzing and understanding the framework of new pedagogical practices that students need to be successful. I employ the counterstories methodology to give a voice to the participants of this study, but also to create a conversation about the silenced voices of the over 100,000 alternative education students in California who may want to engage in attending programs in higher education, but do not have the stepping stones to do so.

Based on my findings, I sought to identify practices that are supportive of student success for this particular population. By gaining insight into practices that these students deem

to be useful in their transition, ideally it would open the door for more diversity in community colleges, but also in four year universities via transfer or immediate enrollment. Ultimately, the significance of this study can only be proven if its results lead to creation of dialogue among educators to better serve this population of students.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the beliefs and experiences of continuation high school graduates as they transition into higher education. This review begins with the exploration of alternative education and the population that it serves in order to provide context for students in alternative education and obstacles they may encounter as they persist towards higher education. The main focus is to understand what teaching strategies encourage the persistence of this specific population in higher education. The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of institutional educational agents that foster trust and relationships of students who attend alternative education schools?
2. What pedagogical strategies or institutional resources are beneficial to improving persistence of alternative education graduates in higher education?

The previous chapter introduced the purpose of the study and provided background information on alternative education in California. It also provided information on pedagogical practices used in alternative education and how the college pipeline influences students of alternative education to attend college. The following review of the literature further examines the previous claims made in the first chapter, which include the analysis of proven pedagogical practices that recognize the educational needs of this student population as well as, examining

literature that counterbalances the deficit perspective framework. This chapter serves as a synthesis of the current literature regarding the rationale of this particular study and its implications for improving in the persistence and retention rates of college graduates from alternative education.

The second portion of this chapter explores the current state of alternative education programming in California, as well as programs that help with the college pipeline and first year experiences. The third portion of this chapter examines teaching pedagogies that have proven to be effective in alternative education environments to promote persistence and resilience in students. Lastly, the final portion analyzes the narratives of alternative education graduates and their perspective on the pedagogies that helped them persist or hinder their experience in higher education.

Overview of Continuation and Alternative Education in California

According to the California Department of Education for the 2016-2017 school year 116,710 secondary students are enrolled in Alternative Education; this includes community day schools as well continuation high schools. There are 23,270 teachers that serve that student population. Continuation schools serve a population of students who could not complete comprehensive or compulsory education due to expulsion, truancy, credit deficiency, juvenile delinquency or need of flexibility for employment or to fulfill familial obligations (CalEdFacts, 2017). If these students continue in higher education, many of them will be added to the first generation college student population. The field of higher education will undoubtedly need to provide more support services to help these students with navigating the higher education

system. Accessing higher education offers the opportunity of upward socioeconomic mobility for the alternative education population. (Bourdieu, 1986, Museus & Neville, 2012).

The California Department of Education (2016) summarizes continuation education as an educational option “...designed to meet the needs of students aged sixteen and older who have not graduated from high school, are not exempt from compulsory school attendance, and deemed at risk of not completing their schooling.” (Ragland, 2016) Additionally, the Department of Education offers that the educational goals and outcomes of continuation schools are:

...dropout prevention, recovery of out-of-school youth, increased student retention, increased graduation rates for students at risk of failure of completing high school, learning gains for students that are significantly behind in credits, educational services and support for foster youth, diversion from the criminal justice system, support for pregnant and parenting students, and other services that derive from a supportive educational environment (Ragland, 2016).

However, there are many variations of alternative education that serve different populations of students. The alternative education options in California are identified as: Alternative Education/Program of Choice, Community Day Schools, Continuation Education, County Community Schools, Diploma Plus High Schools, Home & Hospital Instruction, Independent Study, Juvenile Court Schools, Magnets, and Opportunity Education Program (Ragland, 2016). Each of these educational options can be categorized in three areas as defined by Raywid (1994):

Type I programs refer to schools of choice such as magnet schools which may have a programmatic theme for content, and/or instructional approaches. Type II programs are for students who have been identified as disruptive to the traditional school. These programs may represent one “last chance” before being expelled from school. The emphasis is on behavior modification without regard for modifications of curriculum pedagogy. The third program

type, Type III, has a rehabilitation/remediation emphasis. The goal is for students to return to the traditional school. (Foley, Pang 2006; Raywid 1994)

My study further examines Type III of Raywid's categorizations. The students in my study have either completed Court or Community Day School and have chosen to continue to an Alternative Education or Continuation School or the students were moved involuntarily because of truancy or credit deficiency. Bishop High School, the school that the participants have graduated from, is considered a Continuation School. According to the Continuation Education Program Summary provided by California Department of Education, it states that students' in continuation education programs "...are often credit deficient or are in need of a flexible schedule due to employment, family obligations, and/or other critical needs. For apportionment purposes, a minimum day of attendance in continuation education is 180 minutes." (Ragland, 2016). The priorities of students in this population are different from compulsory education students' because they take on a role of caregivers, and providers for themselves and their families.

Characteristics of Alternative Education Students

There are no specific characteristics that can be universally used to describe an Alternative Education student. However, they are categorized as at-risk of dropping out of school. There are characteristics of early education drop-outs that have been reported via longitudinal study from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). The NCES study concluded that between 2009 and 2012 the highest drop-out rate among ethnicities were African American at 4.3%, Hispanic 3.5%, Other 2.7%, Caucasian 2.1% and Asian 0.3%. They also concluded that males and females dropped out statistically at near the same rate, with males showing 2.7% and female showing 2.6%. Five percent of the lowest fifth of SES students in 2012 and 0.6% of the highest fifth of SES students in 2012 had dropped out. (NCES 2015).

Historically, as mentioned in the section above, continuation schools serve a population of student who could not complete comprehensive or compulsory education due to expulsion, truancy, credit deficiency, juvenile delinquency or need of flexibility for employment or to fulfill familial obligations.

