UNDERSTANDING THE SYMBOLS AND HISTORY OF SCHOOL CULTURE IN AN
ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL: COMMUNITY, CHARACTER, COMMITMENT, AND CHASM

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Abstract

This qualitative research case study explored the perception of members of an alternative school community in understanding how the symbols and history of the school culture helped the school community to understand the school culture. An analysis of the school culture was considered imperative because each school has a culture; understanding these features was helpful in making a school better (Hall & Hord, 2015). In addition, limited literature has been published on the school culture of alternative schools of the Type II nature proposed by Raywid (1994). By being aware of the school culture, the school community can better understand the various processes and activities and how they can and have contributed to a positive or negative school culture at the alternative school. To understand how the symbols and history of the school culture impacted the present school culture, the following research questions were investigated:

1. In general, what are the perceptions of school community members regarding school culture?
2. What are the perceptions of school community members regarding their schools’ culture?
3. What are the perceptions of school community members regarding how school symbols and history of the school impacted the current culture of the school?

Members of the alternative school community were sent an email requesting permission to be interviewed on their perceptions of the symbols and history of the school culture. From the responses received, 12 participants were selected to be interviewed. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, saved as word documents, and imported into Nvivo. Codes and themes were highlighted and cross-referenced using the Nvivo software. The research revealed some similarities to successful high schools. The main themes of community, character, commitment, and chasm emerged from the analysis as symbols and history that impacted the culture of the alternative school and highlighted strengths and weaknesses that could help the school community understand the school culture and decide how to proceed in the future. Attention has to be paid to the culture of this alternative school to ensure its success in preparing students who are college and career ready.

Keywords: alternative school, school culture, disciplinary alternative education program, Type II alternative school, at-risk students, community, character, commitment, chasm.
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I hereby grant permission to the Education Department, Carson-Newman University, to reproduce this research in part or in full for professional purposes, with the understanding that in no case will it be for financial profit to any person or institution.

Signature:  

Date: March 30, 2017
CHAPTER 1
Introduction

American public schools have been challenged on a continual basis to improve student achievement. In the current educational sphere, incredible pressure has been placed on the system to immediately impact and improve student achievement. Posavac and Carey (2007) maintained that accountability has been a noteworthy issue in public education over the last five decades and this has continued to impact how schools implemented programs in fulfilling the stringent demands of various transformation strategies. Subsumed in public education were alternative routes students took to complete their high school tenure. Research has identified three models of alternative schools: Type I were popular innovations, Type II were last-chance programs, and Type III were remedial focused (Raywid, 1994). The focus of this study was on Type II institutions that have been established to support students who are unable to succeed in a traditional school setting because of social, behavioral, and academic deficits (Raywid, 1994).

Approximately 20% of secondary aged children attended an alternative school in America (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010). A national survey by NCES (2010) indicated there were approximately 10,300 alternative schools and programs directed by school districts for at-risk students. DeNobile (2009) suggested educational stakeholders’ concerns about student achievement, school safety, an increase in violence, and the high dropout rate of high school students have increased interest in alternative education programs. To cater to the needs of students in last-chance alternative education programs further compounded the challenges of meeting the demands of various reforms that have been implemented.

The landmark publication, *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), might be considered the start of the overemphasis on standardized tests. Since
then, there have been feverish attempts to improve student success on standardized tests. With these attempts, there have been mixed results in student success in various areas of assessments instituted in the school system. Many initiatives have been implemented to address student achievement but have been unsuccessful for a variety of reasons: change of current political administration, change of superintendent, initiatives that were too complex, immediate results not realized, and a host of other reasons. Due to the political climate and/or changes in educational policies, Stoll (2003) pointed out that these were key external factors that impacted school culture. Levin ((2003) also concurred with Stoll’s preceding idea and added that the expectations [implicit and explicit] of the government as highlighted in education policies and the historical foundation of the school were also influences that contributed to the school culture.

In seeking to ensure there was an increase in student achievement and all students had access to quality education, changes were made in the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) in 2002. This reauthorization was renamed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB; U.S. Department of Education, 2002) Act and held public schools in all states accountable for increasing student achievement. Implicit in the NCLB were mandates that demanded that schools work assiduously to ensure that differences in achievement between various groups were lessened. In these mandates was an emphasis on high-stakes testing. High-stakes accountability processes formed a major component of the NCLB; therefore, it was imperative that schools make necessary and immediate changes to impact student success. From the viewpoint of Fullan (2005), the NCLB was punitive with dire consequences for schools that failed to improve.

In 2015, ESEA was reauthorized and this resulted in The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). This act was purportedly passed to fix some of the woes of NCLB. An important feature of this reauthorization was the rejection of total
emphasis on standardized tests and the thrust for uniform practices for all schools. It was the aim of ESSA to have an education system that prepared every child to graduate from high school ready for careers and colleges (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Fundamental to future success of ESSA was ensuring more children gained access to high-quality state preschool programs.

Whether an alternative school or a traditional public school, student success seemed to be measured by results from standardized tests. It was argued that high stakes testing was an inherent challenge to the formation and maintenance of a positive and healthy school culture, which was considered necessary for student achievement (Smith, 2006). Added to the focus on high-stakes testing in alternative schools of the last chance type was the overarching task of promoting prosocial behavior. Many alternative educators agreed that it was an arduous task to get academic and socio-emotional components to work as a cohesive unit—it took time, talent, and commitment to the task to achieve success.

Although achievement scores were considered important in the educational context, Fog, Butz, and Yakaboylu (2005) argued if schools were only about raising test scores, then they most likely would not make a permanent stamp on the life of the school community. However, with the change of emphasis by ESSA (U.S. Department of Education, 2015) from using standardized tests as the main and sometimes only means of educational accountability, there was now possibly a chance to change the culture to ensure student success in a more holistic manner.

Valentine (2006) suggested that school culture should be thoroughly examined as it was an essential factor in improving schools, however, it must be understood that shaping a school’s culture was complex and intricate. It was posited that school culture was a fundamental, yet intangible feature of the educational institution (Lowery, 2002).
was crucial for effective running of the school because the culture shaped, maybe even dictated, what happened from day to day at the school. Haberman (2013) pointed out that although culture cannot be physically touched, it was very essential in the life of a school.

Haberman (2013) reasoned that a person can enter a school and know right away whether he or she wanted to be there or not. Feelings, faces, sounds, activities, and pictures all contributed to the school culture that existed in that particular school environment. Therefore, it was vital for leaders to ascertain their schools’ culture to ensure appropriate steps were taken in transforming all areas of school life. Fullan (2001) suggested that reconceptualizing school climate and changing negative organizational cultures have become a key reform emphasis in the current educational context. Many of the research undertaken on alternative education were from the perspectives of students, however, it was thought that a new outlook from the adults who worked in the Type II alternative school was needed to offer another angle from which to view this complex organization and concept of school culture.

**Research Problem**

Emphasis on testing has become such a chief focus in public schools; thus, best practices and innovative strategies have to be utilized to ensure student outcomes were increased and improved. Following the release of the *Nation at Risk* report (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), schools have been hard pressed to achieve extremely high levels of excellence. Ravitch (2010) posited that with these constant and increasing pressures, schools and districts have found themselves in serious circumstances due to not finding requisite support from local, state, or federal departments to undertake necessary programs and initiatives for impacting student success. This position was no different in the alternative school setting.
With increased pressure to achieve more equitable student outcomes, Jerald (2006) urged school communities to use every tool in their education arsenal, including organizational culture. To compound the plethora of issues public schools faced, and more so in alternative schools of the Type II nature, Scipio (2013) indicated it was problematic to measure student growth based on traditional indicators of success such as graduation rates, high stakes end-of-course tests, and high school assessment program (HSAP) passing rates for these alternative schools.

The requisite code §§ 59-63-1300 (2013) explained alternative education as it applied to the southern state being studied. The code gave school boards throughout the state the responsibility of creating alternative school programs that catered to students who had behavioral or academic issues that prevented them from engaging in the traditional school program or impeding the learning of others. In this explanation, it seemed to endorse alternative schools of the Type II sort proposed by Raywid (1994). In this particular district, there was a Type II alternative school and various programs of the Type I and III sort housed in various schools throughout the district.

Building a positive school culture at such an alternative school can be considered challenging, especially when most students were not there by choice but had been sent there by their regular school administration. Most times, this fostered a negative attitude toward the alternative school. Therefore, the symbolism and historical importance of the alternative school had to be marketed and envisioned as an interesting and exciting concept so that stakeholders would feel connected to the school and have a positive view of their experiences with the alternative school.

With the constant call for school reform, Colley (1999) concluded that if school reform efforts were continued without dealing with school culture, real change would not come about
and the reform would only highlight another pointless exercise without positive outcomes. Although research (MacNeil, Prater & Busch, 2009) indicated school culture and academic performance were intricately linked, this research did not seek to establish a cause and effect relationship but sought to gain perspectives of various school community members on how the elements of school culture, symbols and history, helped them to understand the school culture.

The educational arena has been overrun by the prevalence of standardized assessments and measurement systems as the main means used to hold schools accountable for student achievement (NCES, 2002). However with the various idiosyncrasies of alternative schools, especially those that catered to at-risk students, there needed to be a closer look at the extenuating circumstances of the students and the school so these can be factored into the student success equation. As early as the 1990s, some scholars have suggested that the formative component of whatever accountability program was used in schools should focus on school climate in general and school culture specifically because the underlying assumptions shared by educators in a school were inextricably linked to school performance (Deal & Peterson, 2016).

A salient point was made by Deal and Peterson (2016) that schools had to model successful businesses and the school community needed to look at its local traditions, folkways, and dreams so that the process of improvement can be started. This idea by Deal and Patterson opened the door to explore the concept of school culture in terms of the elements of symbols and history. This was the premise on which this research was conceptualized. The researcher realized that until the school community started to look at its activities in the context of its symbols and history, necessary improvements would be temporary. It must be noted that Deal and Peterson emphasized the idea that the look should not be a cursory one but a continuous and thorough examination.
Although school culture was an intangible component of every school, it affected the all-important test scores that hung over the heads of school administrators like Damocles’ sword. Of course, many variables impacted a student’s academic success. Socioeconomic status, school climate, student motivation, instructional strategies, school and classroom resources, and school culture were just a few of the variables that have contributed to the complex and dynamic equation of measuring student success. Some of these directly and indirectly impacted student success but all these variables operated on a foundation of a school culture that positively or negatively impacted student outcomes.

Even though school culture was considered a crucial factor in the school development process, limited efforts have been made by school districts and by extension, principals and teachers, to understand or integrate this variable in the improvement process. Possibly the concept of alternative schools and school culture might be considered separate entities. However, if viewed from a Gestalt perspective, the issues intertwined to showcase an important concern in education. Understanding how the elements of school culture, symbols and history, have contributed to and or will contribute to understanding the school culture at the alternative school was significant in the educational field and especially to bolstering the knowledge base on alternative education.

**Purpose of the Study**

This research sought to explore the culture of an alternative school of the last chance program type to gain insight of how the elements of culture, symbols and history, helped the school community understand its school culture. This school was chosen because the researcher was part of the school community. It was reassuring to find similarities between the traditional schools and the alternative school. The differences were somewhat fascinating and the
researcher thought it would be an excellent idea to understand how things operated at this particular alternative school. In addition, the willingness of the school community to share its experiences and how the elements of symbols and history were used to understand the school culture were other reasons this school was selected. This qualitative research used the lens of symbols and history to understand this alternative school. By being aware of the school culture, the school community can better understand the various processes and activities and how they can and have contributed to a positive or negative school culture.

**Research Questions**

1. In general, what are the perceptions of school community members regarding school culture?
2. What are the perceptions of school community members regarding their schools’ culture?
3. What are the perceptions of school community members regarding how school symbols and history of the school impacted the current culture of the school?

**Rationale for the Study**

Many persons might ask, “Why is it important to focus on school culture in an alternative school?” It can be argued that school culture exerted such a compelling influence on the school’s success that it made great sense to understand how it made an impact on the life of the school. The strength of using a model of school culture resided in recognizing that for schools to be effective there had to be a focus on the underlying rituals of behavior that made up the school culture (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008).

This research sought to add to the literature on alternative school education by documenting the perceptions of various stakeholders in the school community on their
understanding of the existing school culture. The need to understand how the school community perceived the school culture was important. Particularly significant was understanding how the elements of school culture, symbols and history, have contributed to developing the school culture and how they could impact the school culture in the future. Understanding this type of school was especially important because more students seemed to be exhibiting at-risk behaviors which negatively impacted their academic progress and holistic development and prevented them graduating from high school.

The study of school culture was considered significant and still needed to be understood in the current educational landscape. Hollins (2008) reasoned culture was such a basic part of the human experience it became an unseen guide that ordered our personal lives. Interest in school culture was particularly significant because of the interwoven link between school culture and academic achievement (Newell & Van Ryzin, 2007). With public schools being heavily reliant on standardized test results to receive funding, it was a pragmatic stance to understand school culture and explore how symbols and history have created, can create, and sustain a positive school culture.

Culture was seen as an important glue that bound the members of the school community. Culture encompassed a multitude of issues while spanning time. The creation and maintenance of a positive school culture was at the heart of increasing student outcomes and ensuring that the core function of schools was carried out (Mulvenon, Stegman, & Ritter, 2005). A positive school culture could possibly lead to students becoming more involved and engaged in their educational experiences (Schochor, 2009). A healthy school culture fostered continuous improvement of the school (Clark & Clark, 2003).
With the inconsistencies and moderate successes some Type II alternative schools have demonstrated, it was imperative new thought processes be utilized to carve a path to consistent success. The demands placed on educators to ensure every student succeeded, graduated high school, and was ready for careers and college seemed a mammoth task; further compounded in an alternative program of the last chance program type. It was the belief of the researcher that there had to be a concerted effort by policy makers, and other educational stakeholders to understand the complexities of the culture of the alternative school. Therefore, it was important that an introspective look be taken so the process of change would start within instead of from outside.

**The Researcher**

The researcher was placed at the work location in the last week of December 2015. This meant the researcher would start school at the beginning of the second semester, January 2016. The researcher’s classes had been covered by a long-term substitute. When told of the new work location, there was sadness. In April 2015, a transfer had been approved to go to a school of the researcher’s choice; however, somewhere in the change of human resources personnel, it was not carried through to send the researcher to that school. This was an alternative program of the last chance program type and all that was envisioned was “bad” kids and all that connation entailed. Unable to change the circumstances, the plan was to think of how to approach this challenge. Reading as much literature on alternative schools was done to get an understanding and appreciation for the task to be undertaken. There was some comfort when it was read that teachers at these schools had experienced success and had made a positive impact on some of their students’ lives by their stance on high expectations and an unwavering focus on prosocial behaviors.
The school was attached to the school district’s professional development center so its location was known prior to the first day of work. On January 4, 2016, the researcher arrived at the school with “getting to know you” ideas and a diagnostic mathematics test to gauge the students’ mathematical skills. The researcher, principal, and head of the mathematics department had a meeting where the routines, procedures, disciplinary plans, and other needed information were explained. There were assurances there would be the necessary support to achieve success.

After the meeting, there was a tour to understand the layout of the building. The researcher had first period planning so did not have students immediately coming to the room. The long-term substitute was there to help in the transition process. The substitute remained in the classroom for the first day. The following day, the researcher was going to be “flying solo.” The first days were anxiety-inducing but the use of classroom management strategies alleviated some existing problems. Sadly, main issues that kept recurring were the constant use of profanity in students’ speech and the disruption of class activity with inappropriate comments. Gradually, the use of profanity decreased and students became more cognizant that they were in a school setting. However, there had to be constant reminders that a school setting required different, school-appropriate behaviors.

To make sense of the experience, the researcher stepped out of the classroom and started to explore the school. The researcher spoke to staff members who seemed friendly but also was prepared for rejection from those who seemed unapproachable. Overall, there was a good reception from staff with a few lukewarm responses. It was quite interesting to find that many teachers chose the alternative school setting and actually enjoyed working at this school. With
that positivity being exuded, the researcher felt this experience could be the start of something great.

**Definition of Terms**

**Alternative programs.** Usually housed within regular schools to cater to the needs of students that typically cannot be met in the traditional school (National Center for Education Statistics, NCES, 2010). Although the alternative school was housed at a separate location, it was still considered a program. Alternative school and alternative program were used interchangeably in the research.

**Alternative schools.** Usually housed in a separate facility where students are removed from regular schools (NCES, 2010). Raywid (1994) identified three types of alternative schools: Type I were popular innovations, Type II were last-chance programs, and Type III were remedial focused (Raywid, 1994). However, the focus of the study will be on Type II institutions that have been established to support students who are unable to succeed in a traditional school setting because of social and academic deficits (Raywid, 1994). Although the institution was called an alternative school, it was actually an alternative program.

**At-risk student.** A student at risk of dropping out of school is any student who, because of his or her individual needs, required temporary or ongoing intervention in order to achieve in school and to graduate with meaningful options for his or her future (The Education and Economic Development and Economic Development Coordinating Council At-Risk Student Committee, 2007).

**Culture.** Defined as patterns of meanings embodied in symbols and history (Geertz, 1973).
Every Student Succeeds Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The reauthorization of the ESEA as a response to No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) to ensure all students graduated career and college ready and to ensure more children had access to high-quality state preschools.

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002). Stemmed from the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) that allowed the federal government to levy punitive measures on schools based on poor performance on standardized tests.

Organizational culture. Will be used interchangeably with school culture.

STAR test. Previously known as Standardized Test for the Assessment of Reading (STAR), however, the designers of STAR have created other STAR assessments to test skills in other areas than Reading. For this study STAR Math and STAR Reading were used.

Student success. Determined by the goals and personal situation of the individual student (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 2012) and can be further understood by looking at retention, educational attainment, academic achievement, student advancement, and holistic development of the student (Miller, 2014).

Summary

In this chapter, the statement of the problem, the background of the study, the research problem, the rationale for the study, research questions, and the purpose of the study were provided. Definitions of terms were also discussed to provide the setting for the literature review in Chapter 2. Chapter 1 sought to give an overview of the need for school leaders to focus on school culture as an innovative way by which the issue of student success and student achievement could be addressed. Most reform initiatives based their success on standardized test scores but researchers such as Fog et al. (2005) believed if schools were only about test scores,
then these schools would not make the needed impact on the school community to have improved student achievement.

Each school has its own idiosyncrasies, different characteristics, strengths, weaknesses, and mode of operation. With such diversity inherent in schools, an analysis of school culture was imperative because each school has a culture; understanding these features was helpful in making a school better (Hall & Hord, 2015). A deeper understanding was needed to shape a positive school culture. Making a school better and improving the school culture were seen as key factors to a school’s success (Peterson, 2002).
CHAPTER 2

Review of the Related Literature

Alternative Schools

Limited literature has been published on the school culture of alternative schools of the Type II nature proposed by Raywid (1994). To be specific, a literature search was conducted using the EBSCO database, searching for keywords (e.g. Alternative schools and school culture; At-risk students and school culture; Alternative education and school culture; Last-chance alternative schools and school culture) in PsycInfo, ERIC, PsycArticles, and Academic Search Premier. No articles were retrieved that matched these search characteristics. Publications and books were found that dealt with alternative education of the Type II sort and school culture separately but not as combined entities.

Alternative schools came on the educational scene in the 1960s during the civil rights period to assist students who were disenfranchised in the regular school setting (Lange & Sletten, 2002). In the 1970s, there was a proliferation of alternative education centers (Raywid, 1994), which were attributed to continued pressure from the civil rights movement to ensure students, particularly those of color, had access to quality education. The 1980s saw changes from an inclusive and open school system to ones that were conventional and remedial (Young, 1990). The changes in the 80s were to remediate the large numbers of students who were disrupting classes and falling behind in school. From the 1990s onward, there was a continual increase in schools that catered to disruptive students. This might be due to the upsurge of violence in the nation’s schools (Ahearn, 2004).

In reviewing the literature on alternative schools, the definition of alternative education was extensive and it continued to evolve. The typology of alternative schools was fluid and
policymakers for public alternative schools for the most part did not understand their importance to the students they teach (Brand, 2011). Hinds (2013) theorized that alternative schools were particularly challenging to define because of the variances in school characteristics, e.g., how alternative the school and how vulnerable or at-risk the students being taught. From the data on alternative education, it was highlighted that many of the alternative schools and programs catered to “at-risk” students who exhibited characteristics that made them likely to drop out of school and not graduate (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2009).

Alternative education schools have also been defined as public school setting that addressed needs of students that were not normally met in the traditional school, provided non-traditional education, served as an addition to a regular school; or was outside the parameters of regular, special education, or vocational education (Sable, Plotts & Mitchell, 2010). In the literature on alternative education schools it was found that Type II alternative schools were also called disciplinary alternative education programs (DAEPs). Disciplinary alternative education programs were defined as educational institutions, public or private, or charter, that provided educational service in the K-12 system for students with disciplinary problems that have been removed from their regular school based on the decision of the school, correctional system, and/or district administration (Booker & Mitchell, 2011).

Another definition by Pierce (2006) defined DAEPs as alternative education options for students who exhibited behavioral problems that disrupted the learning of their peers as well as the order of their home campus. Johnston, Cooch, and Pollard (2004) also explained that alternative schools represented a departure from the traditional school curriculum and environment. From research on alternative schools, Foley and Pang (2006) highlighted that alternative programs catered to a majority of students with emotional and behavioral issues and
that the main admission criteria was often socio-emotional problems, truancy, and referrals from their regular school.

In alternative schools that mainly focused on disciplinary issues, O’Brien and Curry (2009) pointed out that there was a concentrated effort in developing skills to deal with anger and behavioral problems. As the research on disciplinary alternative schools evolved, Zolkoski, Bullock, and Gable (2015) described alternative schools as institutions designed for students who were at-risk of not passing and dropping out of the traditional school based on reasons such as absenteeism, teenage pregnancy, learning challenges and/or disciplinary issues. The main reasons that have resulted in students being expelled or removed from their regular school were possession of a weapon or drug, drug use, fighting, verbal disrespect of staff, and disruptive and defiant behavior (Tsang, 2004). Students were referred to these disciplinary institutions based on referrals by their regular school because of truant behavior, socio-emotional behavioral issues, and expulsion or suspension from regular school by their associated hearing boards (Foley & Pang, 2006).

A student who was considerably behind in his or her credit completion in relation to students of his or her same grade level or experienced life challenges such as being pregnant, attended school irregularly, and had other family concerns that decreased the likelihood of graduating from high school were also some reasons that were seen in alternative schools that have somehow impacted their behavior in the regular school.

Public interest in disciplinary alternative schools have increased and this was reflected by a large number of states in America passing legislation with regards to these schools (Lehr, Moreau, Lange & Lanners, 2004). Therefore, it was not surprising that from the 2007-2008 national survey, 64% of the country’s school districts have alternative schools for at-risk students
(Carver, Lewis & Tice, 2010). With there not being current national data on alternative schools, Moss, Strawhun and Peterson (2014) extrapolated that the number of alternative schools of the Type II nature may have drastically increased. Moss et al. (2014) suggested the following factors that might have contributed to the growth of Type II alternative schools: the implementation of zero tolerance policies, the enactment of NCLB, and the case law and Amendments to the Individual with Disabilities Act (IDEA). In conclusion, Reimer and Cash (2003) suggested that it had to be realized that alternative education was a viewpoint founded on the idea that there were diverse avenues and settings by which students can be educated.

**Classification of alternative schools**

Research synthesis on alternative education by Lange and Sletten (2002) deduced that based on the ever changing nature of alternative schools, it was challenging to characterize and classify these schools. Raywid (1994) used a three-tiered typology to describe alternative school: Type I--featured popular designs, Type II--concentrated on last chance programs, and Type III--focused on remedial programs. Aron (2006) argued that with the myriad of strategies and objectives of the various alternative programs and schools, Raywid’s classification might not be as applicable as in the past. Heinrich (2005) expanded Raywid’s typology and outlined a fourth type – Type IV that emphasized a student-focused option. The type IV proposed by Heinrich highlighted as areas of focus – behavior management, relational, adaptive, and another chance.

The Type IV option that was proposed by Heinrich was viewed as another chance option for students. The goals of the Type IV school were adaptive, challenging, individualized, and worked across boundaries in terms of the student placement. The focus was essentially student-centered, sensitive to the circumstances of the student, and used performance to assess growth.
The premise of the Type IV program was that there was a school-student match with an emphasis on an integrated relationship with the student’s regular school. In summarizing the various types of alternative schools, Heinrich (2005) explained that the aim of Type I schools was ideological and progressive and its educational purpose was transformative; the aim of Type II was behavioral and the educational purpose was for compliance; the aim of the Type III schools was humanistic and the educational purpose was participatory; and the of Type IV schools was emancipatory and the educational purpose was that of empowerment.

In an informal discussion, Roderick (2003) offered four types of alternative educational schools and programs based on the type of students served: (a) students who are “off-track” and need short-term help to get them back into their regular high schools, (b) students who have precipitately entered adulthood because of pregnancy or untenable home situations, (c) students who have fallen behind their starting cohort but are now ready to recover high school credits and accelerate into an adult vocational training or community college, and (d) students who are substantially behind educationally in acquiring high school credits because of low reading levels, retention, and other significant issues (Aron, 2006).

Neumann (2003) described two varieties of alternative schools that were somewhat similar to Raywid’s typology. The first alternative focused on following the educational objectives just like those in the regular school with an added behavioral component that required students to conform to the behavioral norms of the alternative school. The other alternatives were of innovation and were student-centered that promoted the individual and unique nature of students. Lange and Sletten (2002) also agreed with Raywid’s three-tiered typology, however, they added a fourth type that combined choice, innovation, and behavior. Whichever typology
was chosen, it was clear that a single alternative school would have a profuse amount of educational diversity that might become unwieldy.

**Characteristics of effective and successful alternative educational programs**

In seeking to understand the nuances of a Type II alternative school, Smith and Thomson (2014) suggested that educators ask, “How can students in alternative programs be successful when they have not been successful in traditional mainstream education?” Possibly the answer might lie in those characteristics that are somewhat unique to alternative schools and that have engendered success in the past. Pinpointing the characteristics of alternative schools was seen as a formidable task given the diverse population that existed from one school to another (Burkett, 2012).

Research (Conner & McKee, 2008; Johnston et al., 2004; Lehr et al., 2004) indicated that effective alternative programs shared common characteristics of personal/affective, academic, and structural factors. Smith and Thomson (2014) explained that personal and affective factors were those that gave students a sense of belonging and participatory ownership in the school or program. In addition, it was suggested by Smith and Thomson that effective alternative settings have committed and caring staff, high student involvement in the life of the school, mentoring programs that included staff, students, and parents and addressed personal and family issues. It was also found that effective programs had embedded problem solving, conflict management, and goal setting in their curriculum (Conner & McKee, 2008; Lehr et al., 2004).

In successful alternative programs, the academic factors were seen in the special courses that were designed, modification of existing curriculum, individualization of instruction, and provision of academic and behavioral assistance for the students (Smith & Thomson, 2014). There was a flexibility in scheduling that allowed students to be accommodated based on their
work schedule, the modality that best suited their learning style, or time of day that was more convenient to the specific issue of being at the alternative school (Conner & McKee, 2008; Lehr et al., 2004).

There was an overwhelming consensus that the structural element of smaller class sizes was an essential component of successful alternative programs (Kerr & Legsters, 2004). Having a clearly explained mission, high standards of behavior, attendance, and performance were other structural components that were deemed necessary for a successful alternative program of the Type II nature (Smith & Thomson, 2014). Possibly one of the structural elements that might be problematic would be enforcing rules. Conner & McKee (2008) pointed out that rules have to be clearly stated and explained, then enforced with fairness and consistency.

From a comprehensive study of various research on alternative schools Heinrich (2005) have found that successful alternative schools have features such as small size, individualized instruction and personal interaction between students and teachers, supportive learning settings, relevance to students’ lives in learning, and flexibility in organizational structure. These characteristics helped schools achieve success in whatever program was being offered to students. In seeking to understand alternative schools, Wilson, Stemp, and McGinty (2011) proposed that the hallmark of effective alternative schools was the active re-engagement of at-risk students in the learning process. Regardless of which category, typology, or characteristics that was used in alternative education, there was one constant that resounded--individualized attention to achieve success.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staffing</th>
<th>Instruction</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Nontraditional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small school, class size,</td>
<td>Standards-based</td>
<td>Supportive environment</td>
<td>Flexible scheduling, evening hours, multiple shifts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low student-to-teacher</td>
<td>Innovative and varied curricula</td>
<td>Informal or high structure</td>
<td>Student and staff entry choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ratio</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult mentors</td>
<td>Functional behavior assessments</td>
<td>Student-orientation</td>
<td>Reduced school days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership from either a</td>
<td>Self-paced instruction</td>
<td>Proactive or problem focus (i.e., last chance)</td>
<td>Linkages between schools and workplaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>principal or director/</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher-director</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of specialized services</td>
<td>Vocational training involving work</td>
<td>Character, theme, or emphasis from interests</td>
<td>Intensive counseling and monitoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e.g., library, career</td>
<td>in the community</td>
<td>of founding teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>counseling)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic leadership</td>
<td>Social skills instruction</td>
<td>Teacher-student and student-student</td>
<td>Collaboration across school systems and other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>relationships</td>
<td>human service agencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fewer rules and less</td>
<td>Individualized and personalized</td>
<td></td>
<td>Collegiality with faculty and students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bureaucracy</td>
<td>learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Composite characteristics derived from Barr & Parrett, 1997, 2001; Chalker & Brown, 1999; Cox, 1999; Duke & Griesdorn, 1999; Knutson, 1998; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Leidig, 2002; Lehr & Large, 2003; Raywid, 1994, 2001; Reimer & Cash, 2003; Ruedel et al., 2001; Saunders & Saunders, 2001; Schutz & Harris, 2001; Tobin & Sprague, 2000.)

Figure 2.1. Typical Alternative Education Program Characteristics

Source: Heinrich (2005)

Incorporating these essential elements in Type II alternative schools might be the linchpin in saving and improving these schools. According to Scipio (2013), the main purpose of Type II alternative schools was to reform the behavior of youth who exhibited disruptive behavior. If the school did not have a comprehensive policy to guarantee all elements were addressed, then students most likely would not experience the success needed to be graduates and ready for college and careers. Despite the challenges in identifying the characteristics of alternative schools, Raywid (1999) highlighted that alternative schools were formed to meet the needs of students who had difficulties in the traditional school setting and the curriculum and programming of these schools were not traditional or conventional.
Organizational Culture and School Culture

Organizational culture and, by extension, school culture have been the subject of educational value since the 1930s and even then, its importance and characteristics were understood. Waller’s (1932) description of schools highlighted that they have unique cultures comprised of complex social relationships intertwined in an elaborate context of games, wars, and ceremonies. Almost a century later, the reality of schools having elements of games, wars, and ceremonies have not changed. Brady (2008) concurred with the previous idea and pointed out that it had to be realized that schools were complex institutions that had distinct and unique school cultures.