Studies have shown that alternative education enrollments are “...disproportionately students of African American, Latino or Native American descent, have low socioeconomic status (SES) , and often have special needs.” (Farrelly & Daniels 2014) It has been noted that “...most students arrive at alternative schools disengaged from the educational system,often described as unmotivated and bringing very little energy or commitment.” (Farrelly, Daniels 2014). In actuality, there are many academic, social and personal reasons responsible for students failing to graduate. Bridgeland, Dilulio and Morison in their article *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts* (2006), listed the following 24 most common reasons:

1. Schools that disregard various student learning styles;
2. Irrelevant curriculum;
3. Inadequate counseling services;
4. Delayed intervention;
5. Habitual truancy;
6. Substance abuse;
7. Single-parent home;
8. One or both parents are high school drop-outs;
9. One or both parents are substance abusers;
10. One or both parents have been, or are currently incarcerated;

11. Extreme poverty;
12. Teen parent;
13. Unsuccessful in traditional school model;
14. Below grade level performance in core content areas;
15. High mobility;
16. Involvement in foster care system;
17. Raised by grandparents;
18. Verbal, physical or sexual abuse;
19. Neglect;
20. Credit deficient;
21. Gang affiliation;
22. Behavior/discipline issues;
23. Low self-esteem; and
24. Lack of social group or appropriate social skills

(Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006).

Alternative education students tend to struggle because there is no platform in compulsory education to address the issues listed above in depth. Alternative education environments are statistically smaller, have smaller class sizes, and may provide more resources so that students can address their personal issues alongside earning an education.

Effective Pedagogical Practices in Alternative Education

The effective practices of alternative education vary greatly from that of a comprehensive or compulsory traditional high school. Educators must remain aware of the

population of their students and the hardships they may have faced. That awareness changes the dynamics of the classroom and school culture. Murray and Holt (2014) state that in alternative education settings, “The whole student focus is necessary so that personal, social, emotional and academic development may be addressed. Warm, caring relationships with teachers and staff members are a critical piece to the alternative school culture.” (Murray, Holt 2014) The organizational structure of an alternative school moves beyond one purely focused on education to incorporate a focus on community and belonging. The cultivation of a community is possible because of smaller school population and smaller class sizes along with teaching and pacing to address students’ needs in all realms of their lives. As Murray & Holt argue, “Alternative programs must be structured in such a way as to generate feelings of comfort and safety. Clear, strict, behavioral expectations with the administering of fair and consistent discipline assist in maintaining a comfortable and safe environment.” (Murray, Holt 2014). Ideally, alternative schools have a main goal of creating an environment where students can rehabilitate their status as a student in a traditional school or create a sense of self-determination and accomplishment that can be maintained beyond the completion of high school (Murray, Holt 2014, p . 12-13).

The creation of this safe environment for students is produced through relational pedagogy strategies. Relational pedagogical approaches “...treat relationships as the foundation of good pedagogy, building on the strong emphasis on relationships already embedded in pedagogy itself” (Boyd, MacNeill, & Sullivan, 2006). Relational pedagogy emphasizes three practices that aid in creating a safe and responsive classroom culture: reflective behaviors, class meetings, and student-centered learning (Boyd, MacNeill, & Sullivan, 2006). These practice move interactions between teachers and students away from being purely academic and implement social interactions that create opportunities for teachers to express caring and respect

for their students, as well as modeling healthy emotional navigation strategies (Stronge, Tucker, & Hindman, 2004). The relational pedagogy that many alternative schools encourage teachers to use involves the students' past experience and funds of knowledge to create a link to more complex concepts in subjects they may know very little about. "Relational pedagogy fosters positive and supportive teacher-students relationships while recognizing that education takes place in the interactions between the teacher and the learner" (Schademan & Thompson, 2015).

Similarly, the experiences of creating a community among peers extends to higher education as well. Aries and Seider state that many first- generation, low income (FGLI) students also face feelings of "...pain, ambivalence, displacement, alienation and shame"(Aries & Seider, 2005). They also explain that "...students undergo significant effects on their sense of self, as well as the relations with friends and colleagues who still inhabit the 'old world'" (Aries & Seider, 2005). While we may offer programs to help students comfortably assimilate into a new environment many of those programs do not extend beyond the first year, leaving students without the structural community that first year experience programs offer. Relational pedagogy suggests that students need a consistent structural community in order to overcome obstacles faced in the educational arena.

Effective Program Elements

Murray and Holt have determined six essential elements that are consistent across models of successful alternative schools. The elements of the models and a description of what they mean follow:

1. Student-to-Teacher Ratio
2. Social and Emotional Support

3. Caring and Committed Staff
4. Family Involvement
5. Individually Designed Education Plan
6. Self-efficacy (Murray & Holt 2014)

Student-to-Teacher ratio. In the most effective student supported environments there are typically fewer students so that individual attention can be given to all students. Allowing time for individual attention allows educators the opportunity to interact with students on a more personal level that could involve understanding of the students' background and this understanding their approach to education as a whole or specific topics. Knowing students' backgrounds creates a greater likelihood that personalization of education through relationships between students and staff will occur.

Social and emotional support. Educators in alternative schools take on many roles as stated in the above section. Social and emotional support means allowing students to see the human side of the educator. "Deprivation of appropriate social and emotional support is one of the key factors that lead many youth to academic and social disengagement" (Murray & Holt 2014). Educators have to understand that it is imperative for the student to see appropriate behaviors and emotional responses and that obstacles are bound to occur; the learning aspect comes from the reaction and method of overcoming those obstacles. Duncan-Andrade explains that educators of urban and disadvantaged youth have a responsibility to:

...implore our colleagues to recognize that our damaged petals and those of our students, are not what need to be reformed out of us; they are what need to be celebrated about us. Each time we convey this-- the true value of the painful path--we are building critical hope in the person next to us who wonders if they, too, can make it through the crack. (Duncan-Andrade 2009).

Caring and committed staff. Studies have shown that students of poverty are most successful when they have reliable relationships with trusted adults (Woolley & Bowen, 2007). In order to have trusted adults in alternative schools there has to be a level of commitment from the teachers. Educators must choose to teach that specific population and engage in their lives beyond the capacities of merely classroom instruction. As a trusted adult in an impoverished community teachers serve as a motivational adult that could lead to the students; persistence through their education which in turn heightens the students ability to confront difficult emotional and behavioral obstacles. A strong staff connection has proven to increase attendance, feelings of connection, positive social interactions and heightened participation in educational activities. (Woolley & Bowen, 2007; Marks, 2000)

Family involvement. Bandura et. al (1996) demonstrated in his study that children are more likely to exhibit positive aspirations, academic or otherwise, if their parents exhibited similar aspirations for their education and social development (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). “Family and community participation is an integral component to the effective alternative program. Parents, siblings, spouses, or partners must be involved in self-help groups, school conferences, and school activities if improved performance is to occur.” (Murray & Holt, 2014). Without the family involvement it would be easy for a student to become disengaged from school or become distracted from the goal of graduating from high school.