According to Schoen and Teddlie (2008), Schein’s (2004) work on organizational culture provided a framework for constructing school culture. Schein labeled three levels of culture that functioned within the context of a school environment. The levels differed based on their visibility within schools and the level of awareness among school members. The three levels of culture were artifacts, values, and underlying assumptions. At the most visible level were artifacts, i.e., the symbols and observable behavioral patterns in a school. At the second, less visible level were values that explained why the organization operated in a particular manner; however, it did not give details about the compelling nature of the culture. The final level explained the learned underlying assumptions that formed the bedrock of values and how these values were exhibited by people.

Other interpretations have been posited in utilizing Schein’s levels of culture in understanding school culture. Another view was proposed by Yukl (2002) in a more practical manner that related to the daily operation of the school. Artifacts were the daily formalities, observances, and images most visible to the observer. Ringing of the bell, morning
announcements, and lining up to go to lunch were a few examples of artifacts in the school environment. Values were internal attitudes about ethical issues. The traits of fairness, cooperation, excellence, honesty, loyalty, and justice most schools used as character traits for a given month were emphasized. Underlying assumptions were the symbols, values, and beliefs that were not overtly perceived but continued to subtly shape the conduct of the members of the organization.

While Schein (2004) focused on three tiers of culture as assumptions, espoused values, and artifacts, other researchers viewed culture in other interesting ways. Ivancevich and Matteson (2002) used the picture of an onion to describe the layers of culture: symbols represented the observable, external layers; heroes and rituals were the second layer; and values comprised the third inner section of culture.

**Theoretical Lens and Related Theoretical Literature**

Many definitions of culture have been proposed. Depending on the different lenses and perspectives used, the definitions have varied nuances that made it challenging for researchers to unanimously agree on a definition of the concept of culture. Ibarra (2008) reasoned that part of the difficulty in conceptualizing the definition of culture was it referred to unspoken, unexpressed, implicit values and beliefs that directed actions but remained unseen to even members of the group to which it referred.

The concept of school culture has been ignored, in part, because it was difficult to study; experts often disagreed on its nature and the manner by which it must be assessed (Hoy & DiPaola, 2008). Although researchers disagreed about a universal definition of school culture, they agreed that school culture was an integral component of all schools since it was a mixture of various elements and relationships that existed in the environment.
Because culture was not a concrete entity, it was difficult to fully grasp the intricacy of school culture simply by analyzing its meaning and details (Deal & Peterson, 2016). However, analyzing the various definitions offered some insight and showed the depth and breadth of this phenomenon. In the literature, school culture has been used synonymously with an assortment of concepts including school climate and school ethos (Glover & Coleman, 2006). With the varied meanings of culture, the interchangeability of terms, and lack of agreement on research methodology, the issue of gaining consensus on how to conduct culture research was made very challenging (Caesar, 2007).

Maslowski (2001) defined school culture as the basic assumptions, norms, and values shared by school members that influenced their functioning at school (p. 8). Another interpretation was school culture was the historically transmitted patterns of meaning that included norms, values, beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, traditions, and myths understood by members of the school community (Short & Greer, 2002). School culture as defined in Wagner’s (2000) conceptualization of school culture, explained that school culture was the shared experiences both in and out of school (traditions and celebrations) and a sense of community, family, and team that was shared by all involved.

Maslowski (2001) encapsulated the concept of school culture and suggested that it can be regarded as an all-inclusive entity that permeated and impacted everyone within the school. Stoll and Fink (1996) explained that culture provided a description of the operation of the school and acted as an aperture through which the world can be observed. Stoll and Fink were of the belief that school culture played an influential role in changing schools. School culture constantly evolved and while there were those who might say that once formed, the school culture was
fixed, it was the opinion of Stoll and Fink that it might be sensible to view school as a paradox of both being static and dynamic in its conceptualization.

Deal and Kennedy (2000) coined the term *corporate culture* and defined key elements as

- company values;
- heroes, rituals, rites and ceremonies;
- cultural network; and
- the business environment.

Although this definition was from a business model perspective, this concept could be applied to a school setting. This model offered great insight into understanding how the school could be transformed into a progressive environment that promoted school growth and student success. If the school was placed in a corporate context, the school community would be seen as the fiber that formed the cultural network by connecting the values of the school to the ceremonies, rites, and rituals of the heroes who modeled the values.

**Culture and Climate**

Although institutional climate and culture were considered key components of school improvement, these terms were often confused and used inconsistently (Hall & Hord, 2015). The concept of climate was viewed by Hoy and Miskel (2005) as a broad term explaining educators’ views of their work surroundings, official and familiar structures, and social interactions. Hall and Hord concurred with the above idea of climate and introduced the idea of measurability in their definition of climate.

There were varying views on the interplay between school culture and school climate. In one instance, climate was considered to encompass culture and provided a picture of a school in its entirety; in this context, culture was favored for investigating the cognitive structures of the
school (Van Houtte, 2005) (see Table 2.1). Several other researchers (e.g., Hanson, 2003; Owens, 2001) also concurred that culture was a component of climate.

Possibly the idea of culture being a component of climate stemmed from Renato Taguiri’s (1968) seminal work on culture from the perspective of climate being a mix of culture, ecology, milieu, and organization. Even though Taguiri’s definition remained popular, distinctions and agreement between the relationship of climate and culture remained inconsistent. Still, another view (e.g. Poole, 1985) argued that climate was a part of culture while Burton and Obel (2004) proposed that climate and culture were independent concepts.

Table 2.1

*The Relationship between Climate and Culture*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Climate</th>
<th>Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>Psychology and Social Psychology</td>
<td>Anthropology and Sociology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Survey Research Multivariate</td>
<td>Ethnographic Techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statistics</td>
<td>and Linguistic Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Abstraction</td>
<td>Concrete</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>Perceptions of behavior</td>
<td>Assumptions and Ideology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Gruenert (2008) offered a practical way shown in Table 2.2 of distinguishing between climate and culture.
Table 2.2 *Gruenert’s distinction between climate and culture*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Climate</th>
<th>Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday versus Friday</td>
<td>Gives Mondays permission to be miserable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude or mood of the group</td>
<td>Personality of the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides a state of mind</td>
<td>Provides a (limited) way of thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible, easy to change</td>
<td>Takes many years to evolve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on perceptions</td>
<td>Based on values and beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel it when you come in the door</td>
<td>Members cannot feel it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is all around us</td>
<td>Is part of us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The way we feel around here</td>
<td>The way we do things around here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First step to improvement</td>
<td>Determines if improvement is possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s in your head</td>
<td>It’s in your head</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Gruenert (2008).*

**Positive School Culture**

The benefits of a positive and healthy school culture could not be overemphasized in having a school where staff and students enjoyed the teaching-learning experience. From all indications, the school culture was the interwoven factor in a school that impacted its effectiveness in helping students to be successful. The following were pointers to a positive school culture:

- Low turnover of staff with mutual objectives shared by the community.
- Areas of curriculum and instruction were explicitly stated and developed through consensus.
- Communication was authentic and there was humor and trust among staff members.
• Celebrations were used to recognize the contribution of school community members.

• Support was readily available from school and district leaders. (Wagner, 2000, p. 4)

The culture of the school stemmed from its vision and values and was gauged based on the alignment of behaviors, customs, symbols, and ceremonies with the vision of the school (Jerald, 2006). In addition, high levels of unanimity among employees about what was valued in the organization and exhibiting the required energy to instill these values in the organization were two characteristics of a robust culture (Munro, 2008). The degree of alignment with the vision of the school created a positive or negative school culture. The resultant culture hinged on the customs, symbols, traditions, and activities that aligned with the vision.

In fulfilling the vision of the school, Hobby (2004) proposed several actions that sent clear messages about the vision and values of the school:

• Rituals: These included the various celebrations and ceremonies that were observed.

• Hero Making: Role models, hierarchical and rewards systems, and mentors of the school.

• Storytelling: Laughs, myths, and common narratives shared in verbal and written form.

• Symbolic display: Art pieces that decorated the walls and medals received and exhibited.

• Rules: Protocols, formal guidelines, and implicit permissions that governed the school.

Schools with positive cultures exhibited high staff camaraderie and collegiality, positive acclaim from the school community, and improved student achievement (Fiore, 2001). It was
indicated that there was a positive correlation between positive school cultures and student gains and engagement, teacher productivity, and fulfilment (Hoy, Tarter & Hoy, 2006). It stood to reason that if the culture was not favorable for learning, then student success could be negatively impacted (Watson, 2001).

From most reviews of effective school literature, school culture was central to academic success (Leithwood & Louis, 2002). From this idea, it was argued that if the school culture was understood, conceptualized, and worked on to become strong and healthy, there would be a corresponding positive growth in student achievement and success. Peterson (2002) suggested that shaping [school] culture was of particular significance, especially with the continued emphasis on rigor in the curriculum and stringent measures of accountability that were required by the different mandates.

The hallmarks of successful school cultures were those that were welcoming, informal, caring, and attentive; had collegial relationships; were collaborative, dynamic, and had frank dialogue; and had a determination to face the future as a team (Bascia & Hargreaves, 2014). In describing successful schools in terms of professional activities, Peterson and Deal (2002) suggested that these schools have mutual professional language and stories of achievement, diverse chances for effective professional development, and observances that celebrated growth, teamwork, and learning.

Culture was viewed as both a dynamic process created by the actions and interactions of the community that continuously surrounded the school community, and also by norms, rules, structures, and routines that directed behavior (Schein, 2004). To fully understand school culture, it was imperative to identify the school culture’s fundamental expectations, values, customs, and beliefs and determine the goodness of fit between the assumptions, the school
goals, and the faculty’s beliefs about each if there was to be a positive culture shift (Kaplan, 2013). To effect a positive culture shift, the school’s history have to be examined, the school culture analyzed and the following two questions have to be asked (and answered):

1. What components of the school culture were positive and should be reinforced?
2. What components of the school culture were negative and should be changed?  
   (Kaplan, 2013)

The following advice was offered by Deal and Kennedy (2000) on how to understand the school’s culture:

1. Get to know the school culture by asking questions to understand the people, observe and figure out the role of the various members, and ascertain the values of the system.
2. Reflect on how the school culture impacts student achievement and how the school culture impacts student growth and the execution of school objectives.
3. Look at people’s values to determine the degree of similarity between groups.
4. Organize opportunities where people can talk about and reflect on their values.

Types of Culture

Steinhoff and Owens (1988) outlined four distinct school cultures:

1. Family culture--Characterized by familial values with a foundation of care for the team members and focus on student success.
2. Machine culture--Have characteristics of an efficient mechanism. The focus was on accuracy rather than on cultivating leaders.
3. Cabaret culture--Described like a performance. The interactions and roles have theatrical overtones.
4. Little shops of horror--The culture was defined as erratic. The environment was tense and stressful.

Another proposition was put forward by Cameron and Quinn (2006) on the types of culture: hierarchy, market, clan, and adhocracy. Hierarchy culture was composed of clear pathways of decision-making power with common rules and accountability procedures. Market culture emphasized the bottom line, profitability, and other business-specific ideas. Adhocracy culture was fluid and operated on the principle of flexibility, creativity, and adaptability to achieve success. Clan culture highlighted tribal norms such as shared values and goals and collaboration.

**Measuring Dimensions of School Culture**

Table 2.3 gave an overview of how various researchers have conceptualized the dimensions of measuring school culture. School culture was such an elusive, multifaceted, and multidimensional concept that it affected how it was measured. Various researchers have conceptualized how school culture can be measured. Collegiality, collaboration, and support from leadership seemed to be common themes that existed in the various models.
Table 2.3

*Dimensions of Measuring School Culture*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collegiality (professional collaboration)</td>
<td>Collaborative leadership</td>
<td>Goal orientation</td>
<td>Academic challenges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaching out to the knowledge base</td>
<td>Teacher collaboration</td>
<td>Participative decision-making</td>
<td>Comparative achievement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimentation (exploring new teaching techniques)</td>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td>Innovativeness</td>
<td>Recognition for achievement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High expectations</td>
<td>Collegial support</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>School community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust and confidence</td>
<td>Unity of purpose</td>
<td>Formal relationships</td>
<td>Perception of school goals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangible support</td>
<td>Learning partnership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Elements of Culture**

According to the seminal work of Clifford Geertz (1973), culture was understood as historically transmitted patterns of meaning embodied in symbols. Significant elements of culture were the norms, values, beliefs, traditions, rituals, and ceremonies and myths decoded by a particular group of people (Geertz, 1973). A substantial portion of research on school culture stemmed from Geertz’s interpretation of culture.

Schools normally have formalities and observances, which were group events used to celebrate achievements and pay homage to those who have made invaluable contributions to the
school (Peterson, 2002). A comprehensive overview of culture, its elements, and the role and benefits of a positive school culture to the school community was offered by Sergiovanni (2009):

1. The values, symbols, and belief systems of the school community formed the school culture.

2. Culture dictated the thought processes and behavior patterns of the group.

3. The customs, history, shared meanings, behaviors, and stories formed the culture of the school.

4. When the school culture was cohesive and clearly understood, there was an increased probability it would fulfil its goals and objectives.

School culture incorporated symbols and stories that broadcasted basic values, supported the mission of the school, and created a collective sense of dedication. They were also iconic symbols that conveyed meaning and established a connection to the past (Peterson, 2002). Peterson also suggested that in positive school cultures, stories, traditions, rituals, and ceremonies aligned with the school’s vision helped to support learning and dedication.

Symbols represented intangible cultural values and beliefs that permeated an organization, a nation, a tribe, or a family with meaning (Deal & Peterson, 2016). Deal and Peterson further stated that these symbols were also seen as cultural rallying points representing values and beliefs that were difficult to express but played a commanding role in cultural unity and pride. Posted statements of the mission of the school, exhibitions of student products, showcase of former accomplishments, signs of diversity, awards, and historical objects were some obvious symbols that might be exhibited in the school (Deal & Peterson, 2016). These meaningful and powerful symbols stirred one’s emotions, pride, and commitment in the school. On the other hand, they can just be placed in the hallways to impress visitors on special
occasions. The researcher has experienced both scenarios. In one school, it was demanded by the principal on those “look pretty days.” In another school, the use of symbols was a very natural outgrowth of classroom learning; this natural and dynamic flow helped the school be one that was interesting and engaging.

Deal and Peterson (2016) suggested the symbolism of the physical plant and architecture were representative of the school’s cultural values and beliefs. With staff and students spending a large part of their hours in the school, it was logical that it should be a symbol that evoked positive and warm feelings. In addition, architecture reinforced culture in four main ways: signaled what was important, tied a community together, communicated a message of the values and beliefs, and instilled a sense of pride in the school (Deal & Peterson, 2016).

An interesting phrase Deal and Peterson (2016) introduced in the context of the element of symbolism was living logo--a person who broadcasted powerful symbolic messages as he/she went about his/her daily routine. If each stakeholder examined and owned this simple but powerful phrase, great rewards would be reaped for both staff and students.

Symbols used in creating a positive school culture can be very simple or extremely complex. Deal and Peterson (2016) suggested some types of symbolism used by leaders [and teachers] in schools such as action, intellectual engagement, communicating values, advocacy, collegial sharing, humor, storytelling, and ceremonies. Some of the previous symbols might seem mundane; however, if used collaboratively, they helped the school community become connected to the institution on a deeper emotional level and lasted a lifetime.

Without a documented historical map, the school can lose its way (Deal & Peterson, 2016). This idea resonated with the researcher and brought to mind the words of Marcus Garvey (n.d.), “A people without the knowledge of their past, history, origin and culture is like a tree
without roots” (para. 1). Knowing and understanding the historical chart of a school served a profound symbolic and social ideal for the future success of the school. This knowledge strengthened the cultural origins and nurtured the future (Deal & Peterson, 2016).

The idea of schools jumping from one initiative to the next without much success was highlighted by Deal and Peterson (2016) in their argument that if the organization did not have strong cultural roots, the organization would float from one fad to another, most times with a cycle of mistakes without learning from the experiences. Knowing and appreciating the past and how it affected the development of the school was key to understanding the present and ensuring a positive school culture. Deal and Peterson concluded that making the link with historical origins was a necessary step in determining school culture.

Another way in which the element of history was viewed was as a collection of stories about the members and events arranged to showcase impressive character and lasting power (Deal & Peterson, 2016). Deal and Peterson suggested history be constructed by making use of old annuals, yearbooks, official papers, and minutes of meetings. These was considered a treasure-trove in understanding the school culture. In addition, trophies, pictures or architecture, and spending time with the storytellers of the school magnified the history and its impact on the school culture.

To be of value to the school community, culture needed to be perpetually developed through interacting with others and through introspections on life and the world (Finnan, 2000). Culture was also deemed both a product and a process (Bolman & Deal, 2013). As a product, it was the accrued knowledge of members of the organization. The process of culture was reflected when old members taught neophytes; through that interaction, ideas were renewed and recreated.
School Community and School Culture

It should not and cannot be the task of the school principal alone to understand, form, and ensure that a positive school culture existed. This complex, dynamic concept needed to be addressed using a multifaceted approach. The literature endorsed the value of the school community being integrally involved in creating a positive school culture with the principal at the helm (Mitchell, 2008). It was found that in schools that had sustained reform there was a high probability that there was continuity in leadership, commitment of stakeholders, and the reform process was entrenched in the structure and culture of the school (Dantow, 2005).

In any school, a deep underlying fiber of school culture connected the group and had the ability to shape the thoughts of the group and the values held by the community (Goldring, 2002). The way in which unwritten expectations developed over a period of time as the school community worked together and solved problems showcased the relevance of the school community as an essential component of a positive school culture (Peterson, 2002). Barth (1990) believed authentic school development took place when the school community participated in varied opportunities to learn together, engaged in critical thinking and utilized the problem solving processes, and became a professional learning community where learning was the central focus. The idea of school culture being impacted by building communities of learners in schools was seen as a good way to move schools forward. Barth endorsed the above idea and outlined four assumptions for success:

1. School communities have the ability to be better if the circumstances were conducive to learning.

2. All participants learned together and motivated each other.
3. Areas of improvement focused on school culture, social interaction, and authentic learning activities.

4. The emphasis of school improvement was on finding and ensuring the right conditions were present for school growth.

In looking at how school community impacted school culture, Smith (2007) noted that building school and community connections strengthened the culture of the school. Therefore, the school community that cared about the longevity of school growth and student success must be cognizant of the influence of school culture (Fiore, 2001). Fiore concluded that schools with positive cultures involved all stakeholders in the creation of their missions but also ensured that all stakeholders understood what constituted student success in their community. In helping students to be successful in spite of being sent to an alternative school, it was suggested that it was of importance that all the stakeholders work together to make sure that there was a smooth process of transition back to their regular school (Valore, Cantrell, & Cantrell, 2006). Fullan (2005) concurred and stated that administrators at all levels of the school system should have a collaborative work process to ensure that the students were successful at the alternative school and when they returned to their regular school.

It was reinforced by Deal and Peterson (2016) that school leaders must comprehend their school in terms of its patterns, purposes served, and origins. They further noted that trying to change a culture without understanding it was a definitive way for stress and failure. To even consider school culture was a mammoth task. However, Deal and Peterson gave clear guidelines how to approach such a task and set the stage for success in the change process to achieve positive school culture. When the school culture was unpacked and understood, a leader can
discover how it came to be, who its prime beneficiaries and most formidable guardians were, and the strength and modes of its influence (Deal & Peterson, 2016).

School leaders must be knowledgeable on the subject of culture because whether they believed it or not, they were ultimately responsible for creating, shaping, changing the school culture, and helping the community to gain an understanding of the role school culture played in the success of the school. Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, and Sobel (2002) were of the opinion that school principals were the gatekeepers of positive school culture. They have found student performance hinged on effective leadership by school leaders. Arguably the most significant and possibly the most problematic job of a school principal was changing the culture (Barth, 2001).

It was believed by many in and out of the educational sphere that principals and, by extension, teachers were the key elements in having an effective school. Fiore (2001) reasoned the most effective principals were the ones who understood that teachers have the power to be a creator or an obstacle to positive culture and encouraged principals to welcome teacher leaders as major contributors to a positive school culture.

It was believed by some researchers (Schein, 2004; Yukl, 2002) that in the school community, school leaders had an overwhelming influence in creating a school culture. Habegger (2008) was also of the view that school leaders played a dominant role in developing school culture. However, it must be understood that the school leader also created a school culture in an intentional or subconscious manner that might not have the intended positive impact. Picucci et al. (2002) indicated there were benefits to a positive school culture as it promoted academic and developmental success for students while reinforcing the idea that effective leadership was central to the development of a healthy school culture.
School transformation has to be done with the support of teachers. Principals needed to understand that a large majority of teachers were required to transform a culture. Shaping school culture was a long-term process that necessitated substantial effort from all members of management of the institution (Hornáčková, Princová, & Šimková, 2014). Shaping a school culture required a change in the leaders, their behavior, and their ability to signal a change to their teachers [students and other stakeholders] and their surroundings.

Culture has to be consciously thought about--if not, a culture will develop anyway. Under the direction of the principal, the school community has to be guided toward creating a culture that will fulfill the vision of the school. The leaders of schools have to ensure the behaviors and attitudes necessary to achieve that vision were reinforced. The elements of symbols and history were considered powerful tools that could be utilized to move the school forward and ensure success for all.

There was also the idea that the teacher was the deciding factor in student achievement (Wong & Wong, 2009). Fiore (2001) contended in a school environment, the teacher represented an important player in advancing or blocking a school-wide positive culture from being fostered. One way teachers created, fostered, and preserved a positive and healthy school culture was by the quality of the connections they formed with the students they taught.

It was considered essential that community resources and services be identified to bolster school, families, and student learning and development (New York Department of Education, 2011). Research by Christenson and Sheridan (2001) concurred that the quality of family-school-community connections influenced student learning. In ensuring that there was a holistic approach to support students at alternative schools of the Type II sort, it was suggested that there should be a wraparound service approach (Mullen & Lambie, 2013). Wraparound service was
defined as a collaborative team approach that supported students’ needs in school, home, and community (Suter & Bruns, 2009).

The wraparound services coordinated and utilized the skills and resources of a variety of professionals such as counselors, psychologists, social workers, mentors, teachers, and other stakeholders, who were invested in supporting the student and family (Mullen & Lambie, 2013). The transition and follow up services at the students’ regular school needed to be coordinated and improved to ensure that the student succeeded (Lehr et al., 2004). Success was more likely when there was a coordinates and comprehensive approach to reintegrate students in their regular school (Valore et al., 2006). Although a supportive environment was identified as a key characteristic of alternative schools, the synthesis of research on alternative schools highlighted that support services and resources in the Type II alternative schools were often limited (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

Schools were considered the link between parents, local communities, and the wider society. Deal and Peterson (2016) indicated a constant factor has been found in school effectiveness literature that supported the idea that contributions by parents and positive relationships that developed between parents and school community made a marked difference for both staff and students. A significant point was also made in Deal and Peterson’s explanation that to have a positive school culture that impacted school effectiveness, there had to be a mutually created, shared tapestry that bound the school community together. Undergirding this shared tapestry, there had to be a culture of respect that built ties between the stakeholders and the school.
Summary

This chapter sought to give an understanding of the concept of school culture and the evolution of alternative schools. Organizational culture was used to give a deeper understanding of school culture as schools were viewed as organizations. The theoretical lens through which the study was viewed and the related theoretical literature on school culture was included to give a firm grounding of the concept being examined. The nuances of culture and climate, characteristics of a positive school culture, types of school culture, the dimensions of school culture, how school community impacted school culture, and the elements of culture were also discussed to give a comprehensive picture of school culture.
CHAPTER 3

Methods

In seeking to understand school culture, a qualitative research method was used. A qualitative approach was recommended when researchers sought to explore events in their naturalistic setting (Rudestam & Newton, 2007, p. 32). Qualitative research methods were particularly suitable for ascertaining the meanings individuals gave to phenomena they experienced (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In exploring school culture, a qualitative method that included a study of people, events, and culture; observational techniques; and an evaluation of stories, verbal recollections, and symbols was considered a good way to gain understanding of the concept (Schein, 2004). This resulted in the use of interviews, overview of test scores, referral data, and student code of conduct handbook, to gain a deeper understanding of the culture of the alternative school.

In formulating the research questions, Flick (2006) suggested the questions must be framed as clearly and explicitly as possible in the initial stages of the project. This was suggested with the understanding that as the project progressed, the questions would become more tangible and specific to the context of the problem. In addition, Stake (2010) suggested a qualitative methodology was appropriate when exploration of a topic was being undertaken. In this exploratory framework, research questions were framed from a how and what perspective. Atieno (2009) agreed such questions were the types with which qualitative studies often began. With these types of questions, the researcher gained a deeper understanding of what was happening with regard to the topic being studied. The following how and what questions were explored in this research:
1. In general, what are the perceptions of school community members regarding school culture?

2. What are the perceptions of school community members regarding their schools’ culture?

3. What are the perceptions of school community members regarding how school symbols and history of the school impacted the current culture of the school?

Geertz (1973) in his seminal work on culture analyzed the facets of culture and considered them in terms of their symbolism and separated the components, stated the inner interactions among those components, and then described the system in a broad way. Geertz’s research used a case study approach and it was found that the primary limitation was the lack of generalizability. This was because the findings of the research were not tested to discover whether they were statistically significant or due to chance (Atieno, 2009). The lack of generalizability was also applicable to this study, however, it was still beneficial that the study be undertaken. In the qualitative paradigm, generalizability was an inherent limitation, however, Noble and Smith (2015) suggested that applicability of the research should be the focus in terms of the degree which the research can be applied to other contexts, places, or groups.

Case study method was based on the social constructivist model. The idea that meaning was created as human beings interacted with the environment and people suggested that there was a social aspect that informed their experiences (Woolfolk, Winne, Perry, & Shapka, 2010). The constructivist model gave credence to the use of a case study to understand school culture, to use open-ended questions, and to focus on the symbols and history of school culture.

School culture was a phenomenon experienced by all persons who walked through the doors of any given school (Schochor, 2009). Therefore, it was difficult to determine the best
vantage point from which to critique and analyze school culture. Using questions that allowed participants to speak freely and in as much detail as necessary were considered a good fit for gathering information regarding a multifaceted and uncharted topic (Kvale, 2007). On the other hand, self-reported data were inherently unreliable (Davis, 2007; Judson, 2006). Thus, using a variety of staff at the alternative school in gathering data ensured this complex issue was seen from different angles and gave an inclusive and holistic representation of school culture in this alternative school.

Although it was advised that an interview guide be developed, the interviewer had to know how to ensure a harmonious balance between being overly reliant on the interview guide and yet get the depth and breadth of the issue being discussed (Flick, 2006). Fontana and Frey (2005) reasoned each interview experience was one of interaction with the result of social interplay as well as an artifact of accurate accounts of the conversation. According to Maxwell (2005), research questions and interview questions complemented each other in the research process. Research questions outlined the areas that needed to be understood and related questions in the interview guide were what the participants were asked to garner understanding of the topic.

In utilizing a qualitative research methodology and an associated interview strategy Aluwihare-Samaranayake (2012) pointed out that because people were the center of the research it had to be understood that researcher and participants had their own subjective experiences, interpretations, and realities, and these were embedded in socio-cultural and political contexts. The researcher agreed with Aluwihare-Samaranayake that this hardly created a neutral setting or made the interview a neutral tool. However, an interview uncovered such valuable, unique, and multifaceted information that it needed to be used but with requisite precautions and declarations
regarding the researcher’s biases. Another weakness of open-ended interviews was the difficulty in coding the data (Creswell, 2012). Although the limitations of interviews have been highlighted, Perakyla (2005) observed that by using interviews, the researcher could actually investigate areas of reality such as people’s personal experiences and outlooks that remained inaccessible otherwise.

Schein (2004) outlined the following points that could be used in understanding culture and formulating a framework with which to assess the culture:

- Culture can be measured by means of the interview process.
- Culture cannot be measured by using surveys or questions.
- A cultural assessment is worthless except it is connected to a problem the organization is experiencing.
- In undertaking the cultural assessment process, it should be understood that there are subcultures that will have to be separately assessed to determine their value to the goals of the organization.
- Culture can be explained and measured based on the symbols, values, or common unspoken assumptions.

Two cultural elements, symbols and history, were the points of convergence throughout the study. These elements seemed to be able to delve into the depths of school culture and were also mentioned by other scholars who have studied culture in schools and other contexts.

**Research Design**

To gather information for understanding the school culture, a case study approach was utilized. This form of qualitative descriptive research provided an in-depth look and allowed conclusions to be drawn about an individual, group, or phenomenon only in the specific context.
the study was conducted. Conducting interviews was the main way of gathering data. Interviews of three administrators and nine staff members were conducted to gain a deeper insight of the school culture. Secondary data of test scores, referral data, and student code of conduct handbook were also reviewed and analyzed to aid in developing themes and sub-themes.

Five components of effective case study research were given by Yin (2009) and utilized in this research: (a) research questions formulated, (b) purpose of the study stated, (c) basis of analysis identified, (d) purpose of the study connected to data collected, and (e) criteria for understanding results decided on.

**Research Participants and Setting for the Study**

The alternative school studied was located in the capital city of a southern state in the United States. This particular school was used because the researcher was a member of the school community being studied. The principal and the two assistant principals along with nine staff members were interviewed to gain their interpretation of the school culture and how the elements of culture, namely symbols and culture, helped them to understand the school culture. It was recommended 8 to 15 interviewees be used although fewer interviews can be used when multiple interviews were conducted or when the group was uniform (Hill et al., 2005). This group was not considered to be particularly homogenous so $N=12$ met the criteria as suggested above.

In the alternative school studied, students from grade 6 through to grade 12 were sent to the alternative school by the Hearing Office based on truancy and other behavioral issues that disrupted their learning and the learning of others at their regular school. The alternative school had a population of 186 students. The student population was 182 African American, 3 White,
and 1 Hispanic. There were 121 male and 65 female students. In terms of middle school and high school students, there were 66 and 120 students respectively.

There were 13 certified teachers, three long term substitutes, four administrators, one nurse, a career specialist, two guidance counsellors, a part time social worker, part time mental health counselor, and an in-school suspension supervisor. The school also had a part time psychologist, two instructional assistants for the High Support special needs class, a mathematics interventionist, a reading interventionist, and a media specialist. Fifty percent of the staff members had advanced degrees. The alternative school offered the core subjects of Mathematics, Social Studies, Science, and English Language Arts. Electives were Physical Education, Integrated Business Applications, Entrepreneurship, Digital Input, and Personal Finance. With the exception of Physical Education, all the electives were computer-based.

The motto of the school was, “Whatever my mind can conceive and believe, I will achieve”. The school had a pledge that was entitled, “Pledging our commitment to success”. The alternative school did not have a school handbook so the school used the district’s student of conduct handbook to set standards of behavior. The mission and vision of the alternative school was the same as that of the school district.