Individually designed education plan. In order for students to be successful in alternative schools, educators must understand the student's individual emotional, social, and academic needs. After educators have an understanding of each student's needs they can modify the student's educational experience to fit that of their needs. With individualized programs students are more likely to be successful in their educational endeavors.

Self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) defines self-efficacy as one's confidence in one's own ability. Bandura (1977) also says that self-efficacy can be developed and anxiety or any other feelings that would diminish self-efficacy can be actively avoided in a classroom with an educator who is cognizant of their students' emotional and educational needs. Any positive educational interactions can increase a student's self-efficacy within the school settings but can also become applicable outside of school settings.

College Pipeline and Persistence

Intervention or First Year Experience (FYE) programs serve as a mechanism to encourage attending college and persisting through one's college career. Many of these programs begin with high school in most compulsory high school education. Program examples include AVID and dual enrollment opportunities afforded to students in high school. The purpose of these programs are to familiarize high school students with college culture along with peers that they may attend a post-secondary school as well. FYE programs serve as a hub to gather students based on their commonalities and to build a small community of support as students begin their first year of college. The pipeline framework was created to examine the tools needed to create greater retention rates of diverse communities. Many intervention and FYE programs serve the underserved populations such as the populations mentioned previously in this review of literature.

Even high-achieving minority students can be swayed by negative interactions with educators and need an advocate to connect with that may not be involved directly with their education. "Intervention programs often provide a supportive environment for students outside the classroom, exposure to role models, and academic enrichment, or serve as a buffer for the messages communicated by teachers, counselors, or staff." (Contreras, 2011). These programs

and interactions outside of the classroom “...attempt to influence academic preparation and the transition to college.” (Contreras, 2011). Influence is introduced in the form of mentor and peer support, so students can also experience events with someone who is on the same pathway. These programs also play a pivotal role in minimizing the isolation that a student may encounter during their first year of college. “Programs that support the transition to higher education play a critical role in identifying potential among students of color and cultivating this potential to prepare them for the rigor of college.” (Contreras, 2011). Tinto and Engstrom analyze qualitative data that determine the elements of a successful FYE program. Their findings were that students needed the a safe place to learn, a supportive place to learn, the feeling of belonging in college, and the ability to make connections (Tinto & Engstrom, 2008). Students were more persistent when they had the above mentioned elements intact. A safe place to learn was determined by their ability to speak freely and ask questions in smaller groups that they may not ask in a full classroom. Students indicated that their confidence increased because their group of peers was small enough to know each person individually which allowed for them to gain respect and experience vulnerability as well as depend on their peers as resources. A supportive place to learn was indicated by students’ experiences continuously being validated by their peers as well as faculty. Barbatis (2010) comes to the same conclusion regarding supportive positive interactions with faculty, “Frequent interaction with faculty was more strongly related to satisfaction than any other involvement” (Barbatis, 2010). However he also expressed that this varies per student; “...developmental, culturally and ethnically diverse students have rarely been shown to develop close relationships with their professors” (Barbatis, 2010). A feeling of belonging was created by implementing small learning communities where students could experiment with their sense of self in a safe environment as well build confidence in their

abilities as a student within their community. Lastly, students indicated that learning deeply with the ability to make connections was a most beneficial experience. Students reported their confidence soared when they are able to apply concepts learned in various classes to other coursework or experiences they may have outside of the educational environment.

Tinto and Engstrom complete their analysis and offer two pieces of advice for the successful implementation of an intervention or FYE program:

Institutions need to avoid the tendency to place developmental-education programs and the academically underprepared students they serve at the margins of institutional life...to be effective, learning communities require that faculty and staff change the way they work and, in some cases, think. (Tinto & Engstrom, 2008)

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to begin to develop an understanding of the students' unmet needs with hopes to examine and change pedagogical practices or implement programs that may begin to help this specific type of non-traditional student through their educational careers. The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of institutional educational agents that foster trust and relationships of students who attend alternative education schools?
2. What pedagogical strategies or institutional resources are beneficial to improving persistence of alternative education graduates in higher education?

The following chapter of this study is divided into sections: (a) the investigative design and the rationale for the methodology of this study; (b) the description of the study population as it relates to a Bishop High School in Northern California; (c) the treatment of the data, which describes how the data will be collected, analyzed and the ways that I establish trustworthiness and validity.

Investigation Design

Qualitative research in general focuses on the understanding of how people make sense of their personal experiences. The definition for qualitative research is offered as "...a broad category of research with a vast array of methodologies that generally rely upon some form of interview, observation, and/or artifact collection from which conclusions, additional questions, and/or results is formed." (Kalmbach Phillips & Carr, 2010). Qualitative research relies on

understanding the nuances of lived experience, additionally, narrative analysis and constant comparative analysis provides an opportunity to give a voice to participants, and in this case, continuation high school graduates. This research was approached phronetically, meaning that this research idea was formed with previous contextual knowledge and carried the intent that the narratives given would directly reflect praxis of educators of K-12 and higher education institutions (Tracy, 2013).

Constant comparative analysis is rooted in many social and humanities disciplines and focuses on specific stories told by individuals (Glaser, 1965). It reflects a process in which the answers provided to the original question further inform one's research path. As a researcher I employed the phenomenological approach to contextualize my collected data. A phenomenological approach involves analyzing and understanding the lived experiences of several individuals (Creswell, 2007). Constant comparative analysis, by way of phenomenological research, and qualitative analysis was used in a combined effort for this study to examine in-depth interviews via open ended surveys and in-person interviews as well as focus groups. I chose to use constant comparative analysis and narratives because this methodology was best suited to answer the research questions and allowed me to discover emerging themes about the transitory time of alternative education graduates. The narratives provided a voice where there is seldom a voice in educational research. This method best captured the most accurate picture through the student's perspective using their own words and stories to describe the pedagogies that they felt were most useful in their persistence throughout school and into higher education. There was no more appropriate way to tell their stories, than to have them tell it themselves. In order for these narratives to be generalizable, I triangulated the experiences

across all three data sets; student surveys, in-person interviews of teachers; focal interviews of students.

Using the phronetic approach allowed me, as the researcher, to actively search for possible solutions to the research questions in each interview. The participants of this study provide their interpretation on elements of a successful transition out of a continuation high school into a higher education institution.