With this institution being considered an alternative program, not much data was available on the website of the State Department of Education about test scores and other demographic data that would be helpful in giving an overview of the program. In addition, the students were somewhat tied to their regular school in terms of test scores and other data that would reveal academic aspects of the students. The website of the alternative school was also perused to find data that would aid in giving a clearer picture of the academic life of the school but such data was unavailable.
There were two diagnostic tests that the alternative school tried to administer to the students that attended the school – STAR Mathematics and STAR Reading. However, because of the transient nature of the students and them being attached to their regular school in terms of enrolment, most times they were not switched on day of arrival to the alternative school so was not in the alternative school’s database to be tested. In addition, sporadic attendance also contributed to students not being tested. The school used a district-bought software called STAR tests in Mathematics and Reading to inform math instruction and determine how students have grown or what interventions were needed.

Many students that attended the alternative school came from low-income families and/or single-parent households. Prior to the start of the research, 100% of the students would have qualified for free or reduced lunch. However, because of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) program, under the aegis of the United States Department of Agriculture, the school had acquired a grant to provide lunch for the students. This meant that students in the school district did not have to pay for lunch or breakfast, or apply for free or reduced lunch. Therefore, the categorization of students as free or reduced lunch students was no longer used.

**Data Collection Procedures**

In a case study approach, data collection was described as a process that permitted researchers to examine the phenomenon being studied by using the sources of evidence (Merriam, 2009). The six sources of evidence identified by Yin (2009) for case study research were: interviews, archival records, direct observation, documentation, participant-observation, and physical artifacts. Every case study did not require all the sources, however, having multiple sources of data strengthened the reliability of the study (Stake, 1995).
Data collection for this qualitative case study used multiple sources – participant interviews, school district’s student code of conduct: Student rights, responsibilities and character development handbook 2016-2017, referral data, and test scores. The utilization of a variety of sources created a triangulation or convergence of sources (Creswell, 2012). According to Schwandt (2015), “Triangulation is a means of checking the integrity of the inferences one draws. It can involve the use of multiple data sources, multiple investigators, multiple theoretical perspectives, and/or multiple methods.” The school district’s student code of conduct handbook, referral data, and test scores were deemed important in augmenting evidence from the primary data collection method of the interviews.

For this particular case study research, multiple sources and multiple investigators were used to converge on the truth. A three-step methodological triangulation (Yin, 2009) of the interviews was utilized:

Step One – Interviews were conducted and recorded.

Step Two – Interviews were transcribed and returned to the participants for their review and approval. Member check was considered important in the validation process to ensure that the researcher had correctly represented what the participants had said in the interviews (Vogt & Johnson, 2016).

Step Three – Researcher collaborated with two external co-coders during the data analysis process in deciding on themes and sub-themes. Subsequent coding was done by researcher, the co-coders, and Nvivo. There was concurrence among researcher, co-coders, and Nvivo on the themes highlighted in Chapter 4. Whenever there was disagreement between researchers and the co-coders, the point of contention was discussed until there was agreement.
The primary source of data was collected from participants’ interviews. The research questions were used as the basis of understanding the school culture and this helped to develop the interview guide. Hill et al. (2005) recommended that an interview schedule be developed with 8-10 questions that could be suitably answered within an hour. Using a semi-structured interview process, interview questions were used to understand how the elements of symbols and history can and have contributed to an understanding of the school culture.

Face-to-face interviews were preferred over phone interviews as they were more dynamic and fluid. The personalized conversation with the participant allowed for the social interaction needed when investigating a subject like school culture. The interviews were conducted during the month of May 2016. All interviews were audiotaped. Signed consent for the interview and audiotaping were obtained prior to the start of the interviews (see Appendix A). Interview lengths ranged from 45 to 60 minutes.

An interview guide was developed to aid in the interview process. A pilot interview was conducted before the start of the study. Conducting a pilot interview allowed the researcher to highlight questions that needed rewording or were ambiguous. This process also helped to identify questions of a sensitive nature that made participants uncomfortable. Data collected in this pilot interview were not used in the data analysis process. Pilot testing of the interview was important in deciding if there were errors and weaknesses in the questions chosen and allowed for modifications before beginning the project (Kvale, 2007). From the pilot interview, the final interview guide was developed (see Appendix B). An audit trail (see Appendix C) tracked the progress of the research and verified the steps taken throughout the research process.
Data Analysis

First, the interviews were transcribed. Transcribing the interviews helped the researcher get a comprehensive understanding of school culture from repeatedly reading and listening to the interviews. Second, the data were coded in Nvivo by extracting initial themes. Third, the data were analyzed, categorized, and organized into themes and sub-themes. Next, interpretation of the data was done by identifying similarities and differences. Turner (2010) explained that because open-ended interview questions required interviewees to elaborate on their responses in as much detail as possible, it could be very challenging to highlight similarity in themes from the transcriptions. With Turner’s idea in mind, data verification was done via a process of checking and rechecking the transcripts and codes with the co-coders to ensure the previous assignments were correct and that the similarities and differences were confirmed. The findings of the research study based on participants’ perception of the school culture were organized in a thematic structure.

Limitations and Delimitations

This particular study was undertaken in one school in one school district as opposed to gaining additional insights from other schools on how their school community perceived the elements of school culture, symbols and history, and how the elements helped those schools understand the school culture. The range of this study was restricted to research at the alternative school in one school district; thus, the findings would not be necessarily applicable to similar schools. However, with there being only one program of the last-chance type in the school district, it was the only choice. The sample size in relation to a national representation of alternative school was relatively small, therefore, speculation that this study’s results would be similar to another alternative school should be discouraged.
The study focused on students in general; however, there was no differentiation made between students with disabilities and general education students. Possibly the findings could have been different if the study had been narrowly focused on one particularly homogenous set of students. With interviews being used, information gathered from the participants was of a subjective nature.

**Ethical Issues**

There were no associated risks with participation in this study. Participants voluntarily participated in this study and had the choice to decline to answer a particular question during the interview or stop at any point during the interview. Information was handled in the strictest of confidence. If information was published, participants would be identified by a fictitious name. However, the Institutional Review Board of Carson-Newman University (a committee that reviewed and approved human subject research studies) may have inspected and/or copied records for quality assurance and data analysis. The following measures were taken to ensure confidentiality: (a) In recording and transcribing the interviews, participants were recognized by pseudonyms; and (b) all information pertaining to this research was kept on a computer that required a password to be accessed. Information related to this research was kept until the conclusion of the study. Identities were kept confidential and the school was referred to as an alternative school of the Type II category in a southern state. Participants were referred to by their pseudonyms.

**Summary**

Chapter 3 explained the qualitative framework of the research, the specific research approach that was used, the participants, the settings, procedures for collecting data, issues of ethics, and the process of data analysis. This chapter gave an outline of the research design and
the rationale for choosing the qualitative paradigm to understand school culture at the alternative school.
CHAPTER 4

Results

As discussed in Chapter 1, alternative schools of the Type II sort were created to remediate the academic and behavioral deficits of students in the traditional school setting (Raywid, 1994). The purpose of the research was to understand the perspectives of various members of the alternative school community on how elements of school culture, symbols and history, helped to shape their perceptions of what school culture was and how it affected their daily professional interactions with their students and each other. More specifically, the study sought to explore the extent to which those perceptions reflected and further detailed or modified prevailing definitions of school culture.

A qualitative case study approach was used to explore the perceptions of 12 staff members of a Type II alternative school located in the capital city of a southern state in the United States. Specifically, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather the necessary data to be analyzed to gain insight in the school culture of the alternative school. The interview guide was composed of a set of open-ended questions that elicited responses to answer the research questions. In addition, secondary data sources of test scores, referral data, and student code of conduct handbook were analyzed to add to the thematic structure of the findings.

The 12 participants shared in-depth descriptions of their experiences in terms of their understanding of and active (intentional) or passive (unconscious) interactions with various symbols and history of the school culture. The interviews were audiotaped to ensure accuracy and clarity of understanding during the transcription process. Participants signed informed consent forms that expressed their agreement to be recorded and quoted in published research (see Appendix A). In undertaking the interviews, participants were prompted to elaborate on
certain points to clarify what they meant in their responses. Each participant was thanked for their willingness to share their thoughts and help in completion of the research.

**Research Questions**

The researcher examined the perceptions of the participants on how the elements of school culture, symbols and history, helped them understand their school culture at the alternative school. Three research questions were developed to achieve the preceding goal. The following three research questions were “translated” into 12 specific interview questions (see Appendix B) to facilitate data collection and guide the research.

1. In general, what are the perceptions of school community members regarding school culture?
2. What are the perceptions of school community members regarding their schools’ culture?
3. What are the perceptions of school community members regarding how school symbols and history of the school impacted the current culture of the school?

Through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews the participants were able to respond and share their perceptions on how the elements of school culture, symbols and history, helped them understand their school culture. As the participants answered the questions, the researcher probed where necessary to ensure that the answers were clear and detailed in order to clarify the topic being discussed.

**Overview of Participant Demographic Summary**

A sample of 12 participants was gained from the responses to the introductory recruitment email and recruitment letters (see Appendix A). The recruitment letters were placed in staff mailboxes at the school and an email sent with a brief outline of the research and
directing them to their mailbox to retrieve the letter. The three administrators at the school were
directly contacted to ensure that they would be in the sample. After the three administrators
consented, the first ten staff members that responded were selected. One of the ten staff
members would be used to conduct the pilot interview.

The following demographic information was collected from the participants at the
beginning of the semi-structured, face-to-face interviews: (a) gender, (b) classified or certified
staff, (c) number of years teaching, (d) number of years at the alternative school, (e) subject
presently teaching, and (f) position held at the alternative school (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1

Demographic Information Collected from Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Category of Staff</th>
<th>Number of years</th>
<th>Years at School</th>
<th>Core or Elective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CSA</td>
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<td>Certified Teacher</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Elective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSB</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Certified Teacher</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Core</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSC</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Certified Teacher</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Core</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSD</td>
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<td>Certified Admin</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSE</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Certified Teacher</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Core</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSF</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Core</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.5</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The demographic data revealed 42% of the participants were male and 58% were female. Eight percent of the sample was from the classified category of staff while the remaining 92% was certified. All participants had day-to-day interactions with students. The number of years of service in teaching ranged from 5 to 25 years. However, the range was significantly smaller for the number of years teaching at the alternative school—from one to six years.

The selection of elective courses at the alternative school was not very broad. Only four teachers taught the different electives and only two of the four teachers responded to the recruitment letter to be a part of the project. Therefore, the sample had approximately 17% elective teachers and 83% core teachers.

**Instrumentation, Data Collection, and Analysis Procedures**

On receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board at Carson-Neman University, the researcher gained approval from the school district to undertake the research (see Appendix D). After school district approval was received, recruitment letters were sent to various staff members of the alternative school to invite them to participate in the study. After receipt of favorable responses from 13 participants, a pilot interview was conducted with a randomly selected participant. A pilot interview was done to ascertain if inherent flaws, weaknesses, and ambiguities were present in the interview protocol. Information from this pilot interview was not included in the data analysis for the research. From the pilot interview, it was found that two questions were not phrased in a way to elicit an in-depth answer so they were removed from the interview schedule. An order of how to conduct the interviews was established.

Following the pilot interview, the next step was to schedule a time to interview the remaining 12 participants. Dates and times were logged in phone and computer calendars so there would be reminders of appointments at home and work. At the beginning of each
interview, the purpose of the study was explained and the issue of confidentiality was addressed. In addition, the format and length was outlined. Contact information was also given again and participants reminded that the information was also in the recruitment letters.

The researcher found that an empty classroom was an appropriate setting since it had little or no distraction and a blind at the window was used when participants were being interviewed. All 12 participants who responded to the recruitment letter showed up for their slated interview. Participants were told they were free to ask questions whenever clarification was needed and that they were being recorded per their informed consent (see Appendix A). In the initial phase of the interviews, the researcher established a rapport with the participants and ensured they felt comfortable being as candid and open as possible about the questions being asked. Demographic data were gathered at the start of the interviews. The following pattern was used for all interviews: introduction, asking questions of the participants, seeking clarification, pacing the interview to ensure it did not go over one hour, concluding the interview, and thanking the participants for their time and effort.

The interview process began May 20, 2016 and ended June 1, 2016. The semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were audio-taped recorded and lasted 45 to 60 minutes. During the face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, note taking was also done to aid in the data analysis process. The researcher asked probing questions as needed to gain clarity and elucidate points that were not clear. To provide anonymity, each participant was coded as CSA, CSB,…. CSL. The focus of the interviews was to examine the perception of the participants on how the elements of culture, symbols and history, helped them understand their school culture.

After the data collection process ended, the interviews were transcribed. As the researcher transcribed the data, prospective themes were recorded for later analysis. Leith
(2006) classified these recordings as “early hunches or notions”. The participants were then given their transcripts to review and verify the accuracy of the information. After the transcription, the researcher read the interviews numerous times to become even more immersed in the participants lived experiences in terms of their perception of the school culture.

To delve into the research questions, extract and corroborate themes from the interviews, the school district’s student code of conduct handbook, school’s test scores, and referral data were analyzed. The student code of conduct was read to discern how school culture was expected to be built as the students, teachers, staff, and administrators interacted in the teaching-learning process. Archival records of the limited test scores based on the transient nature of the school population and referral data of the alternative school were examined to get further insight of the school culture. From further analysis, the tentative themes evolved into a more solidified form that highlighted themes, subthemes and sub-categories. From the themes, subthemes, and sub-categories, a preliminary draft codebook was developed and shown in Figure 4.1.
Draft Coding Structure of Key Informant Data Analysis

(1) A strong school culture makes a school a COMMUNITY
   (1.1) Community generates a sense of belonging
      (1.1.1)
      (1.1.2)
   (1.2) Community fosters sharing
      (1.2.1) Physical/actual sharing
      (1.2.2) Intellectual sharing = Group think can be a good thing
      (1.2.3)
   (1.3) Community affords protection
      (1.3.1) One for all and all for one
      (1.3.2) Feeling supported

(2) A strong school culture marks a school’s CHARACTER
   (2.1) common IDENTITY
      (2.1.1) School uniforms
      (2.1.2) School pledge
      (2.1.3) School emblem = the TORCH
   (2.2) common RULES
      (2.2.1)
      (2.2.2)
   (2.3) common CONCERN FOR STUDENTS
      (2.3.1) Nurture their soul
      (2.3.2) Create intellectual ideals
      (2.3.3) Set high expectations
      (2.3.4) Accept and manage failure

(3) A strong school culture requires COMMITMENT
   (3.1) CAPITAL
      (3.1.1) financial
      (3.1.2) intellectual
      (3.1.3) practical
   (3.2) Good Will
      (3.2.1) Within
      (3.2.2) Outside = parents / neighborhood

(4) There is a CHASM between what should be and what is

Figure 4.1. Preliminary draft of coding structure of key informant data analysis.

Figure 4.2 showed an example of how the researcher moved from raw data (actual language statements) to sub-categories of themes to theme categories to final overarching, conceptual theme patterns as suggested by Leith (2006). Through the continued immersion in the information on school culture, the researcher was able to delve further into the data and refine the categories into even larger theme patterns that represented and enveloped the listed topics and created a final version of the codebook presented in Figure 4.3.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Raw Language Statements with Related subthemes</th>
<th>Theme Category</th>
<th>Conceptual pattern of Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation of relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td>Community generates a sense of belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Some teachers have very good relationships with their students. They listen to their concerns and try in their limited ways to help them.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>A strong school culture makes a school a community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation of Diversity</td>
<td></td>
<td>Community affords protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The degree to which a school embraces and celebrates racial, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural diversity.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One for all and all for one</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Symbol of us working as a united team without any weak link.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“In order for an impact to be realized the student’s must be brought to a place where they can feel safe and have all of their needs met.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4.2.** Procedural steps to develop conceptual theme patterns.
Figure 4.3. Final coding structure of key informant data analysis.

In addition, the interviews were imported into Nvivo, a qualitative computer software program developed by Quantitative Solutions & Research (QSR), to augment the data analysis process. In Nvivo a word frequency query was executed to get a broad picture of the data. The results of the word query were depicted in a word cloud and presented in Figure 4.4. The codes and themes formulated in the final codebook were also highlighted and cross-referenced using the Nvivo software for recurring ideas and concepts. The objective of the data analysis was to
create a rich and thick description that accurately represented and explained the meaning of the experiences of the participants (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000). From the coding performed in Nvivo, a hierarchical chart of nodes presented in Fig 4.5 was also extracted to see how the themes, subthemes and sub-categories were represented in the interviews. By uncovering conceptual relationships between the final patterns and themes, the researcher constructed a theoretical understanding of how the symbols and history of an alternative school helped in understanding the school culture.

![Figure 4.4. Word cloud showing results of word frequency query from Nvivo.](image)

The main themes of community, character, commitment and chasm were found from the analysis of the sources. While the themes were listed as discrete entities, there was a dynamic
interaction between the themes as the researcher sought to understand the experiences of the participants. The context of the current study involved uncovering and understanding the symbols and history of school culture by the 12 members of the alternative school community.

Figure 4.5. Hierarchical chart of nodes from Nvivo.

The qualitative content analysis of the interviews revealed four overarching themes that represented how the members of the alternative school conceptualized school culture and how the symbols and history helped in understanding the school culture. The four themes revealed that understanding of school culture was manifested in:

1. A strong school culture makes a school a community
2. A strong culture marks a school’s character
3. A strong school culture requires commitment
4. There is a chasm between what should be and what is.

**Review of the Problem**

Promoting positive school culture seemed to be an overlooked and underutilized strategy in the various reform approaches undertaken in the educational sphere. Although from all indication having a positive school culture was a powerful tool, it was infrequently considered as a fundamental approach that was used to impact student and school success. Thrown into the mix of educational challenges was the added component of understanding school culture in the context of an alternative school. Thus, a deeper understanding of this concept was needed.

Alternative schools have existed for over five decades but somehow many challenges have remained in understanding, conceptualizing, and consistently creating successful solutions that meet the needs of all students. Therefore, an understanding of the elements of culture, symbols and history, was considered as an option in understanding the culture of the alternative school.

**Findings**

**Theme 1: A strong school culture makes a school a community.** Theme 1 explored the concept of having a community that would ensure a strong school culture. The community aspect of a strong school culture was echoed in a variety of sentiments expressed by members of the school community. Embedded in the theme of community were the subthemes that community generated a sense of belonging, fostered sharing, afforded protection, and gave structure. The sense of community was reflected throughout the interviews and showed the participants were aware of the importance of community and tried to ensure that there was a strong community in whatever way they saw or thought possible: “You feel better and you are
more inclined to work better and you are learning what a society should be and reflect when you’re working as a community of people and a school gives you that.” The importance of community was seen as an all-encompassing attribute in a strong school culture: “Positive school culture impacts everybody from your custodial staff, cafeteria personnel, teachers, students, parents, and community.” The vision statement highlighted collaborating with a community that was engaged and committed to ensuring that students achieved their potential in a safe, caring, academically challenging, and diverse learning context that developed productive citizens for a changing world.

**Subtheme: Community generates a sense of belonging.** The sense of belonging was indicated in many of the comments about the appreciation of relationships and diversity. School culture was expressed as:

The degree to which a school embraces and celebrates racial, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural diversity.

The rapport that teachers have with the students. Some teachers have very good relationships with the students. They listen to their concerns and try in their limited ways to help them.

We don’t have teams here but we do have “Make a difference” (pseudonym), the afterschool program, and some of the students we are working hard with attend. This can be used as a symbol so that when a student puts on an impact shirt then they may feel better about themselves because not only are they part of an alternative school but they are part of an organization inside that school that they feel proud about and are willing to go out and wear it proudly- that can have a positive impact.

You know creating a kinship or building a relationship which is key to any educational environment and not just to this particular environment. If you want kids to be a part of what you know they need to have you’ve got to build a relationship to support that. Kids who build a relationship with professionals do more, they work harder.

**Subtheme: Community fosters sharing.** Sharing was a subtheme that resonated throughout the interviews. Many of the participants extolled sharing as one of the alternative school’s best symbols:
I think we have a good collegial relationship here at our school. I like the fact that I can share with the people in this department and we can share lessons and we can talk. We have a great collegial sharing, I think so.

The collegial sharing happens all the time here. I mean I see as far as the staff goes, a lot of the departments, teachers working together on different things.

Although working in a Type II alternative school was considered stressful at times, one participant’s response highlighted collegiality helped in making the workplace less stressful:

“Collegial sharing is a key symbol that is seen at this school. I think this is one of the things that help teachers to cope with the stressful situation that exists at the school.”

The problem solving aspect of sharing was also evident in the interviews: “We share ideas, disappointments, successes, and failures. Just always brainstorming to see how we can get students to make better choices.”

**Subtheme: Community affords protection.** The subtheme of protection was reflected in many of the interviews. The idea of one for all and all for one was echoed throughout the interviews:

I am a team player.

Symbol of us working as a united team without any weak link.

When there is a positive school culture, the school community works harder as a team to achieve the vision of the school.

As a team, we can make great things happen.

Safety was another idea that was highlighted under the subtheme of protection. It was seen as highly necessary in ensuring the alternative school operated effectively:

In order for an impact to be realized, the students must be brought to a place where they can feel safe and have all of their needs met.

One of security, one of safety, one of what I call first and primary of learning.

Kids should be safe, comfortable, and supported, yet challenged academically and
behaviorally.

**Subtheme: Community gives structure.** Structure was another component described as necessary to ensure the school was seen as a community:

I have to reinforce the beliefs and values of the school and making sure the rules are enforced because that is the consistency I think the school needs to have in order for the students to feel that they can be successful.

Like I said keeping things orderly, and the students’ uniforms, we have to have consistency.

I think it all goes back to being consistent; all the schools that people say are good is because they have been consistent in the ways they have done things [that work] over the years.

**Theme 2: A strong school culture marks a school’s character.** From the student code of conduct handbook it was found that there were ten character education traits that were considered essential for students to prepare for greatness. The ten character traits were: respect, honesty, cooperation, citizenship, responsibility, self-discipline, caring, kindness, fairness, and dependability. From the theme of character, the subthemes of common identity, vision, and concern for students were found.

**Subtheme: Common identity.** This was defined by school uniforms, school pledge and/or motto, and school emblem:

The symbols associated with this school are its School Motto, School Pledge, and School Crest. These symbols are positive and long-standing.

It is our motto that we believe in and that we are a school of positive change. And so, if a student comes here they’re going to see that written everywhere.

The use of the Olympic flame because everybody knows what the Olympic symbolizes, which is peace and which is competition and you know which brings forth a positive change to people who know that needs to be a link carried from this person to the next person, to the next person. When they see that from Green School (pseudonym) that’s the picture that we want them to get.
Subtheme: Common vision. Common vision was an idea that occurred throughout the interviews:

Values such as responsibility, respect, and honesty are constantly reinforced by individuals, but there needs to be a school-wide plan on how to incorporate these values in the daily life of the school.

When you are aware of the symbols and history, you feel connected and make an effort to incorporate them in your daily activities. It could almost be a guiding light when the team decides on some strong symbols that will help to direct the growth of the school.

Subtheme: Common concern for students. There was an overwhelming common concern for students. The mission of the school district was to prepare all students to be successful, contributing citizens in a global society by providing an effective and high quality education. All interview participants reiterated strong sentiments that it was all about the students:

Advocacy is done more by the guidance counsellor, social worker, mental health personnel, and those staff that the district employs to provide those emotional and social services that will give students holistic help.

When students know you are not here for yourself but for students, then that will ultimately change the school culture.

There was also a constant reminder that in educating the students, all aspects of their lives had to be considered: “We have to try innovative programs that are not just academically based but social and emotional programs.”

School was normally considered to be a repository of intellectual ideas; in all the interviews, there was an abiding focus on creating intellectual ideals:

Intellectual engagement is evident in teachers engaging students with the content and even life choices. That is tied up with communicating values. This is a dynamic process.

I must make what they are learning meaningful and relevant to them.

My role in developing school culture is to provide an environment which will be
conducive for learning.

With the school population being of a transient nature -- as students could have been placed at the alternative school from 10 days to a school year, it was rather hard to get a true picture of school test scores as students were sometimes absent for testing, not in the school’s database, or refused to test. From the limited scores from benchmark testing, it was revealed that the students at the alternative school as a collective unit scored lower in Mathematics and English Language Arts than the district average. In addition from STAR reading data, which only had test scores for 111 of the 186 students, it was found that all students scored below the 50th percentile. For STAR Math, which also had test scores for 111 students, 9% of the population scored above the 50th percentile.

The need for high expectations and the actual pursuit of high expectations in the various activities teachers and students experience were evident in many of the interviews:

So that when students who are coming after that will understand when they walk through the doors that these are the expectations that we have for students who are coming here need to be put on the right path.

Symbol of high expectation.

A school where positive behavior and attitudes are expected and demanded.

Accepting and managing failure was also an idea mentioned frequently in the interviews:

Their current situation surrounding their arrival at the alternative school aren’t positive, but just like the school has undergone metamorphosis they too can change their condition and outlook.

I tell them all the time, “Your past is your past, you have to make decisions. Life is full of decisions and consequences, positive and negative.”

**Theme 3: A strong culture requires commitment.** The theme of commitment was broken down into subthemes of capital and goodwill. It was felt that commitment was an integral component needed for a positive school culture:
The only other way in which this [needs of students being met] can be realized is if you have an extremely well-trained, passionate, dedicated, and determined set of stakeholders who are driven and passionate about the success of children regardless of their socio-economic status or other environmental obstacles.

The culture will determine whether teachers will stay; if they will be productive, concerned about student achievement, and about those they work with.

**Subtheme: Capital.** Capital was further broken down into nodes of tangible, intangible, and practical expressions of commitment:

I went to Walmart to get all the great things to give the kids. A lot of the staff donated things, they spent $30 and $40 and we were going to have a PBIS store based on children reaching certain levels.

Action is what we as the staff do every minute of the day as we try to ensure that students learn content and develop strong character.

**Subtheme: Goodwill.** The goodwill of a positive school culture was apparent throughout the interviews as understood by the stakeholders inside and outside of the school:

School culture is the “attitude” of the school. It is how the school makes you feel and how the school treats its members, teachers, parents, students, staff members, and community stakeholders.

Because there are so many people who have been here for a while or have returned they understand that these things [symbols and history] can be leveraged with the parents and community who have been around for such a long time.

There has been a start with the business partners as far as letting people know that our kids are going out and volunteering.

**Theme 4: There is a chasm between what should be and what is.** For students to be sent to the alternative school, most likely they had committed a serious offense that warranted long-term suspension or expulsion. Also, if at the alternative school they continued to exhibit behaviors that were against the school policy then there would be requisite consequences as stated in the student code of conduct handbook.
The Incident Management Report which was used to record referral data about student behavior was summarized in terms of actions taken by administrator for infractions committed at the alternative school, behaviors that led to a referral, duration of the suspension, location of the infraction, and time of the incident. From the Incident Management Report, the choices of actions taken by the administrators were alternative placement, community service, conference, intervention plan, referral to community agencies, suspension, warning, withdrawal of privileges, and expulsion.

The behavior that ranked the highest in the alternative school for a referral was refusal to obey/defiant. This was followed by disrupting class, threat, major disruption, and profanity. The most frequent duration of the suspensions when given was three days. It was rare when suspensions of seven to 10 days were given. The classroom and hallway were the top locations for infractions. Other places that infractions took place were the cafeteria and the gym.

This theme painted a compelling picture of the dichotomy that existed at the alternative school. From the interviews, the subthemes of this is reality; that was then, this is now; and this is how it is, but it does not have to stay that way were found.

Subtheme: This is reality.

I would say it [the culture] is inconsistent right now. It is in a flux I think because of the change of the administration in the recent year that there are some inconsistencies going on.

The culture of this school is mixed. Negative and positive. It is negative in so many ways that it is no joke. The students have an “I don’t care attitude.” Education is considered a waste of time. The value that our ancestors placed on receiving quality education is just not even appreciated. The stream of profanity that can be heard during the class changes is ridiculous. The blatant disregard for rules and procedure – always being on cellphones even when told to put them away and focus on the lesson, just plain refusal to obey. That leads me to administration – they could do so much more but I don’t see them doing what they should. Just commonsense things like endorsing and enforcing the cellphone policy and implementing behavioral programs.
Subtheme: That was then; this is now. Many parallels were drawn to show the differences between what existed in previous years to what was taking place in the present context:

I would love for our school culture to embrace the music again when we had music playing in the hallways.

What helped me- when I used to walk up to the school every day and see the fountain and the water flowing. To me that meant, that symbolized, that it is fresh and renewing, that we have an opportunity every day to set a tone to make education fulfilling and renewing.

The only positive history that the school may have that would positively impact the school culture is the fact that the school has been managed by competent people and that rules can be implemented and enforced without a great deal of effort.

Ceremonies have not really been seen during the school year but they can help in building a positive school culture. Previously they were used during the other administration but sadly not this year.

Subtheme: This is how it is, but it does not have to stay that way. In all the interviews, there was an optimistic outlook on how the school culture could be positive:

The ideal culture would be one in which faculty is treated as professionals and not be subjected to “gotcha” tactics to find them doing something wrong.

In my vision of an alternative school, there would be full time psychiatrists, social workers, and any other professionals needed to address the student’s problems. I think next year we have to do a better job of celebrating everything at Green School (pseudonym) that is good.

History should build upon itself. Every year we should be a little better and after that a little better, and a little better.

Summary

Chapter 4 sought to highlight the results found from the interviews of the participants. A thick and rich description of the school culture at the alternative school was gained from the interviews. This chapter included a description of the sample, the research methodology applied to data analysis, presentation of data, and results of analysis. The findings and results of the
study were presented and were based primarily on analysis of the interview transcripts. Findings were discussed under the four themes that emerged from the data. The themes of community, character, commitment, and chasm were found from the data. These themes were further discussed in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5

Conclusions and Implications

This chapter provided a comprehensive summary of the qualitative research with conclusions drawn from the data presented in Chapter 4. The research was undertaken through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with three school administrators and nine staff members. The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the culture of an alternative school of the last chance nature to gain insight of how the elements of culture, symbols and history, helped the school community understand its school culture.

Understanding and promoting positive school culture has been an overlooked and underutilized strategy in various reform approaches undertaken in the educational sphere. Although from all indications it was a powerful tool, it has been infrequently considered as a fundamental approach to impacting school and student success. Thrown into the mix of educational challenges was the added component of understanding school culture in the context of an alternative school. Thus, a deeper understanding of this concept was needed.

Alternative schools have existed for over five decades but somehow many challenges remain in understanding, conceptualizing, and consistently creating successful solutions that meet the needs of all students. Therefore, an understanding of the elements of culture, symbols and history, could help in understanding an alternative school culture.

Based on a review of the literature on alternative schools, the alternative school at the center of this research was considered a Type II alternative school (Raywid, 1994). Type II alternative schools were of the last chance nature. Students were sent to these schools after their regular schools had exhausted all options to get them back on track academically, behaviorally, and attending school consistently. This chapter reviewed, analyzed, and discussed the findings
of the study. This chapter also outlined the implications of the findings of this study for educational stakeholders and suggestions for further research.

Three research questions were used to guide the study:

1. In general, what are the perceptions of school community members regarding school culture?
2. What are the perceptions of school community members regarding their schools’ culture?
3. What are the perceptions of school community members regarding how school symbols and history of the school impacted the current culture of the school?