Overall Population and Specific Population Sample

For this study, I focused on Bishop High School in Northern California to recruit participants. Purposeful sampling proved to be the best method to select my participants, based on my study and research questions. All of the students' who participated graduated from the selected continuation high school between the years of 2015 and 2017. All participants indicated at graduation that they were enrolled in a higher education institution and had participated in an early registration program offered by the local community college. I utilized the help of the academic counselor of the continuation high school to assist me in recruiting and contacting participants. A recruitment email was sent to the projected 47 participants; with 27 replies to participate in the study.

Role of Researcher

I began my student-teaching on an alternative education campus, and the participants in this study are my former students who have graduated and indicated they were going to pursue post-secondary education after graduation. I personally know the challenges these students' had

to overcome in order to continue their education even through high school. As a current alternative education teacher, I encourage my students to pursue higher education, however, many of my students' have chosen to leave higher education because of the experiences that will be discussed in the next chapter. Many of my former students and current students have similar experiences when it comes to applying real-world experiences to manipulate their understanding of content in a classroom setting. Most of the experiences the students' draw from, are experiences that are frowned upon if discussed in a comprehensive educational setting; because my students are unable to ask questions and make connections based on their experiences, more often than not, they lose the ability to understand and make content generalizable.

Data Collection Process

Prior to starting data collection, I gained approval to conduct my study by the Human Research Committee at a California State University. I designed the study around three areas of data to triangulate: open-ended surveys, interviews with students and teachers, and focal interviews conversations with students. All of the demographic characteristics were collected via survey. The survey questions were structured to be open ended which allowed the participants an ability to expand on their initial responses and to help me analyze their perspectives in a more organic way. Initial data was collected via survey with additional follow up questions being asked either in person via focus group or over the phone to minimize any inconvenience to participants. The follow up questions were mostly open ended and determined by the participant's response so as to clarify their experiences in education. Examples of the initial survey questions asked of the participants include, "Tell me about your initial decision to go to

college,” “Who/What was your favorite teacher and class and why,” “Tell me about your experiences transitioning from high school to college.”

Based on the information gathered from the surveys and interviews, I examined each participant’s narrative closely to look for emerging themes and common patterns such as financial and emotional readiness for college or finding a sense of community within a larger community of peers and faculty. My hope is that further examination of these themes and findings begins the conversation about effective pedagogies and college pipeline practices that could lead to the persistence and retention of this specific population of continuation high school graduates.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data was reviewed, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The constant comparative analysis and phenomenological approach (Glaser, 1965) is provided in the form of retelling and interweaving the stories and experiences of the participants to address the research questions of this study. The process of retelling stories included analyzing the raw data and identifying common themes and then presenting a retold story using all the individual experiences with the key themes elevated to show commonalities. This data analysis was entirely inductive because the data that was collected and analyzed allowed themes and codes to emerge naturally (Kalmbach Phillips & Carr, 2010).

I used environmental coding as described by Johnny Saldaña and Leo Mallette (2017) to facilitate the coding process. Environmental coding offers a multidimensional analysis process using environmental factors, not only in the direct setting but also in settings indirectly (Saldaña & Mallette, 2017). Saldaña and Mallette introduced factors such as “...competition,

demographic, ecological, educational, environmental, ethical, geographical, historical, media, organizational, physical, religious, temporal, and security.” (Saldaña & Mallette 2017). Using this process and the factors, I pre-coded the transcripts and surveys of participants, which means I highlighted the key words or phrases that struck me as being significant and common as I reviewed the individual experiences. I also recorded any initial thoughts and observations that I had as a researcher as I reviewed the transcripts and surveys.

After the initial reading, all of the data was arranged by their existing status in higher education and further by their positive or negative experiences from earlier points in their education and their reflective thoughts on how that experience affected their positionality towards education.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Presentation of Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the beliefs and experiences of continuation high school graduates as they transition into higher education. The main focus was to understand what teaching strategies encourage the persistence of this specific population in higher education. The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of institutional educational agents that foster trust and relationships with of students who attend alternative education schools?
2. What pedagogical strategies or institutional resources are beneficial to improving persistence of alternative education graduates in higher education?

The findings presented are grounded in counterstory and phenomenological methodology and are portrayed through narrated experiences of student and teacher participants. This study demonstrates my uses of the phronetic approach and environmental coding to analyze and interpret the strategies needed to promote student success based on the participants' experiences.

This chapter is divided into three sections. Part one provides demographic summaries of the student participants of the study in comparison to the overall school demographics. Part two highlights student participants' experiences related to their educational journey. Lastly, part three identifies teacher participant narratives of what they believe adds to student success at Bishop High School.

Part One: Study Population and Demographic Summary

Of the 27 response surveys to this study; 68% identified as female, 32% identified as male. 68% identified as Caucasian, 8% African American, 32% Hispanic/Latino, 20% Alaskan Native or American Indian, 4% Asian, 4% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 4% Mixed or Multiple Race. Many students reported to have had a difficult transition to Bishop High School and felt the need to live up to the reputation they had gained of Bishop High School which resulted in many suspensions or truancy during initial transition.

School Population. The reported statistics on grade level, ethnicity, cultural and economic make-up, offered by the school accountability report, from Bishop High School for years of graduation for participants is stated below in Tables 1-4:

Table 1: 2015-2016 Grade Enrollment

Grade Level	Number of Students
Grade 9	5
Grade 10	30
Grade 11	82
Grade 12	85
Total Enrollment	202

Table 2: 2015-2016 School Diversity

Student Group	Percent of Total Enrollment
Black or African American	2
American Indian or Alaskan Native	3
Asian	2
Hispanic or Latino	32.2
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.5
White	54.5
Two or More Races	5.4
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	72.3
English Learners	5.9
Students with Disabilities	11.4
Foster Youth	7.4

Table 3: 2016-2017 Grade Enrollment

Grade Level	Number of Students
Grade 9	8
Grade 10	22
Grade 11	55
Grade 12	64
Total Enrollment	149

Table 4: 2016-2017 School Year

Student Group	Percent of Total Enrollment
Black or African American	3.4
American Indian or Alaskan Native	4.7
Asian	2.7
Hispanic or Latino	30.2
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1.3
White	51
Two or More Races	5.4
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	75.8
English Learners	4
Students with Disabilities	16.1
Foster Youth	2

In 2015-2016, ten percent of students met the state standard for English Language Arts testing; as well as two percent meeting the state standard for Mathematics. The suspension rate is 27.3%, which is drastically higher than the districts’ 4.1%, and the states’ 3.7%. The average class size is 18 students. In 2016-2017, eighteen percent of students met the state standard for English Language Arts testing; as well as two percent meeting the state standard for Mathematics. The suspension rate is 19.7%, which is drastically higher than the districts’ and the states’ 3.6%. The average class size is 19 students (“School Accountability Report Card”, 2015-2017).