This case study was conducted in an alternative school of the Type II nature in a school district in a southern state of the United States. This alternative school served 15 middle schools and seven high schools in the school district. The student population of the alternative school ranged from 200 to 250 students per semester. This alternative school had one principal that oversaw the operation of the middle school and high school and an assistant principal was assigned to each school.

Information gathered from this research study could help stakeholders--current school leaders, administrators responsible for alternative schoolteachers, and guidance counselor--focus on specific symbols of the school and the positive history of the alternative school to develop a positive school culture that was needed to engender school-wide success and growth. From the literature, Deal and Peterson (2016) suggested that symbols were powerful tools that could be used in schools by leaders and teachers to impact school culture. The symbols found in this study were community, character, commitment, and chasm.
Major Findings

The demographic data did not reveal major differences in participants’ overall impression of the school culture. The overwhelming impression was the school culture had positive and negative aspects. From the hierarchical chart of nodes extracted from Nvivo, it was found that the theme of “There is a chasm between what should be and what is” was the theme that dominated the conversations of the participants. If the themes were ranked in how frequently they occurred throughout the interviews it would be chasm, community, character, and commitment. Although the theme of chasm might be considered a negative theme, the word frequency query revealed that “students” was the most frequent word used throughout the interviews so gave a balance to the picture of the school.

The idea of “students” being the most frequent word in the interviews also highlighted the subtheme of “common concern for students” which when looked at individually in the hierarchical chart of nodes commanded a significant portion of the interviews. When the researcher looked at the interview guide, it was interesting to note that the word “students” was not used in any of the questions and this showed that at the alternative school, students were the focus even though it was a school of the last chance sort.

“As we strive for increased academic success for all students, we know that success is built on a climate and culture of respect, responsibility and collaboration between school and home.” The preceding statement was taken from the student code of conduct handbook and underscored the fact that student success was and should be at the forefront of the teaching-learning process. In addition, it can also be seen that a positive culture was deemed necessary for there to be an impact on student success.
Possibly from the outside an alternative school of the last chance nature would be solely based on changing behaviors, however, there was a major thrust in academics as reflected in a sub-category of “create intellectual ideals” as seen in the hierarchical chart. The idea of academics and intellectual ideals being important in the alternative was a key component of understanding the culture of the alternative school.

From the word cloud, the researcher concluded in a broad and general way that students had to be the focus of all the activities at the alternative school. Making students the focus was important to ensure that these students who have had difficulty achieving in a traditional school would achieve success. Action by all the stakeholders was necessary to start the process of engaging the students. This meant that administration along with teachers had to build a foundation that created an organized, productive environment that motivated students to re-engage in the learning process. To aid the process of re-engagement, alternative classrooms should be designed to promote and cultivate dynamic interactions between families and the community.

In reviewing the themes found from the interviews, there seemed to be an alignment to the themes of cooperativeness, accountability, and boundlessness (CAB) found by Sanders (2010) from synthesizing over 100 case studies and related research on high performing schools. This CAB model posited by Sanders was grounded in the theoretical framework called structural functionalism. Sanders’ framework outlined that even though each of the parts was separate and performed unique jobs, the functions were interdependent of each other. In the school structure, the student, teacher, principal, community, and district were viewed as being different parts. In the same way that the themes of community, character, commitment, and chasm were listed as
delineated themes, there were overlaps that made them dependent on each other for the school culture to thrive.

**Cooperativeness.** Cooperativeness was demonstrated when the school’s general nature permitted various elements/members to be an important component of the school in order to foster a cooperative school environment (Sanders, 2010). The theme of cooperativeness was found to have three subcategories: school-wide guiding philosophy, collaborative relationships, and family/school/community connections (Sanders, 2010). In the present study, the theme of community was most closely aligned with the theme of cooperativeness. The subthemes of relationship, common vision, and goodwill also encompassed the theme of cooperativeness.

The subcategory of school-wide guiding philosophy in the CAB model aligned with the subtheme of a common vision. It was the consensus of many participants that there needed to be a shared vision developed by the members of the alternative school. When there was a common vision and all players were on the “same page,” there was a greater probability that everyone would be working together and ultimately the vision of student success would be achieved. A guiding philosophy or a common vision was seen as helpful to staff and leadership to keep focused and stay aligned to agreed-upon objectives (Blair, 2000; Glickman, 2002; Kaufman, Herman, & Watters, 2002).

Collaborative relationships were reflected in the present study in the nodes of appreciation of relationships, problem solving, and intellectual sharing. It was frequently mentioned in the interviews that relationships between the staff and students were a key component in ensuring student success. In addition, the collegial and intellectual relationships that developed as a result of teachers brainstorming and problem solving how best to meet the needs of individual learner was another idea evident in the interviews. It has to be understood
that if student achievement/success was the main priority, then all persons in the school environment had to support the activities and procedures of the school. Each person had to feel he or she was a part of the team for student success that worked to find solutions to problems (Picucci et al., 2002; Trimble, 2002).

Intellectual sharing was also demonstrated when a teacher who had worked with ClassDojo, a behavioral tracking program, volunteered to show the staff how to implement in their classes to help with promoting prosocial behaviors. Other cases of collegiality were given, i.e., how to use Kahoot, a subject-based game application that reinforced content while bringing fun, excitement, and competition to the learning environment. Two comments by participants embodied the spirit of intellectual sharing at this alternative school: “Teachers help each other” and “Teachers share ideas to help with discipline and interesting ideas for lessons.”

These comments embodied the sense of community, intellectual sharing, and problem solving sharing. The subthemes of intellectual sharing and problem solving sharing were not necessarily specific to this alternative school or alternative schools in general. However, possibly because of the constant challenges of mediating conflicts, remediating negative behaviors, and getting students to stay on task, it seemed like a significant indicator of the potential for success in this alternative school. The researcher was of the opinion that if intellectual sharing and problem solving were continued, some of the less positive aspects of the school culture, such as student defiance, apathy for learning, and disregard for rules would be eliminated and augured for a more positive school culture.

Family/school/community connections were reflected in the subtheme of goodwill, which had the nodes of Inside School Community and the Outside School Community. For students at the Type II alternative school to experience success, there had to be a dynamic interaction
between family, school, and community. Many researchers (e.g., Cotton, 2000; Daggett, 2005; Griffith, 2003; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Simons & Curtis, 2007) have shown that when families and communities were connected to students, there have been many benefits to students as well as the school and other stakeholders. In addition, when families, community members, and other stakeholders became integrally involved in the life of the school, a deep and positive impact was made on students (Cotton, 2000; Daggett, 2005). These connections all helped to increase student achievement and ensure students experienced success.

Accountability. Accountability in the CAB model focused on the procedures used to ensure the students and staff were held accountable to high performance standards (Sanders, 2010). This was viewed as a two-way process where it applied to students and staff. Student accountability was reflected in the node of Set High Expectations. This flowed from the subtheme of common concern for students.

To ensure that students experienced success, the participants realized there needed to be a standard of high expectations. In this alternative school setting, high expectations must be the norm to impact student achievement. High expectations must be consistent throughout the school and be the same for all students along with a variety of support services (Billig, Jaime, Abrams, Fitzpatrick, & Kendrick, 2005; Ellis, Gaudet, Hoover, Rizoli, & Mader, 2004). In successful schools, there was a persistent emphasis on student accountability. This high expectation for all students must also be linked to local, state, and national content standards for there to be an impact on student achievement and success (Billig et al., 2005; Daggett, 2005).

In these successful schools, high expectations were the norm. From the interviews, it was also found when high expectations were outlined and modeled, students and teachers at the Type II alternative school experienced success in the teaching-learning process. In a high expectation
environment, every student was expected to meet state content standards regardless of race or socio-economic background (Billig et al., 2005; Corallo & Mc Donald, 2001; Hair, Kraft, & Allen, 2001).

Just as students have to be held accountable for their learning, staff must also be held responsible for student success by ensuring they use all available strategies and resources available to help students learn and meet state standards (Billig et al., 2005; Fouts, 2003; Picucci et al., 2002). All members of the school community, whether a custodian, teacher, parent, student, secretary or administrator, must be held to high expectations. In the present study, the node of create intellectual ideals matched the subcategory of staff accountability. Teachers at this Type II alternative school embraced the challenge of creating intellectual ideals in terms of lessons and activities so students would be prepared to be tested and be successful in state standardized tests.

The idea of all stakeholders being held accountable was also reflected in the student code of conduct handbook where there were outlined rights and responsibilities of students, parents, and staff. For example, it was stated that students had the right to pursue a successful education in a safe environment without disruption and to be empowered to achieve their potential and dreams. This was bracketed by students having the responsibility to resolve problems and issues with dignity and respect, abide by attendance laws of the state, and comply with staff member’s request to obey rules as outlined by the district.

Parents had the right to be treated respectfully, to expect that school was a safe place for learning, and to be consulted as soon as possible when decisions were made that affected his or her child. There was also the responsibility of parents to teach and model self-discipline, respect for authority, and the rights of others, support school staff in improving student learning and
behavior, and to abide by the compulsory attendance laws of the state. Some rights of staff were to work in a positive environment conducive to learning and teaching, to work in partnership with others, and work in an atmosphere free from verbal or physical threats and abuse. From the rights and responsibilities of students, parents, and staff outlined in the student code of conduct handbook it was realized that there was a foundation for building a positive school culture if each party adhered to his or her rights and responsibilities.

**Boundlessness.** Boundlessness described a school’s readiness and alacrity to be in a continuous mode of learning and growing (Sanders, 2010). In the CAB model, the ability to work in this mode was defined by using data as a means of evaluation. The node of this is how it is, but it does not have to stay that way, was nearest in conceptualization of boundlessness. Although the node did not imply the use of data analysis strategies, there could be ways in which data analysis could shape the new paradigm at the alternative school. The theme of boundlessness was applied to the present study to mean there were infinite possibilities for there to be rebirth renewal, and growth. Boundlessness encapsulated the idea of “the sky’s the limit.” If as a team, there was willingness to keep working at solving the problems and introduce and try innovative techniques to engage students, then there would be a subsequent positive impact on student achievement.

Analysis of data in impacting student achievement was important and needed to be a key component of understanding the school culture as a means of impacting student achievement. Using data analysis to create boundlessness was supported by Corallo and McDonald (2001), Hair et al. (2001), and Daggett (2005) as a way of informing staff of development decisions and establishing a connection to student learning and achievement.
Major Themes

The themes of the present study were discussed further to give an insight of the school culture of the alternative school.

A strong school culture makes a school a community. A variety of factors contributed to a positive school culture. The nature of the relationships between the various stakeholders, the relationship between community and school, the leadership style of principals and administrators, and the programs that were geared to improving the level of care within the school setting (Ray, Lambie, & Curry, 2007) were some of the factors included in contributory factors to school culture.

Building a community is not an easy task. The dynamics of the relationships between the various members of the alternative school can be very difficult to navigate, negotiate, and understand. However, there was a payload for all involved if there was a community of people working together to ensure the students were successful and benefited from attending the alternative school. “It takes a village to raise a child” was an apt saying that encapsulated the theme of community found in this study and which was especially needed in an alternative school setting.

A buzz-phrase in the district where this alternative school was located was “teamwork makes the dream work” and Murray and Holt (2014) opined that the sense of community that existed among the various members of the alternative school setting created a connection between the student and the school and fostered warm, caring, and deep relationships. They continued to add that these relationships were critical and essential components of the alternative school culture.
Relationships were crucial in developing the sense of community required to engender success for everyone at the alternative school. The quality of the relationships between adults and students was considered essential to ensuring students achieved positive outcomes in all aspects of their lives (Quinn & Poirier, 2006).

The subtheme of intellectual sharing was not necessarily specific to this alternative school or alternative schools in general. However, because of the constant challenges of mediating conflicts, remediating negative behaviors, and getting students to stay on task, it seemed like a significant indicator of potential success in this alternative school. The researcher was of the opinion that if collegiality was continued, then the school culture could become even more positive.

There was power in intellectual relationships developed in schools and this impacted the sense of community needed for the alternative school to be successful. Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) proposed strong intellectual relationships were teachers’ most potent resource. Teachers [and leaders] who are cognizant of the potency of intellectual sharing or collegiality are strategic about creating a positive culture (Donaldson, 2007). In addition, Donaldson noted teacher leaders made use of the relationships that were formed and exhibited determination to assist colleagues hone and improve their daily practices to impact student success. Singh (2013) suggested that in order for collegiality to be effective, there needed to be a process of shared leadership. The process is comprised of the activities of the school community in an interactive context around the task at hand (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004).

Spillane et al. (2004) endorsed the belief of many of the participants in the research that in order to experience growth, there had to be a shared vision, established standards of collaboration, and a team emphasis on student success. In research on collegial theories, Singh
(2013) and Singh, Manser, and Dali (2013) emphasized relationships between staff and leaders as they worked together to impact student success.

Sergiovanni (2001) described collegiality as the method in which teachers and leaders worked together to fulfill common values and goals and established trusting relationships based on the basis of congeniality. To ensure that collegiality was established all areas of this alternative school, Dalin (1994) offered the following components of collegial leadership:

- Emphasis on team building. All members of the school community have to be fully committed to the shared vision of student success.
- Identification and spotlight on best practices in the classroom.
- School communities have to be invested in the success of the school. There has to be a sense of ownership that existed among stakeholders.
- The principal has to be the main model of collegiality.

A strong school culture marks a school’s character. The pledge and motto of the school were highlighted frequently as a symbol (verbal and visual) that could positively impact the school culture. Although it was seen as having the potential to create huge waves in the school culture, it was not being utilized in that manner. Students had not fully understood the significance of the pledge and motto. They repeated them when they were in their family groups but had not embraced their underlying philosophy.

Some of the participants suggested that during the orientation process, parents and students should study the pledge and motto to appreciate what the school hoped for them and what they can achieve if they lived these values. The researcher believed the pledge and motto were powerful tools that could impact students’ lives if students were socialized to the positive energy intrinsic in the pledge and motto.
One teacher commented that now she has seen the pledge and motto through a new lens, she would try to incorporate the pledge and motto into her classroom. The above comment was promising to the researcher because when a person has been made aware of an idea and starts to think about that idea, there was a greater possibility a positive change might take place.

In ensuring the child was successful, the village model was considered an appropriate one to use in this alternative school setting. There has to be an overwhelming and common concern for the students by all members of the school community. This determined the character of the school and helped to steer students on the path to success. Aronson (1995) highlighted parental and community involvement and support and health and social services as vital to the success of most alternative programs. The focus on student success and nurturing of the whole child was pervasive throughout the interviews. Staff at the alternative school seemed as if they were cheering the students along to achieve success. Teachers would talk to each other to find ways in which students could be motivated to be the persons they were destined to become. The participants cared about the students being college- and career-ready so they tried different strategies and methods to ensure students experienced success.

With this alternative school being of the Type II sort, it was necessary all aspects of the student’s lives be addressed so that there would be positive changes in the long term. With the variety of disciplinary and anti-social behaviors that were exhibited by the students, Tolan and Guerra (1994) explained that psychotherapy, behavior analysis, cognitive-behavior methods, and social intervention have to be utilized as they have produced positive outcomes in improving individual antisocial behaviors. The previous idea by Tolan and Guerra was seen under the subtheme of common concern for students in the nodes of nurture their souls and accept and manage failure.
In Type II alternative schools, there has to be a holistic focus on the student so personal, social, emotional, and academic development had to be addressed (Murray & Holt, 2014). Meeting the needs of the students in a holistic manner was very important; Gilson (2006) outlined that the success of the alternative school was the ability to create programs that catered to the social and academic needs of the students. As the whole student was being looked at in the alternative setting, this had to be done in the context of high expectations. Not that traditional school teachers do not emphasize this but it was found that alternative education teachers placed high expectations on all their students while being adaptable to the needs of the students (Murray & Holt, 2014).