Incongruity of participants’ data and school data. The data of participants is not congruent with the data of the school population. Participant data shows a prevalence of female

students that is disproportionate to actual school population. In the school population, approximately 25% of the students identify as female, with the remaining 75% identifying as male. Similarly, the American Indian/Alaskan Native population is significantly more prevalent in this study than on Bishop High School campus. Though not specified directly in the narratives, my knowledge of these participants allows me to share that over 53% of the students surveyed have lived in foster care at least once in their lives, and disproportionately all student participants identify as socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Part Two: Student-participant Experiences with their Educational Journey

Environmental analysis and coding (Saldaña & Mallette, 2017) would assume that because the students in this study grew up and were educated in the same geological location, many of their stories would reflect similar environmentally cultural codes. While there are umbrella environmental codes for all participants, the nuances and interpretations of those codes vary greatly in student narratives. The environmental codes that were most obvious were elements of media, security, education, social, ethical, and causation. Multiple students expressed that their interpretations of Bishop High School, prior to transfer, were created via negative media and social coverage. There were consistent expressions of “that’s where the bad kids go.”, “you get transferred to Bishop when you fail as a normal student.”, “a kid from my high school got expelled to Bishop after he posted about drugs and weapons.”, “my teachers use to tell us that fights happen every single day at Bishop.”. As a researcher, I would be surprised to hear of any students who would be excited about being involuntarily transferred to this educational environment.

As students began to experience Bishop for themselves, their experiences changed their perception of the school and their education. Students who were involuntarily transferred because of truancy, credit deficiency, expulsion, or other extenuating circumstances, regained confidence in their educational pathways because of Bishop. The following students reflected on their teachers and education while at Bishop. Their survey question openly asked them to describe their favorite teacher/class and provide an explanation. These were some of their responses:

KH(1): Mr. L, the art class. I truly found my passion in that class and felt I could freely express myself in an environment which I felt comfortable and at peace. I also felt like Mr. L was a great friend as well as a teacher and helped me through tough times when I just needed someone to talk to.

KH(2): My favorite teacher from Bishop was Miss B. She taught a lot of different subjects but focused on history she was my favorite because she truly knew what it was like to be someone who struggled as a teenager and had compassion and was always there to help whether it was school work or just life advice.

AC: Miss B/Story Telling class and Mr. L/Art. I really liked Miss B's because we talked about a variety of subjects. We were exposed to different thoughts, beliefs, opinions, and different situations that could happen. I really loved being exposed to all those things especially since a lot of my family believes that you shouldn't talk about a lot of things that we should talk about. Machismo was a big thing too. I loved Mr.L's because we were free to express ourselves through our art, we just had to dial down the profanity. It was also a healthy way to cope with things or release some stuff through my art.

TK: Ms. W was moms. It didn't matter where she was or what she taught. Ms. W was the only teacher to believe in me and cry for me when I wasn't doing what I was supposed to be doing. She was the most real and I respected her for everything she said. From get your shit together and stop giving up on yourself to crying with me about my dad and me being homeless and facing time or dealing with my old drug habits.

The students overwhelmingly narrated experiences of teachers being compassionate in all areas of life, in and outside of the classroom. In communicating with the students, these are

the classrooms where they felt most successful because the teacher acknowledged all aspects of a students' life.

Negative educational experiences. Students were also asked to describe their least liked teacher/class and provide an explanation. These were some of their responses:

HN: Ms S. because she had to control everything. I liked english because there are so many interpretations that can be right, and she only accepted her answers as the right ones

BS: I hated Ms. N. She treated me like an idiot because I spoke spanish and didn't score high on my english test that I had to take every year. She would make us play 1st grade games to learn english better and then talk loud like we didn't understand. It made me so mad.

JP: Ms. N was the worst teacher. She was my ELA for spanish speakers teacher and she made me feel dumb. I couldn't test out of the class and she made me do worksheets that a elementary school kid could do. It wasn't helping me towards the goal of passing my test.

TK: I didn't really get along with most teachers. All of them just looked at me like a bad kid with a bad attitude. I was a gang drop out and had multiple felonies and they just knew that. So none of them talked to me. They seemed scared of me.

Students showed general dislike for teachers who played into the persona of Bishop from an outside perspective. Students understood what the educational expectations of Bishop students' were and became offended when teachers taught to those minimum expectations. Student's understood that the teachers in these classrooms only expected the students to operate in the community as a 'bare minimum' citizen.

Comparatively, the narratives show that students felt empowered by teachers who encouraged them to demand agency and understanding in their education and other aspects of their lives. Many of the students communicated the same difficulties with faculty when they transitioned to community college because of perceived readiness; socially, financially, and educationally.

Social, financial and educational readiness. Other factors such as financial/educational readiness, and having a sense of belonging and personal relationships in smaller class communities, seemed to be more prevalent in the students' experiences of transitioning to a community college. The environmental codes expressed here involve educational standards but also financial and organizational standards. Students had a preconception, much like their preconception of Bishop, of what was needed to be a college student, a perceived readiness; socially, financially, and educationally. The students were not taught to rely on their own life experiences to understand how to maneuver through college. Surveyed students were asked to "tell me about your experiences transitioning from high school to college. Obstacles and/or advantages." Some responses were:

KH(1): Being that I had a rough time throughout my high school years up until mid-junior year through senior year, after finally becoming comfortable and confident and situated in a routine, it was very disorienting to be thrown into a whole different school, community, and unfamiliar situation over all. I don't think anything could have prepared me for that though.

KH (2): In high school everyone babies you and helps you all the time, in college there is none of that. You do everything on your own and it's very confusing.

JP: So far the only difficulty I have is teachers understanding that I have a kid and that he is my main priority. So I will leave class for him. But they don't understand.

SB: The obstacles I faced was being able to afford everything on my own. I come from a middle class family of screw ups and they could afford for me to go to school so I didn't get financial aid. So I saved for 5 months before starting school. So I worked to pay for everything and wanted to finish my program as fast as possible. It was tiring.

The factors that students continuously express are time management skills, interpersonal relationships, and financial stability. As the researcher who is aware of the participants' backstories, I am also aware that every one of the participants, in the highlighted narratives, and other narratives not mentioned here, possess the skills to overcome the obstacle they spoke about

in their transition statements. They were not taught to employ those skills outside of the classroom which made their transition much more complicated, and eventually led to many students leaving their college placements.

SF: I left, because I was not mentally ready.

KM: I stopped going to college because I couldn't keep up in my classes. I failed most of my classes so as a result I lost my financial aid. I couldn't afford to go to college anymore. Totally my fault.

WB: I'm currently taking a break until my life is on a more stable path. I'm focusing on work right now in hopes to become more financially stable as well.

KH (1): I left because of a series of unfortunate events that led to the deterioration of my mental and physical health, but will be returning once I have the means of transportation and can afford it.

The perceived need for readiness lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy that students believed they would fail without these tools; instead of building a mindset for students that readiness is built through experiences. Compartmentalizing a set tool kit that is needed in higher education to be deemed successful was is an abstract concept that students could not maintain.

Part Three: Teacher-Participant Narratives

This section of narratives expresses the viewpoints and opinions of student readiness and interactions from teachers at Bishop High School. The teacher participants in this section were three of the teachers that Bishop student participants identified as their favorite teachers. The teachers were asked the following questions: 1) Express the pedagogical strategies that they employ in their classrooms and how effective they feel those strategies are in connection with student success in their classrooms? 2) How they encourage student voice in the classroom? 3)

How they feel Bishop High School differs from comprehensive schools in their district; both in population and in teaching staff? Here are their responses:

Pedagogical Practices. Teachers were asked to identify pedagogical practices that they employ in their classrooms in order to build a relationship with their students, as well as gauging how those connections to students dictate the pathway of success within their classrooms.

Mrs. B: I don't know that it is fair to say that I employ any pedagogical practices, because it comes from connection. I let them know that they are seen and have high expectations to the point of 'you don't get to pretend you know the answer, I'm going to stand right here and help you through it.' I have students who come back to me and say that they appreciate it that I have confidence in them finding the answer and not just walking away which never occurred to me as a strategy. But I also do a lot of teaching where they get to have a voice. There is not a A, B, C, D answer. We do a lot of opinion related things. I think that's it. It seems so simple to me, because it's who I am. I think it's the connection, knowing I have confidence in them and that I care about them. It's as simple as asking 'are you feeling better today?'. If you compliment them and make them feel important, because they aren't feeling important at home, it goes a long way versus come in, sit down, shut up, open the textbook. I try to notice student's right away. Introduce myself, introduce them to the class, shake their hands as they walk in the door. I wish more teachers did that because it makes them feel connected right away. If they don't connect, I just ask them what is going on? Is it me, is there something else going on, how can I help? Sometimes it is serious, sometimes I use humor. Seems so simple, it is just talking to them. If a kid is acting out, you need to ask them what's up, and usually they are happy that you notice and they'll talk to you.

Mr. L: First I have to make the connection, then they start to develop this amazing art work but it's a process. You have to get them to trust you, especially our student body. They come a little wounded and beaten down. They are already expecting to fail it seems like, and they are ready to be told that, so if you have a little patience, and have communication and interaction and a lot of trust. Once you get that trust, and they feel comfortable, then that's how the work gets going. It's not a lot of lecture, they get that in other classes. This environment is an outlet. I check on everyone each day, but they get to go off and kind of do their thing. When you walk into class, you'll see everyone doing something, and that is not by accident. I notice when kids are grouped. It's a natural thing we all gravitate toward a group. So whether it's a gang affiliated thing, that means there is a lot of respect, so you treat them with respect. I never have a problem with the students who everyone else has an issue with. So when new students come in, I let them slowly transition. I give them a few weeks, it is a process, and it's a buildup of trust. If

you get one person in a group to work, then generally they can get the rest of the group to do it without feeling like 'I'm not weird for actually doing the assignment'.

Miss B: Every class is different, so at the beginning of the year, before teaching any content, I establish relationships. For them to get to know me so that makes it safe for them to open up so that I can get to know them. Once I get to know them, then I know a better angle of how to teach them. Because they are all different learning levels, emotional levels, especially at different times of the day. Those are all things that have a huge impact on learning. What's going on at home has a huge impact on learning; the more that we know about them, the more we can tailor a whole package towards them. If we start with a textbook and the framework only, that package hasn't worked for these kids, that is why they are at that school. I tell stories about myself to build that connection. I talk about my trauma, I talk about all the things that have happened to me that I know they can identify with, and show that it is safe for me to talk about it, and the more that I do that, the more it shows that it is safe for them to also talk about it. I do a lot of emotional literacy right up front. It'll tell me if they will get stuck in their academics. And if they don't buy in, then you have to work harder. And because this is the kids last stop, you have to find it. If you are a teacher working with that population, or any population-doesn't matter, you don't get to throw your hands up and say 'I don't know what to do with his kid'. You go to different people, you find out what you need to do. And maybe it'll take a month before that kid becomes engaged, but you cannot give up. We have to say we get that those people didn't treat you right, but give me a chance. We are rooted in relationships. The problem is not on the kid. These are not kids in the box, and we have to feel comfortable leaving that box, and dismiss our formal teacher education to do that. And they aren't going to tell us anything unless they feel safe in that human connection.

Student Voice. Teachers were asked how they use their curriculum to employ student voice within the classroom:

Mrs. B (continued): When we have socratic seminars, the thing that is hardest for me is I don't want to squish anyone, because my guess is that in the other schools they weren't given a voice or were able to say their opinion, and I want to encourage that, but there are a couple of classes with kids who opinions dominate, and I wouldn't want that in a class, it would make me feel like my opinion didn't matter. So I navigate how to politely say shut up and let someone speak.

Mr. L (continued): I notice the projects students are doing. The ones they like to experiment with on their own. One cut out a stencil and started spray painting, and I said that is cool and looks good, and give them ideas that if we put it together it becomes a

composition, which is a project. And then everyone sees it and starts doing it. Then the kids started doing pop-art and Andy Warhol things. And they all buy in. I pay attention to what students want to do on their own and I beef it up and make it relate (to standards). If you pay attention, then you see what they are interested in, then you steal that idea and blow it up to make it into a project. So it's different, in that I pay attention to what they like, because I don't have them very long so I can't teach it (Art) in the traditional way.

Miss B. (continued): I get immediate feedback. I ask 'did that work?' And I have to check my ego, because I know I have more formal training, but if we can ask for feedback and tweak our lessons, the more we are willing to do that, we aren't giving them the same canned version. We give them something that is student centered. But you have to be open and flexible in doing that.

Comprehensive vs. Alternative Education. Teachers were asked to identify the core differences between comprehensive schools in their district and their Alternative Education school:

Mrs. B (continued): No homework, which I think is a detriment, but is overdone at the other schools. For the most part, the classes are smaller, the teachers are more one on one. Connections are usually better. Many students here have a connection with one teacher or another. So students who are not connected with me can go be connected with (Science teacher), but that is crucial for them to get to school and for school safety. Academically we teacher slower, because we have 3rd grade to college reading levels in the same class. And I'm sure that is other schools too, but it's more obvious here because of the smaller classes.

Mr. L (continued): You get that one on one interaction that the students like. Once they get here and get over that whole scared routine that they have heard rumors, it's always overblown. I remind them that we don't grow students here, you all came from the other comp sites so you are all just here together now. The only difference is that you are at a school that is smaller. You have staff that is trained for emotionally disturbed students, and de-escalation drills. We have skills to deal with students who are difficult or angry. We are given skill sets that the other schools, at least in my experience, aren't given or used in the comp sites. We were the pilot program for Nurtured Heart. We are given different tools because we have a more emotionally charged student body, so we have to deal with it different. And we all understand that we have different personalities, there's Mama B, or a chill class like mine. We are also fortunate that we don't have 38 kids in one class. We are trained to come in with respect first, I don't tell them they have to earn it, I give it to them and see what they do with it.

Miss B (continued): It is based on the teachers. From the very beginning I was told to not focus on academic content and instead focus on establishing relationships because they recognize that we have the kids with the highest ACES scores. They are the most traumatized kids in the state. They come to us with a whole suitcase of physical, emotional, psychological stuff that we have to wade through and understand what it does to them before we can ever get them to sit down and take a deep breath and say 'ok, now I'm open to learning today'. We have to worry about them feeling safe in the classroom, and you aren't taught that. We traditionally have kids in rows, why? Because it is easier for us. We don't do eye surgery the same as we use to, so why this too? We are in the people business that is what we have to remember. If we don't see being in the classroom as relationship based, then everything else doesn't matter.

Key elements of teacher narratives. Throughout the provided narratives, there are key elements that these teachers utilize to create a culturally conscious and vulnerable classroom where students feel safe to explore their educational needs. The first element is creating a sense of community within the classroom. All teachers agree that creating a community is vital to student success within the classroom, but also in communication and the ability to maintain interpersonal relationships with their peers as well as their mentors. The second key element that teachers felt was vital to their pedagogy was employing student voice. When teachers' allowed students to make decisions about their own education, the student's empowerment from being given the choice to construct their educational outcome transformed the classroom into a passionate setting for learning and expanding boundaries. As educators, our goals are to create spaces for conscious critical thinking, and teachers on this campus do just that by simply observing and asking students what they are interested in. Lastly, the teacher participants overwhelmingly agreed that the main difference between a comprehensive site and Bishop, was the focus on fostering relationships prior to engaging in content. The consensus of teachers and administrators to change the school climate by focusing on fostering trust with students first, is

the exact element that allows teachers and students to remain vulnerable and flexible in deciding educational pathways.

Discussion of Findings

The teacher participants as well as the student participants understand the importance of community within the classroom and overall. Many of the narratives begin their successes with making a connection with someone. Many of the downfalls that students expressed were not feeling the same sense of community when they attended a community college as when they attended Bishop High School. The teacher participants positioned themselves as able to make connections with students and strongly believe that making the connection is most vital to the success of their students. Relational pedagogy as discussed by Schademan and Thompson, in their research of a community college, mimics the findings that teachers and students expressed in my study. It was found that faculty that served as a cultural agent for students with similar characteristics, employed similar pedagogical practices that involved relationship building, in order to aid success for their FGLI students (Boyd, MacNeill, & Sullivan, 2006; Schademan & Thompson, 2015). Relationship building encompasses understanding that all areas of a students' life; academic, social, and financial, are all intertwined in the experiences that students' may have in a classroom. When one element of the students' life is not nurtured, it directly affects the other elements. Although Murray and Holt (2014) suggested the six essential elements of an effective alternative education classroom; student-to-teacher ratio, social and emotional support, caring and committed staff, family involvement, individually designed education plan, and self-efficacy; the list should be applied to the goals of any classroom in order to foster trustworthy and successful relationships with their students. Enriching the use of those essential elements

allows for natural progression towards employing student voice and developing culturally and environmentally responsive curricula; two elements of pedagogy that student participants indirectly stated was the most beneficial in their educational journey.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the beliefs and experiences that contributed to the success of continuation high school graduates as they transitioned into higher education. As mentioned in Chapter 1, this study set out to address several key goals. The first goal was to identify the characteristics of alternative education students and compare them to similar characteristics of first generation college students, in order to identify common possible needs of the population overall. The second goal was to identify the characteristics of institutional educational agents that foster trust and relationships with students who attend alternative education schools. Lastly, the final goal of this study was to highlight which pedagogical strategies or institutional resources are beneficial to improving retention rates of at risk youth, such as continuation high school graduates, in higher education?

As a result, this study contributed two key concepts to the existing literature pertaining to alternative education students and resources needed for their successful transition to a higher education institution. First, it provides a conceptual framework for alternative education populations and their relation to first generation college student populations. Second, it offers a conceptual framework that identifies relational pedagogy as a pathway to success for continuation graduates who become first generation college students. This chapter reviews these contributions and incorporates my insight as an alternative education teacher and researcher.

There are three findings in this study, all of which came out of applying the counterstories methodology into the constant comparative analysis of the narrative data. The first key finding is, there is a significant connection between the academic confidence of students and educator relationships. The second key finding is, educators served as an agent of change in the perception of these students educational journeys. Additionally, the third finding builds upon the first and second finding by exploring the academic, social and financial perceptions of readiness that students obtain from their K-12 education experiences. The following sections explain these findings in relation to the literature.

Key Finding 1: Students-Teacher Relationships and Academic Confidence

Alternative education students fall into the category of non-traditional because of their educational needs for flexibility that cannot be offered at a compulsory high school. Aron (2006) refers to alternative education students as a transient population for various reasons including credit deficiency, truancy, juvenile court, foster placement or familial obligations (Ragland, 2016). There is a very short period of time to make a connection with students; however, through structural changes, like those made at Bishop, of implementing supportive relationships before engaging in content, students, like the participants in this study, can gain the confidence to continue their education.

Key Finding 2: Educators Serve as Agents of Change in Student Perspectives

Through the process of coding and analyzing for underlying themes, I found that student participant experiences reflected existing literature in recognizing culturally responsive teachers as an agent of change in their educational journeys. Studies have shown that developmentally,

culturally and ethnically diverse students rarely develop close relationships with educators. However, the same studies identify that frequent interaction with educators created more satisfaction and success than any other program or involvement (Barbatis, 2010, Tinto & Engstrom, 2008, Schademan & Thompson, 2015).

Key Finding 3: Academic, Social and Financial Perceptions of Readiness

Environmentally, students and teachers understand the tools needed to succeed in a higher educational setting. These skills are consistently outlined by educators and are deemed skills that are necessary for one to be ‘ready’ for the college experience. The skills that teachers and students’ highlighted as beneficial in their high school educational experience were tools such as open communication, autonomy, and having a reliable adult to turn to. As outlined by Byrd and MacDonald, “...college readiness involves understanding student characteristics and skills within the context of college.” (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005). While we cannot know specific skills for every context in every college, Byrd and MacDonald also highlighted skills that higher education educators felt students were missing, “...things such as attending class, being prepared, using course materials, and collaborating with classmates.” (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005). Preparing students generally by using consistent academic language, as well as implementing relational pedagogy in higher education classrooms would eliminate the need to talk about readiness. Students come into the classroom with funds of knowledge from social and academic experiences; it is in the educators best interest to help the student invite those experiences into the classroom to make a more culturally rich educational environment for everyone to share.

Recommendations

This study used a phronetic approach with the hopes of collecting research and narratives that could immediately impact the praxis of educators, K-12 and higher educational institutions. As a researcher, I chose constant comparative analysis and counterstory methodology to highlight the assumptions and the actualities of this population of incoming first generation college students. My goal was to find strategies that would ultimately increase persistence and retention of alternative education graduates once they transitioned into higher education. Due to limited time, I was unable to collect the experiences of students from multiple school sites. While the narratives do highlight the experiences of many students from multiple alternative education sites, alternative education schools or students are not environmentally generalizable. Further research involving larger groups of high school graduates in various locations, greater time commitment, and longitudinal research of their educational experiences is needed.

Further research should be conducted to try to identify patterns across the pedagogical practices of the teachers that students identify as effective agents of educational change. In this study, the use of my prior students seemed to inhibit some student responses to teachers they liked and disliked. Surveying students, outside of those I know personally, could help with more generalized understandings of the reasons for educational persistence and retention. Additionally, conducting a longitudinal study of student and teacher participants to observe how beneficial or detrimental educator interactions are in shaping pedagogy and academic confidence would also highlight where there are needed areas to improve the relational pedagogy framework.

The participants in this study are interested to see the effects of their narratives in practice for both their former and current teachers/professors. The hope is that educators will

begin to employ a more student-centered classroom in higher education, and students begin to feel empowered to use their voice again and begin to build a similar community to what they experienced in high school.

First Year Experience programs prove to be a great resource for fostering a community during a students' initial transition, but this type of continuous campus-wide relational intervention may be very useful in retaining first generation students beyond the first year. Embracing relational pedagogy as a common practice can be beneficial to any underrepresented group of students. The recommendation is that educators of first generation students evaluate their practices and employ student voice and community building beyond first year experience programs.

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APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Form

**Human Subjects Informed Consent Form
for**

**“Teaching Strategies to Encourage Persistence of Continuation High School Graduates in
Higher Education”**

My name is Nerissa Wallace-Smith. I am a graduate student in the School of Education at California State University-Chico. I would like to invite you to take part in my research leading to the completion of a thesis. The research concerns creating an understanding of the teaching strategies that help or hinder the persistence of continuation high school graduates in higher education. I am interested in your positive and negative educational experiences that you feel have shaped your resilience and outlook towards education.

If you agree to take part in my research, I will send you an e-mail with a link to a Google Form with questions for you to answer about your educational experiences. These questions should take between 30-45 minutes to complete. I expect to only use the data provided from the Google Form, however, a second audio-taped or e-mailed interview may be requested for additional clarification on specific topics. If so, I will contact you by e-mail / phone.

The limited risks to you in participating in this research are the possibility of a loss of privacy and discomfort in being audio taped. I will do my very best to minimize these risks. Your identity and any other identifying information will remain confidential and pseudonyms will be used when necessary.

All of the information that I obtain from you during research will be kept confidential. All information, including notes, written responses and audio responses, will be stored on my computer in an encrypted, password protected file. My computer will also be password protected. Only I will have access to passwords. After this research is completed, I may save the notes and responses for use in future research by myself. The same confidentiality is guaranteed and will apply to future storage and use of all research materials.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You are free to refuse to take part. If you decide to participate, you are free to refuse me to keep the record of your participation. You may refuse to answer any of the questions and possible subsequent clarification questions. You may stop participation at any time.

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact me, Nerissa Wallace-Smith at (925) 207-7428 or by email: nwallace-smith@mail.csuchico.edu. If you agree to participation in

this research and data collection, please sign the form below. Please keep a copy of this agreement for future reference.

If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a participant in this research project, please contact the California State University-Chico's Human Subjects in Research Committee at (530) 898-6880.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX B

Student-Participant Survey Questions

For this survey; all questions are open-ended. If you prefer not to answer a specific question simply respond “prefer not to answer” and move on to the next question.

1. Please provide your initials: _____
2. Gender:
3. Ethnicity:
4. Please Identify your current school status (Ex: Enrolled; year #, or Not Enrolled since MM/DD)
5. Tell me about your initial decision to go to college.
6. Tell me about your decision to continue and/or leave college.
7. What/Who was your favorite teacher/class and why? (Please include the subject area)
8. What/Who was your most disliked teacher/class and why? (Please include the subject area)
9. Were there any teachers, classes, projects that were especially memorable? Why?
10. Tell me about your experiences transitioning from high school to college. (Obstacles and/or advantages)
11. What are some main differences that you notice(d) between high school and college?
12. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your educational experience?

APPENDIX C

Teacher-Participant Interview Questions

- 1) Express the pedagogical strategies that you employ in your classroom and how effective you feel those strategies are in connection with student success in the classroom?
- 2) How do you encourage student voice in the classroom?
- 3) How do you feel Bishop High School differs from comprehensive schools in your district; both in population and in teaching staff?