Although this was the alternative school for behavioral issues for the school district, it was evident that the students exhibited similar behaviors and tendencies that led them to being placed at the alternative school. From conversations with the participants, a comprehensive behavioral change and character education program was not in place at the alternative school. Teachers used behavior management strategies and promoted positive character development in their classrooms, however, there was no school-wide plan to effect positive change.

There was an afterschool program that was geared towards promoting character development. This afterschool program was a result of an Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA) funded grant received by the alternative school to prepare career and college ready graduates. Through participation in the program, students were able to complete seat time at no cost to the student, credit recovery through e2020, mentoring services, life skills enhancement through Overcoming Obstacles to Success evidence-based curriculum, as well as career and personal development. This was considered a positive component of the school culture of the alternative school but because it was only done in the afternoon and students chose
to attend; the character development aspect was not necessarily felt in the general school population.

With test scores at the alternative school being lower than the district average, the staff and researcher were very concerned about the apathy for learning, low scores on tests, and refusal to test in the classroom and other district-mandated times. Brainstorming by the staff was done to come up with ideas that would motivate students to give their best on tests. Teachers would provide incentives for class and students that focused on the test and scored a certain percentage. There were glimmers of hope when some students’ scores were viewed and they scored significantly higher than the district average.

A strong school culture requires commitment. It was alluded to by some and clearly stated by many of the participants that working in a Type II alternative school could be very stressful. It was believed it took resilience, passion, and commitment to be a teacher in such a setting. Every teacher [any adult] working at a Type II alternative school must be there by choice and have the passion to engage the students in being successful (Mottaz, 2002). Lloyd (2001) concurred with Mottaz and theorized no teacher was naturally bad; however, they sometimes experienced frustration when the needs of at-risk students became overwhelming. Therefore, it was imperative teachers [adults] have an inner passion for students who have a variety of challenges that impacted their educational achievement.

Aronson (1995) highlighted the need of students to be at such a setting by choice. Only a small percentage of the students at this Type II alternative school were there by choice; however, because of the nature of the behaviors exhibited at their regular school, there was not much choice in their placement at the alternative school. Choice rather than a forced assignment was preferred but, sadly, this was not the case for most of the students. When there was choice rather
than forced assignment, ownership and commitment to the school was fostered (Murray & Holt, 2014).

With there not being much of a choice in attending the Type II alternative school, this was where the team effort of home, community, and school commitment had to kick into overdrive to help the students be successful. Family and community participation, support, and involvement have to be integral components of an effective alternative program (Murray & Holt, 2014). The commitment and involvement of schools, community, and families in the lives of the students at Type II alternative schools was a recommendation made in The Safe Schools Framework (National Education Association, 2003) that helped the students in Type II alternative schools to be successful.

**There is a chasm between what should be and what is.** The consensus of most of the participants was the alternative school had a great potential to be an effective Type II alternative school. In addition, it was expressed by some of the participants that the administration was more reactive than proactive. Reactivity instead of proactivity was considered a deficiency in the effective running of the school. In a Type II program, U.S. Department of Justice (2001) endorsed the idea that a proactive, thoughtful program developed to meet the needs of Type II students was more effective than the “deal-with-it-when-it-happens” reactive method.

To ensure the success of programs to help students at Type II alternative schools, experts in the field of at-risk students explained that to change antisocial behaviors, they have to be worked on concurrently and rigorously in a long-term context (Van Acker, 2007). For there to be success there had to be consistency in how the program was executed and an unwavering commitment to changing the antisocial behaviors of the students. With the ever-present concerns of school safety and the need for a decrease in students’ antisocial behaviors, the need for
character education programs were considered relevant and needed. Schaeffer (2003) explained that character education went to the underlying causes of violence and antisocial behaviors and developed an environment where negative behaviors would not be accepted nor be allowed to thrive.

The idea of the chasm was emphasized in some of the interviews, especially when discussing the issue of students using phones in the classroom to send text, check Facebook, and a myriad of other social non-lesson related activities. Six teachers collaborated together and designed a flyer to promote the no-phone use policy in their classrooms. They consistently reinforced the idea that phones were not allowed in their classrooms. It worked for them and they shared this with the staff. It was only then that administration agreed to support the teachers on the no phone use policy, although it was against the rules in the school and district handbook. Most teachers were of the opinion that after many discussions had taken place in staff meetings and departmental meetings, administration should have clearly told the students no phones were allowed in the building. Teachers had indicated that phones were a huge distraction and affected students’ grades and their attention span yet no team plan had been made to solve this grave issue.

Limitations

During this study, the researcher had to be cognizant that the research methodology had limitations. The researcher was part of the data collection and analysis process and had to be careful to ensure that biases were not revealed or implied in the interview process or even taking the participants’ words out of the context. It was hoped the findings of this study would be helpful to alternative school educators to strategically use the symbols and history of the school to positively impact the school culture.
Implications for Educators in Type II Alternative Education Settings

For alternative schools to be successful, collegiality had to be dynamic and fluid. Collegiality cannot be between teachers only; it also has to be between teachers and administrators. Administrators have to understand they cannot make a school great on their own. There had to be collaborative leadership based on trust and confidence. All stakeholders have to recognize there were benefits in the positive relationships developed in a bid to help our students achieve success. Of course, relationships were not the easiest thing to develop but there was power in relationships.

The symbols of community, character, commitment, and chasm identified were very important in highlighting strengths and weaknesses that could help the school community understand the school culture and decide how to proceed in the future. Attention has to be paid to the culture of this alternative school to ensure its success in preparing students who are college and career ready. There has to be a strategic and coordinated plan to ensure that the school operated as a true learning community with an embedded character development aspect of promoting prosocial behaviors, and the necessary support so that students, staff, and parents would be committed to helping children succeed. From the research it was found that there was no magic elixir that ensured the school culture in alternative educational settings became positive. It was therefore imperative that the processes and activities that shaped the school culture be fully understood to be able to achieve success.

“In times of urgent problems and confusing circumstances, people demand leaders who can show the way” (Fullan, 2001, p. 45). This called for transformative leadership but did not necessarily mean it had to be a principal. Teachers can and have been transformational leaders so it was time for collaboration to ensure that students experienced success. If the concept of
collaborative leadership was embraced, a positive cultural shift would reap rewards for the educational system, students, teacher, and other stakeholders.

Creating a structure of order and discipline ensured the safety of all persons in an alternative education setting. In the context of collaborative leadership, frank discussion sessions should be held on what elements were needed to achieve success. Reimer and Cash (2003) highlighted 10 elements of successful alternative schools that were used to develop the framework in which to operate: student accountability measures, administrative structure and policies, curriculum and instruction, faculty and staff, facilities and grounds, school leadership, student support services, learning community (staff, students, parents, and community), program funding, and school climate. Successful alternative school do not simply appear overnight but with dedication and consistent follow-through, the school and its students will be on a path of success.

In formulating a new paradigm in which alternative schools can operate, Fullan and Scott (2014) credited Dewey’s (1916) work for providing the framework for pedagogical ideas for deep learning. Pedagogical ideas students were required to master for future success were character education, citizenship, communication, critical thinking and problem-solving, collaboration, and creativity and imagination (known as the six C’s). The six C's could ultimately change the dynamics of alternative schools to focus on the holistic being of the student who fulfilled his/her destiny and served society.

Commitment and the sense of community needed to ensure success at the Type II alternative school were more easily attained when classes and school were small (Murray & Holt, 2014). Fewer students in each class and an emphasis on individual attention were seen as necessary elements in a successful alternative program (Lehr & Lange, 2003). The alternative
setting studied provided the one-on-one interaction needed to ensure student success. With smaller classes, there was a greater likelihood of knowing each student personally and having the ability to develop warm, caring, and deep relationships.

Whether the curriculum focused on core content academics, personal development and behavior, basic skills, or on vocational skills, there must be flexibility in designing a plan for each student using a variety of strategies and methods to meet the individual needs of the learners (Aronson, 1995). Comprehensive counselling services were needed since students entering Type II alternative schools experienced a plethora of academic, socio-emotional, and personal issues.

Alternative programs must be organized according to clear, strict behavioral expectations. These expectations must be upheld in a fair and consistent manner to ensure a comfortable and safe place for adults and students. High expectations must be the norm and all members of the alternative school community must be on board with policies and procedures in place to have an effective and successful school.

Getting parents and community involved in the educational lives of students who are at a Type II alternative school has to be at the forefront of steps to ensure these students experienced success in all areas of their lives. Murray and Holt (2014) explained the alternative education program should include a solution-focused approach that included all stakeholders. Along with these team problem solving approaches, the staff had to be caring, committed, and relentless in the pursuit of success for all students. Murray and Holt suggested the Type II alternative school should be staffed with highly qualified staff members who had the ability to create effective individualized learning plans, design the pace and the instruction to cater to the individual ability and learning style of the students, and hold high expectations for all students.
Recommendations

From the findings of this research, many ideas surfaced that offered possibilities which could impact the school culture of this alternative school and possibly other alternative schools in the nation. If the research included a larger number of alternative schools, then the results could be generalized to other alternative schools. From this study, several ideas seemed worthy of further consideration:

1. What are practical ways to foster community, character, and commitment in an alternative program of the last chance nature?
2. What are behavior modification processes and programs that could positively impact students’ behavior in a last chance alternative program?
3. How can alternative schools of the last chance sort be rebranded from the students’ perspective?

Conclusion

Although this research was not intended to be generalized to all alternative schools in America, it can still offer a fundamental conceptual understanding of how alternative school can be understood. It was challenging, yet exciting to work with the Type II students but it took grit, tenacity, and an unswerving dedication to work in an alternative education school of the last chance sort. Many teachers buckled, went with what was easy, and allowed students to do whatever they wanted. However, if all teachers, staff, and administrators consistently set high expectations, established policies and procedures that promoted safety and order, showed care and respect for students and staff, and continued to build caring relationships, then alternative schools would achieve their purpose of remediating students’ behaviors and getting them back to their regular school. If the culture was negative, it was easy to just accept it as the norm and
admit defeat. As an alternative school educator of only 13 months, the researcher realized that as a team, great things could happen if there was community, character, and commitment with an unwavering focus on student success.
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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Letter and Consent Form to be Interviewed
May 19, 2016

Dear Participant:

I am Collette Silvera, a graduate student at Carson-Newman University. For my final project, I am researching how the elements of school culture, symbols and history, impact school improvement processes in an alternative school setting. You are a valuable staff member of the alternative school in the district and I am inviting you to participate in this research by consenting to an interview to gain your perspective on school culture.

Participation in this research is voluntary. There are no perceived risks associated with participation in this research. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes to complete. This interview will take place in the conference room at the school where we will have minimal distraction. There is no compensation for being interviewed nor is there any known risk. During the interview you can decide not to answer a particular question. In addition, you are free to withdraw from the research without any negative repercussion.

With your permission, the interview will be recorded to ensure accuracy of the information collected and for the transcription process to aid in data analysis. After transcription, I will provide you with a copy of the transcript to verify accuracy of the information and for follow up questions by you or me.

Information provided in this research will be kept confidential. Your name will not appear in any report resulting from this research. You will be referred to by a pseudonym on the tape and in the transcript. Data collected during this research will be kept until the transcript is checked for accuracy and analyzed. After the analysis, the transcripts and tape will be destroyed. In reporting findings from this research, quotes from the interview may be included in the dissertation and/or
publications to come from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at 8034001650 ext. 1416 or by email at csilvera@cn.edu. You can also contact my supervisor Earnest Walker at 8654713445 or ewalker@cn.edu.

This research has been reviewed and received clearance from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Committee at Carson-Newman University. Your signed informed consent will be kept for the duration of the project and for at least three years at a location approved by the IRB Committee. If you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this research, you may contact the Chair of the IRB, Gregory Casalenuovo, gcasalenuovo@cn.edu or irb@cn.edu at 8654713236.

I hope that you will agree to be a part of the research as it will be beneficial to understanding a very important yet overlooked area of alternative education. I anticipate working with you and thank you in advance for your help in my educational experience.

Sincerely,

Collette Silvera
Graduate Student

Earnest Walker
Faculty of Education
CONSENT FORM

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Collette Silvera of the Department of Education at Carson-Newman University. I understand that the research is about how the elements of school culture, symbols and history, impact school improvement processes in an alternative school setting. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary and that I may withdraw my consent at any time without negative repercussions.

I am aware that I have the option of allowing my interview to be recorded to guarantee a true recording of my responses. I also understand that the interview will take approximately 45 minutes.

I am also aware that selections from the interview may be included in the dissertation and/or publications to come from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous.

I understand faculty and staff from the school will not be at the interview nor have access to the notes made or printed transcriptions.

I understand that this research has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Committee at Carson-Newman University. I was informed that if I have any comments or concerns resulting from my participation in this research, I may contact the Chair of the IRB, Gregory Casalenuovo at 8654713236, gcasalenuovo@cn.edu or irb@cn.edu

I agree to participate in this study.

☐ YES ☐ NO

I agree to have my interview tape recorded.

☐ YES ☐ NO

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any thesis or publication that comes of this research.

☐ YES ☐ NO

Participant’s Name (please print) _____________________________

Participant’s Signature _____________________________ Date ______________

Researcher’s Signature _____________________________ Date ______________
APPENDIX B

Interview Guide
Interview Questions

An Interesting Alternative: Understanding the Symbols and History of School Culture in a Non-traditional School

Gender __________
Classified or certified ____________
Subject presently teaching __________

Number of years at OLC ____________
Number of years teaching ________
Position at OLC _________________
1. How would you define school culture?

2. What is the importance of having a positive school culture?

3. How would you describe the culture of this school?

4. What is your role in developing the school culture?

5. Describe the ideal school culture that you would want at this alternative school?

6. What history does the school have that positively impacts the school culture?

7. What can be done to ensure that in the future when you look back there will be a positive historical picture?

8. What symbols do the school have that can positively impact the school culture?

9. What are other symbols that can be used to positively impact the school culture?

10. Deal and Peterson (2016) argued that symbolism can be used to impact the school culture. Symbolism of action, intellectual engagement, communicating values, advocacy, collegial sharing, humor, storytelling, and ceremonies are some of the ideas they suggested.

   i. Are these events seen at this school?

   ii. If they are present, how are they used?

   iii. If they are not present, how can they be used to impact school culture?

   iv. How effective are they (or can be) in positively impacting the school culture?
APPENDIX C

Audit trail
January 2016  Reviewed various databases to identify the scope of the relevant data on alternative schools with a focus on Type II alternative schools and school culture.

March 2016  Made methodological determination about the case study research and began preparation for literature base and IRB review.

April 2016  Received IRB approval to conduct research. Requested permission from school district to conduct research at the alternative school.

May 2016  Received letter from school district with permission to conduct research.

Sent recruitment letters to invite staff to participate in the research.

Informed consent form was attached to recruitment letter.

Participants responded to recruitment letter. Interviews appointments made. Pilot interview done to ascertain flaws and ambiguities. Interviews conducted.

June 2016  Transcribed interviews and sent transcripts to participants to review for accuracy.

August – September 2016  Worked with two co-coders to analyze data and develop thematic structure to code the data from referral data, test scores, and student code of conduct handbook.
APPENDIX D

District approval letter
May 13, 2016

Collette Silvera

Dear Silvera,

The Research Committee of ___ has approved your class project regarding “An Interesting Alternative: Understanding the Symbols and History of School Culture in a Non-traditional School” for the duration of the 2015-2016 school year. You may conduct your class research at ___ during the working day.

Please maintain the confidentiality of the data and do not make public the name of the district or school. We ask that you provide us with a copy of your completed research.

Sincerely,

___, Chair
Research Committee

CC: