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**SAFETY NETS, SAFETY VALVES, AND TRUE ALTERNATIVES:  
HOW COMPETING DISCOURSES SHAPE LEADERS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF  
ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION**

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## ABSTRACT

Alternative education is a broad and often contested concept. Beginning in the 1960s, the alternative education movement initially aimed to decentralize authority over schooling, providing educational options to students, families, and communities. For the early alternative education movement, the lack of rigid parameters around what alternative education is and what it is not allowed for innovation and rapid growth. However, over the last sixty years, distinct narratives describing alternative education have emerged, which create varied and even antithetical possibilities for how alternative education is understood. These narratives have formed discourses. Discourses construct social reality, determining what can be perceived as true, important, and possible. Three distinct discourses describe alternative education as creating: true alternatives, innovative schools that change teaching and learning; safety valve alternatives, schools that allow for the removal of “disruptive students;” and safety net alternatives, schools that provide support for students whose needs are not met by comprehensive schools.

While the changing meaning of alternative education and the problems associated with it are well documented by research, a smaller number of studies examine the causes behind these changes. This study uses qualitative interview methodology to explore alternative school leaders’ understandings of alternative education’s purpose. Focusing on leaders who work within public-school district controlled, brick and mortar, alternative schools and programs in eastern Pennsylvania, this study explores the questions: how do alternative school leaders understand alternative education’s purpose and how do their understandings align with prevailing discourses?

The findings of this study indicate that safety valve discourse, which describes alternative education as behavioral placements to which “disruptive students” are assigned, has become the dominant view of alternative education in eastern Pennsylvania. At the same time, this study

found that many alternative school leaders hold complex beliefs about alternative education and their work, associating alternative education with multiple meanings, including support, innovation, and meeting the needs of students. For some participants, these complex meanings form counter-narratives, which challenge the assumptions inherent in safety valve discourse and redefine students as capable and the purpose of alternative education as helping all students realize their potential.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Arising in the 1960s, the early alternative education movement offered another way of thinking about schooling. Grounded in the view that all students can learn and thrive in the right environment, alternative education resulted in the creation of schools designed to meet the unique needs of students and communities. However, over time, the meanings associated with alternative education have changed significantly. Today, the term alternative education can evoke images ranging from student-led democracies, where entire school communities debate and vote on school policy, to punitive schools modeled after in-school suspension rooms, where students sit in cubicles and complete worksheets while cut off from classroom instruction and their peers.

Alternative education emerged and has persisted partly because of its ability to take on many forms and as a result to challenge the understandings, beliefs, and values that direct behavior within traditional schools. Alternative education theorist Mary Ann Raywid (1999) argued that, “alternative schools are highly malleable. They will be what you make them” (p. 51). However, alternative education is now often associated with paradoxical meanings. At its best, alternative education creates caring communities (Raywid, 1993; De La Ossa, 2005; Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable & Tonelson, 2006; Bland, Church, Neill, & Terry, 2008; McClay, 2011; Watson, 2014) organized around non-traditional pedagogic practices that retain high expectations for all students (Kellmayer, 1995; Quinn & Poirier, 2006). At its worst, alternative education excludes and stigmatizes students who deviate from norms (Kelly, 1993), reducing access to high quality educational opportunities (Munoz, 2004; Kim, 2006; Farrelly, 2013). Barr (1981) explained these antithetical understandings, noting alternative education can serve, “as an exciting laboratory

where unique and often daring programs are conducted and evaluated” but can also be, “used as a dumping ground for students labeled as disadvantaged, deprived, disruptive, or dull” serving as “little more than grim detention centers” (p. 571).

While there is a growing research base documenting the wide variance between alternative programs, there are fewer studies that examine why this variance exists. This qualitative study explores how alternative school leaders understand the purpose of alternative education and how their understandings align with competing narratives and their resultant discourses. Leaders are instrumental in determining what kinds of alternatives schools and programs are created. Since alternative education is “a perspective, not a procedure or program” (Morley, 1991, p. 10), the understandings of leaders are likely to determine what alternative education becomes. As Raywid (1994) explained, variation between alternative schools results from, “what is assumed about school and students” (p. 27). When the assumption is that certain students present a problem, remedial or even punitive schools are the logical result. However, when the assumption is that problems result from the “school-student match—and that by altering a school's program and environment, one can alter student response, performance, and achievement,” (p. 28) then innovative educational alternatives are the likely outcome.

### **Justification**

Alternative education has become a fixture in American public-school systems. However, there is reason to believe it is less often associated with changing schools and school systems and increasingly associated with removing and remediating students. Citing national data from the 2007-2008 school year, Carver and Lewis (2010) found that there were 10,300 school districts operating alternatives for students labeled “at risk” in the United States. Lehr, Moreau, Lange, and Lanners (2004) estimated that between 1998 and 2002 the number of states with legislation

regulating alternative education increased from 22 to 48, and they found that 58% of respondents indicated that alternative schools in their states enrolled students both voluntarily and involuntarily.

In the current educational environment, where many states have instituted policies that define the purpose of alternative education as serving “disruptive” or “at-risk” students or as “disciplinary” alternatives, it is uncertain what niche alternative education fills within the habitat of American public schools. Alternative education has been viewed as an opportunity to challenge or “change the system” (Raywid, 1999, p. 49), either by creating new educational paradigms that could be adopted across the system or by providing variety and choice for those seeking an educational avenue different from what is offered in comprehensive schools. However, it is now possible that alternative education can be an impediment to systemic change because it often serves as a safety valve releasing students from the system when the structures in place cannot serve them, masking the problematic ineffectiveness of those structures (Arnove & Strout, 1978; Raywid, 1999).

National and state policies enacted in response to public perceptions of eroding school safety may be most responsible for the shifting understandings associated with alternative education. The national Gun Free Schools Act of 1994, the subsequent Safe Schools Act of 1995, and Act 30 of 1997 in Pennsylvania (Bickford, 2001) each required schools to employ zero tolerance and mandatory expulsion for certain disciplinary infractions. In Pennsylvania, they also established Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth (AEDY) to provide educational alternatives for students removed from school. By 2006, AEDY in Pennsylvania had expanded to 614 programs serving 30,000 students (The Education Law Center, 2010). Policy has symbolic significance (Rosen, 2009), so policies that label their target population as “disruptive students” and demand zero tolerance contribute to narratives that define alternative education’s purpose as

preserving order in comprehensive schools by enabling the removal of students perceived as a threat to the efficient operation or safety of the school.

These narratives feed discourse. Discourse is a term with multiple meanings. Foucault (1990) used the term discourse to describe “sets of statements” or language organized into a pattern that “arranges and naturalizes the social world in a specific way and thus informs social practices” (p. 1127). Discourses direct behavior because they determine what is possible, what is true, what is legitimate, what has value, and what can and should be done (Taylor-Dunlop & Norton, 1997; Anderson & Grinberg, 1998; Niesche, 2011). Fairclough differentiated between discourse as social theorists use the term to examine patterns of language that exert a form of social control and discourse as it is used by linguists to examine language within a social context. Though Fairclough (1993) also explained that these distinctions converge since language exists in a “dialectical relationship with other facets of ‘the social’ (its ‘social context’)—it is socially shaped, but it is also socially shaping, or constitutive” (p. 134). Similarly, Alvesson and Kerreman (2000) distinguished discourse as a local phenomenon and “Discourse” as a societal phenomenon. As a societal phenomenon, discourses are “general and prevalent systems for the formation and articulation of ideas in a particular period of time” (p. 1126).

For the purposes of this study, I employ discourse in what Alvesson and Kerreman (2000) refer to as the macro or societal sense. While recognizing that local patterns of language also form discourses which shape understandings and direct behavior, discourse in this study will be a tool for identifying the prevailing ways alternative education is discussed and described, resulting in broad categories or ways of understanding alternative education. These discourses have been constructed through the language of policy, research, and professionals. This study examines how these broad patterns are reflected in the local understandings of alternative education in eastern Pennsylvania. That is to say, this study examines how certain discourses

have constructed possibilities about what alternative education can and should be, and it explores the resultant understandings held by alternative school leaders.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Mary Ann Raywid (1994) developed a typology to distinguish between the differing manifestations of alternative education. She categorized alternatives as: Type I “schools of choice,” programs aimed at using innovative approaches that change the way school is structured and instruction is delivered; Type II “last-chance programs,” which focus on modifying student behaviors and removing students perceived as disruptive or dangerous from comprehensive school settings; and Type III “remedial focus” programs, which aim to improve academic, social or emotional capacities of struggling students (p. 27). Since its publication, Raywid’s typology has become one of the most commonly referenced descriptions of the variance between different alternative schools and programs.

Closely aligned with Raywid’s (1994) typology, three prevailing discourses have emerged describing the purpose of alternative education. One discourse describes alternative education as creating “true,” innovative alternatives and an opportunity to change the nature of schooling so that it provides more options and meets the needs and interests of a greater number of students and families. The second discourse views the purpose of alternative education as providing a safety valve that allows the comprehensive school to release students viewed as “disruptive” or “problematic,” and the third discourse describes alternative education as providing a safety net, which catches students who have been labeled “at risk” before they drop out, providing them with social and academic remediation. These three discourses represent the ways in which alternative education is talked about by researchers, policy makers, and practitioners and are likely to influence how alternative education is understood and what it becomes.

While discourse shapes social reality, leaders also have a substantial capacity to influence the shared understandings that direct practitioners' work and determine the purpose of an alternative school. An alternative school leader has been described as "the keeper and changer of school culture" (Tylor-Dunlop & Norton, 1997, p. 4), as transforming alternative schools and creating "college-going cultures" (Farris, 2014, p. 2), and as elevating the status of an alternative school through "assertiveness and sharp political skills" (Tallerico & Burstyn, 2004, p. 47). At the same time, school leaders are subject to discourse themselves (Niesche, 2011) and their perceptions of what alternative education can and should be are influenced by the ways alternative education is talked about by educators, researchers, and AEDY policy.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the understandings of leaders within district controlled alternative secondary schools in eastern Pennsylvania. Specifically, this study addresses the following questions:

How is the purpose of alternative education understood by alternative school leaders?

What patterns and themes are evident across alternative school leaders' understandings of alternative education?

How do these patterns and themes align with prevailing alternative education discourses?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Strong leaders are often identified as one of the keys to a successful alternative school. Calls for "dynamic leadership" (Barr & Parrett, 2001) that is able to cultivate positive culture (Taylor-Dunlop & Norton, 1997; Farris, 2014) and leaders who are able to "support the vision and mission" and "genuinely care about their students" (Quinn & Poirier, 2006, p. ii) are common in alternative education research. However, leaders do not work in a vacuum. School leaders are subject to discourse (Niesche, 2011). Narratives cultivate discourse, which, "arranges and

naturalizes the social world in a specific way and thus informs social practices” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000, p. 1127). Therefore, the differing narratives regarding alternative education form discourses, which in turn shape leaders’ perceptions of alternative education. Sergiovanni (1992) explained that leadership practice is largely directed by a leader’s mindscape, “the mental pictures in our heads about how the world works” that “program what we believe counts, help create our realities, and provide a basis for our decisions” (p. 8). While leaders play an essential role in determining what kinds of alternative schools are created, leaders’ mindscapes –their understandings, values, and beliefs– are likely to determine how they approach this work.



Figure 1-1: Theoretical Framework

Figure 1-1 illustrates the relationship between narratives, discourse, leaders’ understandings, and ultimately alternative school purposes. This study will focus specifically on the middle of this process, the relationship between discourse and leaders’ understandings. However, studies have established theoretical support for all of the relationships illustrated above. Selznick (1957) differentiates between mission, the formal statements that describe the goals of an organization, with an organization’s embodiment of purpose, the informal understandings and assumptions that direct practitioner behavior. Unlike management, which aspires to shape behavior, leaders aspire to shape how people think and feel (Alvesson, 2002). Therefore, leaders have the potential to shape shared understandings, values, and beliefs within an alternative school, molding the school’s embodiment of purpose and determining what kinds of alternative schools are created and operated.

Within a context replete with narratives that define alternative education as for “bad kids” or “disruptive youth” (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013), leaders are incredibly important. Leaders can potentially cultivate schools and programs that nurture counter-narratives as Nasir, Ross, McKinney de Royston, Givens, and Bryant (2013) observed in one alternative program, where “dominant notions of race and power were transformed through an alternative system of discipline and a different way of viewing the students” (p. 490). However, leaders’ understandings of alternative education are likely to be influenced by discourse, so it is essential to understand the relationship between alternative school leaders’ understandings and discourses that describe alternative education’s purpose as either punitive, therapeutic, or innovative.

### **Significance of the Study**

Alternative education in Pennsylvania has received limited attention from researchers. In a 2003 study, Hosley surveyed teachers and administrators regarding alternative school and program characteristics. The study found a curricular focus on remediation and concluded that while therapeutic and academic goals were also evident, safety valve or, “Type II Discipline program components are common to most programs” (p. 15). A follow up study (Hosley, Hosley, & Thein, 2009) again surveyed school personnel to examine characteristics of Pennsylvania’s alternative education programs. This second study found that staff believe that programs are “moderately effective in reducing dropout, improving academic performance, reducing truancy, reducing disruptive behavior, improving school attendance, changing target behaviors, and assisting students in the development of academic goals” (p. 18). However, the study also found a focus on remediation, noting that practitioners in alternative schools believe, “that the programs should continue to focus on the reengagement of disruptive and at-risk students” (p.4). Because both studies use quantitative methods, they were able to demonstrate that in Pennsylvania

alternative education is increasingly used as a safety valve or safety net but they were not able to explore the patterns within this trend or provide insight into why alternative education in the state has moved in this direction.

In a study in western Pennsylvania, Holtzman (2014) employed mixed methods to explore comprehensive school principals' perspectives on alternative education. However, a focus on "transient alternative education students" (p. 5), situated the study within discourses that view alternative education's purpose as either providing a safety valve or safety net, and the study's findings largely fit within these two perspectives. For example, in discussing the ideal location for alternative schools, about half of principals in the study argued that they, "would prefer getting alternative students off campus to limit their ability to disrupt the education of others, while other principals would rather have more control of the alternative environment" (p. 91). Holtzman does note that a study of principals within alternative schools would likely find very different perspectives.

As alternative education in Pennsylvania increasingly denotes schools and programs intended to remove and remediate students, it is important to examine the understandings of alternative school leaders. The Education Law Center (2010) conducted an analysis of Pennsylvania AEDY policy, concluding that the state must develop, "a broader definition of alternative education that would involve a continuum of options for students who need different types of educational experiences" (p. 40). Broadening the discussion about alternative education's purpose is one of the potential benefits of this study. Studies of alternative education in Pennsylvania have clearly identified a trend toward disciplinary alternative schools and programs. These studies have established that there is reason to believe that the prevailing discourses shaping understandings of alternative education in the state are those that define it as a safety net or safety valve. However, Hosley et al. (2009) targeted school districts receiving AEDY funding and Holtzman (2014) focused on alternative schools that serve transient students and those

labeled “at risk,” limiting each study’s capacity to explore other potential understandings of alternative education.

By casting a wider net, this study has the potential to uncover understandings of alternative education that correspond with other discourses, which view alternative education as an opportunity for system change and changing the experience of schooling. In using qualitative methods, this study aspires to create a clear and detailed picture of the patterns and themes within alternative school and program leaders’ descriptions of alternative education. The findings of this study can serve policy makers, school leaders, and researchers who hope to broaden the conversation about what alternative education is and can be, assisting public school districts that aspire to cultivate a spectrum of alternative options that have the potential to serve the diverse needs and interests of students and families.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Since the beginning of the alternative education movement, there has been significant uncertainty about what alternative education is and how it can potentially contribute to the broader educational system. The growth of alternative education within the public-school system has been accompanied by increasing disparity between alternative types and a growing range of understandings and beliefs associated with the concept. In this review of the literature, I will trace how narratives regarding alternative education have evolved over the last 50 years and explore definitions and theoretic typologies that represent the range of understandings associated with the concept. I will then review current research on alternative education, showing how narratives have formed three distinct discourses; each of which establishes assumptions about the purpose of alternative education, and I will examine both the promise and the problems that accompany different assumptions about the purpose of alternative education.

#### **Evolving Narratives of Alternative Education**

During the 1960s, the first alternative schools were private and intended to challenge the system. Arnove and Strout (1978) identified growing dissatisfaction with public schooling as the impetus for early alternative education, noting that many people had come to see public schools as, “alienating, dehumanizing, and racist” and “stiflingly boring and ineffective in transmitting even the basic skills” (p. 76). Free schools and freedom schools, often identified as the originators of the alternative school movement (Lange & Sletten, 2002), were inspired by this critical view of public education and what Raywid (1981) characterized as, “the educational humanism of the

1960s" (p. 551). Free schools valued students' emotional well-being above their academic achievements and were generally focused, "on the individual child's freedom from coercive approaches to learning" (Graubard, 1972, p. 353). The freedom schools, on the other hand, were founded by civil rights groups in hopes of providing a superior education to African-American students and increasing awareness of the civil rights movement (Perlstein, 1990).

By the early 1970s, alternative schools were created within public-school systems including open schools, which featured individualized instruction and innovative strategies (Young, 1990), and magnet schools, created as urban school districts attempted to meet the Supreme Court's order to desegregate (Fuller & Elmore, 1996). The 1970 White House Conference on Children, the 1972 President's Commission on School Finance, and the 1965 War on Poverty legislation all pushed for greater funding and development of public alternatives (Wells, 1993). Young (1990) estimated that in 1975 there were over 1000 public alternative schools, and by 1981, Raywid estimated that there were 10,000 public alternatives.

During this period, continuation schools, which had been commonplace during the early 1900s (Kelly, 1993), reemerged as a response to students who were perceived as a challenge to the structures within comprehensive schools. Young (1990) described continuation schools as options for students in danger of dropping out that, "were designed to provide a less competitive, more individualized approach to learning" (p. 14). However, continuation schools may also be closely associated with remediation, exclusion, and stigma since students who attend them are often either "dropouts" or "pushouts" unable or unwilling to conform to the expectations of comprehensive schools (Kelly, 1993). Young (1990) noted that by the early 1970s continuation schools were the second most common variation of alternative education, accounting for 21 percent of public alternative schools.

The growth of continuation schools foreshadows the shifting understanding of alternative education. By the mid-1970s, many school districts employed alternative education as a response

to student misbehavior. The 1976 National School Public Relations Association overview of school disciplinary policies identified alternative education as “the approach suggested most often for dealing with students who disrupt the education process” (Neill, 1976, p. 38). Arnove and Strout (1978) explained that by the late 1970s, “alternatives also increasingly connoted ‘alternatives to suspension’” (p. 80). As continuation schools grew in popularity, many of the more innovative public alternatives struggled. According to Deal (1975), the average early alternative lasted only 18 months. He attributed their lack of longevity to challenges with financing, autonomy, legitimacy, and accountability while existing within, “hostile ‘establishment’ environments” (p. 14) coupled with idealistic leaders that often lacked an understanding of organizational behavior.

As many of the original alternative programs closed their doors, new alternatives increasingly focused on serving students identified as at-risk or disruptive. Young (1990) described the shifting purpose of alternative education during the 1980s as, “less experimental, representing a more conservative educational climate and a different student clientele” (p. 19). Young’s study of alternative education programs in Washington state found that 53 percent of administrators perceived alternative education as serving, “low achievers,” “disruptive” or “turned off” students compared to 38 percent who identified alternative education being for “all kinds” (p. 20). Wells (1993) argued that after the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the focus of the national policy agenda shifted from individual student growth to “back-to-basics” reforms, and with this shift, the support for innovative public alternatives eroded.

In the early 1990s, new state and national policies also reflected this changing understanding of alternative education. The Clinton Administration created “The Gun Free Schools Act of 1994,” requiring a “zero tolerance” approach to reducing school violence and mandatory expulsions. State responses to “The Gun Free Schools Act” often included the creation

of alternative education programs to provide temporary educational settings for expelled students. At the same time, the Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Act passed in 1997 established guidelines for placing students with disabilities who commit certain disciplinary infractions into alternative educational settings. A 1998 study of state policies found that 57.9% of responding states had enacted legislation regulating alternative education and 37 of 38 responding states “endorsed” alternative education. While the study found significant variability between states’ definitions of alternative education, the authors cautioned that states must monitor programs to, “minimize placements based on administrative convenience or isolation of ‘undesirables’” (Katsiyannis & Williams, p. 282), commenting on the trend toward alternative education serving as safety valve for comprehensive schools.

In the wake of state and national policies defining alternative education as serving “at-risk” or “disruptive youth,” the number of alternative schools grew throughout the early 2000s with an increasingly narrow focus on serving students labeled “at-risk.” Citing estimates from two other studies, Lehr et al. (2004) noted that between 1997 and 2002 the number of public alternative schools serving “at-risk” students in the United States increased from 3,850 to 11,000. By 2009, Lehr, Tan, and Ysseldyke found that 88% of reporting states had alternative education programs that serve students with “behavioral problems not including a documented disability” (p. 27).

### **Alternative Education Definitions and Discourse**

The changing and varied understandings of alternative education have made definitions challenging (Porowski, O’Conner, & Lou, 2014). Kellmayer (1995) argued that, “the term alternative education has been applied indiscriminately to such a wide variety of programs that its

meaning has been clouded in confusion among educators, students, and the general public” (p. 2). Mary Ann Raywid (1990) reflected on the problematic lack of consensus surrounding the meaning of alternative education after the National Alternative Schools Conference where “real disagreements within the group over what alternative education is and what it should be” (p. 25) prevented the endorsement of a National Alternative Schools Day.

Morley (1991) saw alternative education as arising from the belief that, “everyone does not learn in the same way and should not be taught in the same way” (p. 10). Similarly, Young (1990) defined alternatives as providing: “greater responsiveness,” “a more focused instructional program,” “a noncompetitive environment,” and “greater autonomy,” (p. 3). Conversely, researchers have also labeled alternatives as “safety valves” releasing students from the traditional school system when they are perceived to challenge the structures within the system (Kelly, 1993), “dumping grounds” (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Kellmayer, 1995; Groth, 1998; Kim & Taylor, 2008), “spaces for remediation and warehousing” (Dunning-Lozano, 2016), and as a “pit stop” on the school-to-prison-pipeline (Horsford & Powell, 2016).

To address the need for common definitions, Raywid (1994) created a typology, grouping alternative schools into three categories: type I “popular innovations,” schools aimed at using innovative approaches that change the way school is structured and instruction is delivered; type II “last-chance programs,” which serve as safety valves and focus on modifying student behaviors and removing disruptive or dangerous students from the regular school setting; and type III “remedial focus programs,” which serve as safety nets and aim at improving the academic, social or emotional capacities of struggling students. A second typology labeled the three types of alternatives as those that attempt to “change the student,” those that attempt to “change the school,” and those that attempt to “change the system” (Raywid, 1999, p. 49).

Raywid’s typology reflects discourses, which have established divergent ways of understanding the purpose of alternative education. As narratives describing alternative education

evolved, clear patterns emerged regarding how people understand alternative education's purpose. These patterns, or discourses, are evident in the language of policies defining alternative education and they are evident in the practices that researchers have observed as they study alternative schools and programs. While Raywid's typology aspired to describe types of programs, both Raywid (1994) and Aron (2003) recognize that in practice alternatives often adopt features from across typologies. Research has consistently proven this to be true. Therefore, it may be more accurate to view Raywid's typology as illuminating three discourses, which illustrate distinct ways of thinking about alternative education.

As Gee (2012) explained, discourses establish, "taken-for-granted and tacit 'theories' about what counts as...the "right" ways to think, feel, and behave" (p. 4). Within each of the three primary discourses about alternative education, there are certain assumed "truths" about the nature of alternative schooling and the students it is intended to serve. Furthermore, the "truths" contained in the varied discourses can be contradictory. For example, the idea that alternative education is the best response to a broken system that underserves and marginalizes many students is a common assumption within discourse describing type I or true alternatives. In contrast, the assumption that some students are dangerous or disruptive and need to be removed from the regular population to ensure the safety and efficiency of comprehensive schools is at the core of discourse describing type II, safety valve alternatives. Because these distinctions may be better understood as ways of thinking about alternative education rather than denoting discrete program types, in practice, an individual alternative school can be associated with multiple different discourses.

Kennedy-Lewis, Whitaker, Soutullo (2016) examined practitioners' perceptions of a disciplinary alternative program; their study illustrates the potential for multiple discourses to align within an individual educator's beliefs about alternative education. Using the term discourse to denote language within its social context, the authors found two contrasting discourses were

evident within practitioners' perceptions of the alternative program, a discourse of safety and a discourse of equity. They found that the discourse of safety arose from narratives that describe alternative education as a safety valve or safety net, retaining students in the system, preventing drop-outs, and improving safety in the comprehensive school by secluding "dangerous" and "disruptive" students. The discourse of equity on the other hand aligned with views that alternative education should change the nature of schooling. The researchers found that these two discourses were often evident within the rationalizations of individual teachers, who viewed sending students to the alternative program as mutually beneficial since it promoted safety and efficiency in the comprehensive school and allowed students to receive the educational services they need to change behaviors and become successful. The issue the researchers uncovered with this convergence of perceptions is that there was no evidence that students benefitted from their placement in the alternative program, so the discourse of equity simply masked the truth that the program existed to improve the safety of the comprehensive school at the expense of students' access to equitable educational experiences.

Kennedy-Lewis et al. (2016) demonstrated the importance of examining discourse regarding alternative education and understanding the problematic nature of discourses that view alternative education as a mechanism for improving the safety, security, and efficiency of comprehensive schools. Using the concept of discourse differently, this study focuses on how broader, macro discourses describe alternative education's purpose in three different and contrasting ways. These three discourses aligned with the findings of Kennedy-Lewis et al.'s (2016) study, showing that local discourses describe alternative education as providing equity, changing the school, and safety, changing the student or removing the student. These three discourses establish and legitimize certain views of alternative education while delegitimizing others. Ultimately, they each establish certain possibilities for the creation of alternative schools and programs. Some of these possibilities promote promising approaches to schooling that may

meet the myriad needs and interests of students and families within a pluralistic society. Other possibilities are problematic as they may lead to the creation of alternative schools that stigmatize students and deprive them of equal educational experiences.

### **True, Innovative Alternative Discourse**

True, innovative alternative discourse describes alternative education as a potential tool for changing how schools function, addressing the “mismatch [that] exists between the structure of schools and the cultural, social, and linguistic background of some segments of the student population” (Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006, p. 6). Within this discourse alternative schools and programs are often referred to as “true alternatives” (Graubard, 1972; Garrison, 1987; Groth, 1998), “schools of choice” (Raywid, 1994; Morely, 1991; Barr & Parrett, 1997), “laboratory schools” (Arnone & Strout, 1978; Barr, 1981), or “innovative alternatives” (Edwards, 2013; Raywid, 1983). Assumptions at the core of this discourse include the belief that student failure, misbehavior, and dropout are symptoms of a disconnect between a student and the school environment, that all students can learn in the right environment, and that a healthy school system provides multiple approaches to learning to account for the different needs and interests of students and families. Alternative schools that embrace the assumptions espoused within this discourse alter the environment, goals, and practices of schooling.

While less often the subject of empirical research than safety net and safety valve alternatives, there are a number of true alternatives depicted in practitioner and theoretical literature. Nikhil Goyal (2016) described contemporary true alternatives, including the Brightworks School in San Francisco, which features entirely interdisciplinary and project-based learning, the Brooklyn Free School where there are no required classes and students have a voice and vote in shaping school policy, and the Philly Free School where a student judiciary board

resolves conflicts within the school. Most of the alternative schools Goyal described are private or existing outside the system with the exception of the Workshop School in Philadelphia. The Workshop School is a true public alternative where students spend half of their school day working on interdisciplinary projects and the other half of their day in elective classes and shops.

John Kellmeyer (1995) also described a public true alternative, which he founded, the Atlantic County Alternative High School (ACAHS). According to Kellmeyer, ACAHS maintains an 86% graduation rate and prepares graduates to enroll in college, despite serving students who traditionally experience high rates of dropout and significantly lower graduation rates. A key to the school's success is its location on the campus of a community college. This location enables students, who are academically ready, to take college classes. It also provides students with the experience of cultural immersion into higher education, building both the academic and social skills students need to succeed in college. This rethinking of the structure of schooling typifies the values and beliefs associated with innovative or true alternatives.

While neither Kellmeyer (1995) nor Goyal's (2016) descriptions of true alternatives employed empirical research, there are studies that indicate alternative education has been used to change the structure of schooling. For example, research indicates that alternative schools and programs often offer caring and close-knit communities rarely achieved within comprehensive schools (Gold & Mann, 1984; De La Ossa, 2005; Kennedy, 2011; McClay, 2011; Farrelly, 2013). Raywid (1993) described communality as a defining characteristic of alternative schools, calling community "the magic of alternatives" (p. 23).

Nasir et al. (2013) described how community in alternative schools can disrupt traditional, hierarchical power dynamics, empowering students who have been previously marginalized within the comprehensive school. The authors identified this dynamic in a study of an alternative program serving an all-male, African-American student population. The authors argued that within the program, "dominant notions of race and power were transformed through

an alternative system of discipline and a different way of viewing the students” (p. 490), changing “students’ mainstream experiences with school discipline” (p. 492). Nasir et al. make the case that because teachers develop meaningful relationships and assume the best about students, they invert the traditional “ideology and repression” (p. 494) that the students have experienced.

### **Safety Net Discourse**

A second discourse describes alternative education as a “safety net” (Kelly, 1993; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Becker, 2010), “therapeutic” (Raywid, 1993; Farlar, 2005; Aaron, 2006) or “remedial” (Raywid, 1994). Within this discourse, the purpose of alternative education is associated with care but also treatment intended to change the child. Assumptions at the heart of this discourse include: the belief that students fail, misbehave, and dropout because of personal or familial issues that can be corrected and the belief that it is essential to find ways to retain students within the educational system.

This discourse also links alternative education to students labeled “at risk.” Hemmer (2011) explains that conceptualizations of at-risk include views that schools must engage in “child saving,” but by attempting to predict who will be at risk and constructing categories of risk, many narratives introduce the, “issue of *fault* of the deficiencies found in students or their families and/or communities” (p. 77). While the origins of the term “at risk may” be an interest in promoting equitable outcomes for students underserved by schools, an unavoidable byproduct of this construct is the placing of blame and stigmatizing certain student groups and their families. Giroux (2003) problematized the evolution of conceptualizations of at risk, arguing that:

in a society marked by deep racial, economic, and social inequalities, youth have become the risk. Such perceptions signal a growing shift in the public's consciousness of young

people and a willingness to support legislation that portrays many young people as a threat to the social order (p. 61).

Alternative education policies often follow this paradigm, growing out of a view that certain students are a threat to the order of schools and therefore require alternative education.

“At risk,” much like alternative education, can be understood in two ways. One emerges from the belief that schools are structured in such a way that they either fail to serve some students or push them to the margins by design, grouping students into the normal and capable and the abnormal and incapable. The other implication of the term is that some students are flawed and in need of treatment. Within this view, their lack of ability or normalcy becomes as Giroux (2003) argued, “a threat to the social order” requiring policy that allows for removal and remediation of those seen as incapable and abnormal. Ball (2013) applied Foucault’s description of the “the exile and the leper” and the “whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, and correcting the abnormal,” (p. 86) to unpack the term “at risk.” Ball explains that “schools act strategically to avoid these lepers, costly and unproductive students—those with special needs, behavioral difficulties, unsupportive parents, or another mother tongue” (p. 109).

When linked to students labeled “at risk,” alternative education has both promising and problematic implications. Gold and Mann (1984) contested that when alternative schools fulfill students’ need for relationships and opportunities for success, they reduce delinquent behavior. Kennedy’s (2011) study of California’s Community Day Schools (CDSs) illustrated the benefits associated with safety net alternatives. Because the CDSs in the study maintained small class sizes, the opportunity for trusted teachers to provide empathy and modeling allowed students to feel safe and “try on new academic and social identities” (p. 20). Creating new identities allowed students to see themselves as capable, changing their approach to academics and creating the potential for improved academic performance and outcomes. Unfortunately, Kennedy found that these new identities often do not persist once students leave the program. Kennedy highlighted a

primary problem with viewing alternative education as treatment; alternative schools designed with this understanding are often temporary placements. However, when students return to comprehensive schools, they are likely to experience the same challenges that caused them to seek out or be sent to an alternative school in the first place, and many times this return is further complicated by the stigma of having attended an alternative school for “at risk” youth.

Kelly (1993) argued that “stigmatizing hierarchies” are a primary flaw of alternative schools, which need to be addressed if alternative schools are to realize their potential to assist students, “who feel alienated by the current system” (p. 216). Much like the stigmatization that accompanies being labeled “at risk” because of poverty, abuse, neglect, teenage pregnancy, or learning disability, alternative schools understood as a catchall solution to these problems are often seen as second-rate and lower on the institutional hierarchy than comprehensive schools. The view of alternative schools as a subclass is often evident in the facilities of alternative schools (Tallerico & Burstyn, 2004; Dunning-Lozano, 2016), the sense among teachers and principals that working in an alternative school resulted in lower status (Kelly, 1993), and in arguments that alternatives should be temporary environments returning remediated students to the more legitimate academic environment of the comprehensive school as soon as possible. While safety net alternatives may retain students in the educational system and provide connection to needed support services, the pairing of these benefit with labeling and categorizing of students results in stigma. Kelly highlighted this unfortunate trend, asking, “Is it possible to create an alternative environment for pushouts, dropouts, and potential dropouts without stigma?” (p. 68).

Negative perceptions of alternative education and stigma associated with attending an alternative school have been noted in a number of studies. Graham’s (2015) study of a North Carolina alternative school serving “at-risk” students found that despite the faculty’s consistent belief that the school was “a good place to work and learn” (p. 300) 57% of faculty felt that the

school was not respected in the community. Similarly, studies by De La Ossa (2005) and Dunning-Lozano (2016) both found that students believed the alternative school was better than the comprehensive school but recognized that it is perceived negatively by the community. Prior (2010) described students developing bonds with teachers and reengaging in their education while enrolled in an alternative school. However, upon return to the comprehensive school, those students were labeled as “trouble makers,” which would effectively undo the confidence and renewed sense of connection to their education students had developed.

Closely associated with alternative education stigma is the assumption that alternatives feature rote and remedial instructional practices. Barr and Parrett (2001) illustrated a problem associated with labeling students “at risk” in that this label is often accompanied by a misunderstanding that these students need reduced academic expectations despite significant research showing the benefits of high expectations and academic challenge. “Rote behavioral techniques” and “lowered academic standards” (Munoz, 2004, p. 5) are persistent themes in studies of alternative schools. Findings from a large-scale quantitative study (Ryan, 2009) suggested that there is a pattern of reduced academic expectations in alternative schools. Using data from the 2003-2004 national Schools and Staffing Survey, Ryan found that shorter school days and self-paced instruction were predictive of alternative schools while graduation rates and graduate attendance of four-year colleges were both negatively correlated with alternative education.

Many qualitative studies illustrate how reduced academic expectations manifest in alternative schools. Kim and Taylor (2008) described pedagogy characterized by rote learning in an effort to remediate credit instead of developing, “critical thinking, synthesis, and higher order thinking” (p. 31), which precludes attaining a college education and entering professional fields. Groth (1998) found that by featuring computer-based instruction an alternative school helped to retain students in the system but failed to provide an educational experience comparable to that

offered in the mainstream school. Others have found that alternatives prioritize, “discipline and behavior management over student learning and engagement” (Horsford and Powell, 2016, p. 21), “attendance, punctuality, and productivity rather than academic content” (Kelly, 1993, p. 172), and pedagogy, “informed by an ideology of and methodology that typifies the notion of remediation” (Munoz, 2004, p. 14).

### **Safety Valve Discourse**

The final discourse describes alternative education as a safety valve for the larger public-school system. Within this discourse, by allowing the public-school system to siphon off students who are perceived as “disruptive,” “deviant,” “undesirable,” or “dangerous,” alternative education serves as place to store or to serve, depending on the perspective, students removed from comprehensive schools. Within this discourse alternative schools have been identified as: “disciplinary alternative education” (Watson, 2014), a “safety valve” (Kelly, 1993; Kennedy-Lewis et al., 2016), a “dumping ground” (Barr, 1981; Aron, 2003; Graham, 2015; Dunning-Lozano, 2016), “punitive” alternatives (Raywid, 1994; Obleton, 2010), “last chance” schools (Kelly, 1993; Leone & Drakeford, 1999), and “warehouses” (Arnové & Strout, 1978; Farrelly, 2013). Some of the labels, which have been attached to alternative education within this discourse, such as dumping grounds and warehouses, are intended to expose this conceptualization of alternative education as a false and problematic one. However, not all researchers share this view. In fact, this contrast in authors’ intention as they describe disciplinary alternative education raises the question of whether it should be viewed as a single discourse or two competing discourses, one that recognizes this understanding of alternative education as necessary and one that problematizes this understanding and views it as a misapplication of alternative education.

Discourse that views punitive alternatives as necessary rests on the assumption that when students threaten the safety, security, and efficiency of comprehensive schools they need to be removed from school but provided access to an educational alternative. Another core assumption within this discourse is that alternative schools serve as a deterrent, a punitive threat that prevents students from acting out within the comprehensive school so as to avoid being assigned to an alternative school. A central tension within this discourse is revealed when we recognize that there are students, though probably a significantly smaller number than are currently assigned to disciplinary alternative schools, whose behaviors may make it necessary to remove them from the comprehensive school. However, viewing alternative education in this way creates significant problems. As Gregg (1999) pointed out, a “punitive purpose may put educators in the awkward—if not unconscionable—position of creating schools undesirable enough to deter bad behavior” (p. 109).

To many alternative education theorists, schools that serve this safety valve function are incorrectly labeled as alternative education. Kellmayer (1995) called these safety valves, “punitive, ineffective programs... masquerading as ‘alternative’ schools” (p. xii). Barr (1981) argued that alternative “dumping grounds” are created when school leaders misunderstand and misapply the concept of alternative education. Raywid (1981) labeled these punitive alternatives, “a misnomer,” (p. 191) arguing that to be an alternative school a school must appeal to some interest or need of students and families who then choose to enroll in the program. Despite the unified view among leading alternative education researchers and theorists that punitive alternatives are not alternatives at all, there is evidence that this form of alternative school is commonplace in Pennsylvania (Hosley, 2003; Hosley et al. 2009).

However, examples of safety valve alternative schools are evident in studies conducted across the United States. Kim’s (2006) narrative inquiry study of Borderlands Alternative School in Arizona is a notable example of a punitive or type II alternative. Borderlands is a public

alternative of assignment; all students attending the school are sent by the administration of other schools within the district as a response to rule violations. Capturing the voice of five members of the school community, two students, a teacher, an administrator, and a security guard who serves as disciplinarian, Kim portrayed the school as dominated by hierarchical enforcement of rules and commitment to rote instructional practices. All of the interviewed school employees articulated a desire to “inculcate rules to kids” because “they need to learn how to behave so they can function in society as a cashier or something” (p. 7). The students on the other hand commented on the oppressiveness of the rules within the system, the lack of compassion, and curricular and pedagogic practices whereby teachers, “regurgitate the stuff they are supposed to teach” much of which is “biased and pointless” (p. 12). The study illustrates what happens when alternative education is understood as a safety valve or dumping ground. Students are assigned to the program as a disciplinary consequence; they are viewed and treated as if they are problematic; and they are provided with a substandard education.

Despite how clearly problematic alternative education is when it serves as a safety valve, ultimately, there are many reasons why punitive alternative education models are becoming more common within public-school systems, including a policy context that centralizes authority over curriculum and espouses zero tolerance. Kelly (1993) argued that safety valve alternative schools fill two essential roles for public-school organizations in that they, “provide[s] a mechanism to rid mainstream schools of failures and misfits without holding school administrators fully accountable for the consequences” and “administrators districtwide could use the continuation school as a threat in order to marshal students into conformity” (p. 68). Losen and Gillespie (2012) made another argument for the necessity of safety valve alternatives, contesting that in comparison to traditional forms of exclusionary discipline, alternative educational placements offer potential benefits for students, such as: “a greater focus on fostering appropriate behavior, and an increase, rather than a decrease, in adult attention and supervision” (p. 11).

While they may be a permanent fixture in public education, safety valve alternatives have been linked with decreasing equal educational opportunities and increasing rates of incarceration (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010; Horsford & Powell, 2016). Studies of Texas Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEPs) have linked these disciplinary alternative programs with criminalization of school level misbehavior. Studies attribute this trend to a growing disparity between the “legislative intent” of DAEP law, which was to establish mandatory placement in DAEPs for students who engage in criminal and dangerous behaviors, and their actual use, resulting in placement for school level disciplinary infractions (Reyes, 2001-2002). A second study found that discretionary placements account for as many as 71 percent of all placements in Texas DAEPs (Tajalli & Garba, 2015). The end result is the criminalization of school level misbehavior and enrollment in programs intended for dangerous and criminal offenses. Giroux (2003) equated zero tolerance policies with a war on youth in America, “especially those marginalized by class and color” (p. 60), explaining that zero tolerance, initially intended to be a response to a narrow range of student misbehaviors has expanded over time, and these policies “redefine students as criminals and as a result, increasing numbers of young people are suspended, arrested, or expelled from school, often for ludicrous reasons” (p. 62).

Another issue with safety valve alternative schools is that there are indications that students of color and students with disabilities are involuntarily enrolled at disproportionate rates in comparison to non-disabled and white students. Studies of school disciplinary practices have shown nationwide trends towards higher rates of suspension for African-American students (Losen and Skiba, 2010). Research indicates that there are similar trends for disproportionate assignment to disciplinary alternative education programs. A Texas study found that 29.3 percent of students in Texas DAEPs were African-American compared to 14 percent of the school population (Tajalli & Garba, 2015). Similarly, a survey of alternative school leaders in a Midwestern state found that 22 percent of students in alternative schools were identified as

needing special education services, which is nearly double the national rate of special education enrollment (Wasburn-Moses, 2011).

The Education Law Center (2013) identified disproportionate placement of students with disabilities and African-American students as a persistent problem in Pennsylvania's AEDY programs. The data showed that between 2008 and 2011, African-American students accounted for over 35 percent of AEDY placements in the state while only accounting for 16 percent of all students. During the same time period, students with disabilities accounted for 37.8 percent to 42.6 percent of AEDY placements while only accounting for 15 percent of all students in Pennsylvania's public schools (Educational Law Center, 2013).

### **Merging and Competing Discourse**

While some alternative schools are easily distinguishable and fit neatly into typologies, research indicates that there can be significant differences between alternative schools with similar formal aims, as can be seen in the contrast between continuation schools that create college-going cultures (Farris, 2014) and dropout prevention alternative schools identified as increasing the likelihood of incarceration (Kim et al., 2010). A potential reason for this variance is the presence of discourses that establish different ways of understanding the purpose of alternative education. The effect of these discourses is perhaps most striking in individual alternative schools where there are contrasting understandings of alternative education and its purpose.

There are a number of examples in the research on alternative schools and programs influenced by two or all three discourses. Watson (2014) found that students benefitted from the experience of attending an alternative school, but these benefits were compromised by the presence of a "false binary" whereby alternative education is perceived as serving "bad kids" and

comprehensive education was perceived as serving “good kids.” As a result, before they can benefit from alternative education students proceed through a stigmatizing process of failure, labeling, and rejection, which is then repeated when they leave the alternative school. Also, Bland et al. (2008) found that an alternative school featured caring relationships between teachers and students, student empowerment, and the absence of competition. However, the absence of competition contributed to a belief within the community that the school offered an inferior academic experience. In both studies, the environment of the alternative school aligns with discourses describing true alternatives. However, in the community surrounding the alternative school, the perceptions align with discourse that views alternative education as a safety valve.

Other studies have found a similar disconnect can exist within a single alternative school. Horsford and Powell (2016) found that school climate was paradoxical in that the alternative school was clearly punitive and stigmatizing but at the same time the teachers were dedicated to the needs of their students and formed close, caring relationships. Similarly, Hollowell (2009) portrayed a Georgia disciplinary alternative with a highly committed and caring faculty and administration, but also a padded room where disruptive students are kept in isolation. Kim and Taylor (2008) contrasted the differing understandings that can exist within a single alternative school, explaining:

A multidimensional state of disequilibrium permeates the school environment. One side represents a state of caring that exists between the students, teachers, and administrators. Another facet discloses an authoritarian and hegemonic bureaucracy, which prevents the school from providing an education beneficial to the students (p. 33).

There is also evidence for contrasting understandings of alternative education and the influence of three divergent discourses in Pennsylvania’s AEDY policy. The policy states a primary objective of, “temporarily removing persistently disruptive students” (PDE, 2013, p. 1), which clearly aligns with discourse describing alternative education as a safety valve. The policy

defines disruptive students as those who have committed at least one of seven infractions: “persistent” school policy violations, drug related offenses, violent acts, possession of a weapon, criminal misconduct, behavior that would merit suspension or expulsion, and habitual truancy. These aspects of the policy suggest that AEDY’s purpose is to create safety valves. However, the policy also reflects discourse that describes alternative education as changing the school. For example, the policy aspires to ensure that, “every student has the opportunity for success” by assisting “districts and schools in creating academic programs that meet Pennsylvania’s rigorous academic standards” (PDE, 2013, p. 1). At the same time, many attributes of the policy are in line with a view of alternative education serving as a safety net, providing treatment and returning students to comprehensive schools once they have been rehabilitated. For example, the policy acknowledges that some students, “require additional supports in an alternative placement” and that alternative schools must, “provide behavioral supports and counseling aimed at modifying the disruptive behavior” (PDE, 2013, p. 1).

### **Chapter Summary**

Narratives about alternative education have evolved significantly between the beginning of the alternative education movement in the 1960s and the emergence of zero tolerance policies in the 1990s. These narratives have resulted in three distinct discourses or patterns in how people talk about alternative education, constructing and limiting what can be perceived as true and possible. These discourses can coexist within a single alternative school as well as within policies defining alternative education’s purpose. While these discourses can often be found in close proximity, they espouse dramatically different views of alternative education, and their implications can be antithetical. Discourse, which calls for true, innovative alternatives, is likely to result in experimental school designs. Discourse describing alternative education as providing

a safety net, helping to reengage and remediate students labeled at risk are less likely to result in innovative teaching approaches and often come with a level of stigma. Safety valves on the other hand are unlikely to be innovative, likely to be punitive, and unavoidably stigmatizing. Research indicates that there are increasing numbers of alternative schools and programs that serve to remove or remediate students, and that alternative education is less often viewed as tool for changing the school system.

However, many of the studies tracking these trends use quantitative methods and are unable to examine why alternative education is increasingly used as a tool for changing students instead of changing schools. As I will explain further in chapter three, this study employs qualitative interview methodology to examine the understandings of alternative school and program leaders, identifying themes and patterns within their understandings and how they align with the three prevailing discourses, which describe alternative education as a safety valve, safety net, or opportunity to change the nature of schooling. The understandings of school leaders are likely to be one of the most important factors in determining what alternative education becomes. Leaders are directed by their mindscapes (Sergiovanni, 1992), their values, beliefs, and understandings. At the same time leadership, unlike management, aspires to shape the thoughts and feelings of practitioners (Alvesson, 2002). The “the belief systems of faculty” (Tschannen-Moran, Salloum, & Goddard, 2014) and teachers’ values (Lazaridou & Fris, 2005) shape behavior within schools.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Questions**

This exploratory study examines alternative school leaders' understandings of alternative education and its purpose, and it examines how their understandings relate to three prevailing discourses, which define alternative education as creating opportunities for innovative schools, safety nets, and safety valves. Specifically, this study will address the following questions:

How is the purpose of alternative education understood by alternative school leaders?

What patterns and themes are evident across alternative school leaders' understandings of alternative education?

How do these patterns and themes align with prevailing alternative education discourses?

#### **Choice of Methodology**

This study used qualitative interview methodology to examine alternative school leaders' understandings of alternative education. Other studies in Pennsylvania have used quantitative methods to identify trends in how schools use alternative education (Hosley, 2003; Hosley et al., 2009), establishing that there is an increasing tendency for public schools to use alternative education as a safety valve, allowing for the removal of students who are perceived as "disruptive." However, qualitative methods were selected for this study because they allow for a closer examination of the understandings of alternative school leaders, enabling the researcher to identify emerging themes and patterns within alternative school leaders' understandings of

alternative education's purpose and how those understandings relate to three prevailing discourses.

Krathwohl (2009) recommends using qualitative methods in situations where an inductive approach is required, including:

- When research is lacking in an area and one must emphasize discovery rather than corroboration of a hypothesis. The focus and design of the study is not preplanned; it develops as work proceeds; it is an emergent study.
- Because the nature of the program or process is sufficiently diffuse that goals are best discerned in the research process rather than determined beforehand.
- When research progress in an area has plateaued and you are seeking a new perspective for a fresh start or are attempting to find something that was overlooked in previous work. (p. 237)

Each of these conditions is true for this study. Research on alternative education in Pennsylvania has focused on tightly defined versions of alternative education, such as AEDY programs.

However, AEDY programs really only represent one type of alternative school, those that remove students who are viewed as disruptive or safety valves. This study aspires to examine the insights of the full spectrum of district controlled alternative schools, which would not be possible using narrowly defined categories of alternative education. The choice to open this study up to a broader, more inclusive group of alternative school leaders offers the opportunity for a “fresh perspective” and more comprehensive view of how alternative education is perceived by those doing the work of leading alternative schools and programs, making qualitative methodology preferable.

Also, this “fresh perspective” requires the identification of a loosely defined group of alternative schools and programs and their leaders. The alternative schools and programs in the sampling population for this study meet Krathwohl's (2009) criterion that qualitative methods are

preferable when a, “program or process is sufficiently diffuse” (p. 237). The many schools and programs within the geographic boundaries of the study that fit Raywid’s definition of alternative education are rarely viewed as part of one coherent movement or group of schools. Instead, they represent widely varied approaches to schooling and a range of educational purposes. This variance also makes qualitative methodology more appropriate since it allows for a more flexible approach to participant selection and data collection, revising procedures throughout the process of data collection and analysis. Also, the emergent nature of the study requires methodology that allows for adaptation and adjustment throughout the process of data collection and analysis to respond to the variance within this loosely defined grouping of schools and programs.

Qualitative methods are also preferred for this study because the research questions require that I develop insights into themes and patterns across leaders’ perceptions of the purpose of alternative education. The theoretical framework for this study suggests that leaders’ beliefs, understandings, and values or their “mindscapes” (Sergiovanni, 1992) are shaped by discourses that define the purpose of alternative education. However, these discourses do not exist in isolation from each other. While quantitative research allows for identification of the trends within alternative education’s use, qualitative methods are best suited for examining the nuanced interaction between conflicting discourses and their influence on both individual leaders’ understandings of alternative education and the overarching trends in how alternative school leaders understand alternative education’s purpose.

### **Sampling Population**

For this study, purposive sampling was used to identify appropriate participants. Silverman (2010) suggested that purposive sampling is preferable for qualitative studies because it allows for selection of cases that the researcher anticipates will be most “illustrative” (p. 141)

of the phenomenon of interest. However, it also requires clearly defined “parameters of the population we are studying” (p. 141). The population for this study consisted of leaders of district controlled, brick and mortar, alternative schools and programs serving students in grades nine through twelve. Privately operated alternative schools, even those contracted by school districts, virtual schools, charter schools, and alternative schools operated by an intermediate unit or consortium of school districts were all excluded from the study. Magnet schools, hybrid schools with a virtual component, and special enrollment or theme-based schools operated by a school district were included in the sampling population for the study.

Because alternative schools are often overseen by a comprehensive school principal or a district level administrator who has other responsibilities and a limited role within the alternative school or program, only leaders whose role within the alternative school makes up at least 50% of their full-time position were included within the study. This selection criterion was established because a district level administrator, such as a director of special education, with a large number of responsibilities other than the oversight of an alternative program is likely to have a very different perspective on the purpose of alternative education than a head teacher whose entire job consists of work within an alternative school or program. A study of alternative schools in Illinois found that one in every five schools used centralized as opposed to site-based management (Foley & Pang, 2006). In Pennsylvania, alternative schools appear more likely to lack a dedicated administrator. Hosley’s (2003) survey of school districts found that alternative programs are administered by a, “principal with combined duties 37 percent of the time and an administrator, not a principal, with combined duties an additional 25 percent of the time” (p. 15).

The abstract nature of both leadership and alternative education made participant selection for this study challenging. Since the study aspires to develop a comprehensive picture of how alternative school and program leaders understand alternative education, it was essential to include participants that are representative of the full range of district controlled alternative

schools and programs operated within eastern Pennsylvania. The need for this study arises from the variance across understandings of alternative education, so adopting an inclusive definition of alternative schools and programs for the study's sampling population was essential. To examine the varied perceptions of alternative education across the region, it was important to avoid limiting participants to a strictly defined alternative type, such as AEDY programs, since that would likely yield a limited view of what the purpose of alternative education is and can be.

To mitigate this threat to the studies' internal validity, a clear and inclusive definition of alternative education was used to guide participant selection: Raywid's (1983) definition of alternative education as "an administrative unit with its own personnel and program: a school or a school-within a-school, but not just a course or a course sequence" (p. 191) that has an instructional mission, pedagogic practices, and/or student population that differ from the comprehensive school. While Raywid limited her definition to programs voluntarily chosen by students and families, I omitted this portion of her definition for the purpose of participant selection. Raywid's argument that alternative education is something that is selected by a student or family would exclude a number of schools and programs that are identified as alternative education within eastern Pennsylvania, such as AEDY programs, which are enrolled through administrative placement as opposed to parental or student selection. Including these programs was essential to the study's goal of exploring the varied understandings of alternative education within the geographic boundaries of the study.

The many differing understandings of leadership also posed a challenge for participant selection. Varied leadership structures are prevalent in alternative schools and programs, which often employ non-traditional leadership models. It is fairly common for an alternative school or program to have a district level administrator as the defined school administrator, and to have a teacher or counselor who is the de facto leader. Excluding programs because they lack a traditional administrative leader would also prevent the study from accomplishing its goal of

casting a broad net and exploring the varied understandings of alternative education in the region. Therefore, to identify leaders for inclusion in the study, a broad conceptualization of school leader was employed allowing for the selection of alternative schools with nontraditional leadership structures. This broad conceptualization of leader also ensured that participants are directly involved in the day to day functioning of the alternative school, not a district or comprehensive school administrator for whom administering the alternative school is only one of many responsibilities.

Citing the lack of research and theory that looks beyond formally assigned leadership roles, Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004) recognized that leadership changes depending on task, and each instance of leadership practice involves leaders, followers, and a context. Within this theory, school leadership is not a position but instead an action based on a certain task and context. Spillane et al. define school leadership as involving, “the identification, acquisition, allocation, co-ordination, and use of the social, material, and cultural resources necessary to establish the conditions for the possibility of teaching and learning” (p. 11). Drawing from this definition and theory, I defined leaders, for the purpose of participant selection in this study, as individuals for whom work within the alternative school or program makes up more than fifty percent of her or his time and job responsibilities, and she or he is the person most often responsible for: mission and vision, school culture and climate, obtaining and distributing resources, faculty professional development, teacher evaluation, and managing student behavior (Spillane et al., 2004, p. 13).

### **Participant Selection**

Participants for the study were identified by screening all school district websites within eastern Pennsylvania to first find district controlled alternative schools and programs that meet

the criteria established above and then to identify a leader within each alternative school and program. Districts within the sample were identified using Pennsylvania Department of Education's Educational Names & Addresses (EdNA) directory and PDE's map of Intermediate Units. All school districts within counties served by Intermediate Units 14, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, and 25 were included within the sample. In total, 149 school districts were included.

Philadelphia, served by IU 26, was not included within the sample because Philadelphia's approach to alternative education is significantly different than the surrounding communities. The Philadelphia School District has moved away from a uniformly neighborhood school or comprehensive school model to feature many theme-based, special enrollment schools. While there are still some neighborhood schools within the district, there are now over 20 high schools that are special enrollment schools such as STEM schools, art academies, and music academies. There are also a number of schools that are labeled alternative education within the district; however, the majority of these schools are governed by private organizations who hold contracts with the school district. Because of how different Philadelphia is in their approach to school organization, including Philadelphia's alternative school leaders would require a change to the original design for the study, requiring a comparative case approach since views of alternative education within the district are likely to be largely influenced by district policies. While Philadelphia's approach to school organization and alternative education is interesting, including Philadelphia would have been beyond the scope and the initial intent and design of the study.

Participants within the sample were identified by exploring school district websites. The process of locating leaders of appropriate schools and programs involved: reviewing each district website's list of schools, typing terms such as alternative, AEDY, academy, and program into the website search bar, reviewing high school faculty rosters, and reviewing high school student handbooks. This initial search revealed 28 schools and programs meeting the inclusion criteria within the geographic boundaries of the study. Recognizing the likelihood that other alternative

schools and programs are operated by school districts within the geographic boundaries of the study, a request was made to all participants that they refer other potential participants

An initial recruitment email with a link to the survey was sent to the identified leader of each of these 28 schools and programs. Two weeks later a follow up recruitment email was sent to this group requesting completion of the survey. This initial recruitment resulted in only two responses, and one was screened out after the participant indicated that oversight of the alternative program made up a small percentage of his or her overall role. To improve participation rates, follow up phone calls and individual emails were sent to each of the participants. These phone calls improved participation. They also highlighted challenges with participant identification and recruitment. One issue revealed during follow up phone calls was that some of the websites had outdated and incomplete information. In some cases, programs identified on the website were no longer functioning. In other cases, the leaders identified on a website were no longer in the identified role or the leader was only assigned to work in the program on a part time basis. Four respondents identified themselves as partially responsible to the alternative program while holding many responsibilities throughout the school and/or district. Of these respondents, one was able to refer a dedicated leader of the alternative program not identified on the website. Another group of eligible participants was hesitant to complete the study because they did not see their schools as alternatives and therefore believed that they had no insight into the purpose of alternative education.

In response to these emerging challenges, additional steps were taken to identify and recruit participants. First, a list of comprehensive high school principals was compiled using school district websites. These principals were emailed a description of the study and the attributes of appropriate participants with a request that a link to the survey be forwarded to leaders of alternative programs that operate within their comprehensive high schools. Two weeks

later, a reminder email was sent to principals of schools that had not forwarded the survey to an alternative program leader.

Additionally, as it became apparent that many individuals who lead schools and programs that fit the inclusion criteria for the study do not view their schools as alternative education, a pattern emerged. Leaders of alternative schools that fit Raywid's description of innovative or true alternatives – STEM schools, science academies, and other specialty schools – seemed less likely to associate their work with alternative education and were therefore not represented in the first group of respondents. In order to capture the understandings of various alternative school types, it was essential to include these leader's voices during data collection, so an additional recruitment email was created targeting these individuals, which was followed by a phone call requesting participation in only the second phase of data collection. Emails and phone calls were used to recruit leaders of these innovative alternatives to participate in the interviews, and leaders of innovative alternatives did prove to be more responsive to phone calls and more willing to participate in the study when invited to just participate in the follow up interview.

In total, ten participants responded to the survey. Because of the small number of participants in the survey, all ten were invited to participate in the follow up interviews. Seven of the ten agreed and participated in an interview. Additionally, some individuals from the original sampling pool were contacted again by both phone and email to solicit their participation in interviews. In particular all leaders of type I alternatives from the initial sampling population were invited to participate in an interview because this group was not represented in the survey data, and their participation was essential to fulfill the goal of examining the understandings leaders of a broadly defined group of alternative schools. Two additional participants from this group agreed to participate in the study, bringing the total number of participants for the study to twelve, with two individuals only completing the interview, three individuals only completing the survey, and seven individuals completing both the interview and the survey.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

To answer the research questions, this study employed two phases of data collection. The first phase consisted of a survey with five open-ended questions administered to leaders in district-controlled alternative schools in eastern Pennsylvania. The survey was distributed through a web-based survey platform, Qualtrics. The second phase of data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted over the phone or in person based on participant preference.

Surveys were developed to elicit initial insights into alternative school leaders' understandings of alternative education and its purpose. Recognizing the limited information on district websites and the potential for inaccurate identification of participants, participants were asked to answer screening questions prior to completing the survey. The first screening question was used to confirm that the participant worked at least 50% of the time in an alternative school or program. Because of the potential that a participant's perception of what is and what is not alternative education might vary from the definition used for this study, a broad and inclusive explanation of what programs are appropriate for the study with examples was included in the first screening question. The second screening question was used to confirm that participants were leaders within their school or program. Participants who answered yes to both questions were invited to review the informed consent information before beginning the survey.

The survey itself consisted of five open-ended questions. The first question asked for further detail about the alternative school or program at which the participant works. This question was included to address research question number 3, which explores patterns and themes within alternative school leaders' understandings of alternative education and its purpose. The final four questions each were designed to provide an opportunity for participants to explain their

understandings of alternative education by describing their views of its purpose, the students alternative education should serve, and competing views of alternative education they experience.

In phase two of data collection semi-structured interviews were conducted to further probe themes that emerged during initial analysis of survey data. As Silverman (2010) suggested, data gathered prior to the interviews were used as a “guide to conducting” (p. 202) the interviews. As themes emerged during the analysis of survey data, they became areas of interest for the semi-structured interviews. Krathwohl (2009) also recommended this approach for emergent studies since it allows the researcher to examine “broad areas to find what is significant” (p. 299) and then become more focused allowing the researcher to begin to understand the phenomenon of interest with greater depth. An initial interview protocol was developed prior to the collecting of survey data and tested as part of the pilot study. However, this protocol was revised significantly between completion of the surveys and beginning of the interviews to provide a more targeted focus on the themes that emerged during initial data analysis.

To develop the interview protocol, I employed Weiss’ (1994) recommendation of the five attributes of a study, which should be used to determine the questions to be asked during a qualitative interview:

The problem. A sense of the breadth and density of the material we want to collect. A repertoire of understandings based on previous work, study, awareness of the literature, and experience in living. Pilot research. A sense of what will give substance to the eventual report. (p. 41)

For this study, a thorough review of the existing literature base as well as my experiences as a teacher and educational leader within a variety of different alternative schools all informed decisions about questions to be asked. However, data from the survey were used as the primary

resource for determining what patterns and issues were likely to benefit from further exploration during the interviews.

Weiss (1994) noted that in order to result in a coherent research report, a researcher must go into the interview with a sense of whether results will be reported diachronically, in an order determined by the time of events, or synchronically, in an order based on topics and themes, which moves “from sector to sector” (p. 44). Qualitative interview researchers do this by first identifying the primary “sectors” into which data will be organized. Once sectors are identified, researchers can determine topics within each sector to be explored during the interview. This results in generating “a list of topics-to-learn-about” (p. 46), which then becomes the framework for the interview protocol.

Recognizing that this study does not explore a process or chronology of events, I approached constructing the interview protocols with an understanding that ultimately the research report would be organized synchronically, addressing sectors and themes that emerge within each sector. Initial coding and analysis of survey data was used to identify likely patterns in need of a greater “density of material” (Weiss, 1994, p. 41). Survey data were used to generate a list of sectors and topics to be covered within each sector. The areas that emerged during initial analysis of survey data included:

- Patterns within how leaders of type I, type II and type III alternatives understand the purpose of alternative education
- The mixing of different alternative education discourses within participants’ views of alternative education’s purpose
- The differences between how participants define population, students who benefit from alternative education, and mission, what alternative education does for those students, for the broader school system, and for society

- Recognition that alternative education is accompanied by stigma and conflating alternative education with Pennsylvania’s AEDY policy
- The contrast between simple and multidimensional understandings of alternative education – some participants view alternative education as having one purpose while others view alternative education as potentially serving multiple purposes

Ultimately patterns that emerged during analysis of the initial survey data were used to construct a list of sectors and topics to be explored within the interview protocol. Sectors and topics are organized in the table 3-1 below.

**Table 3-1:** Sectors and topic used to create the interview protocol.

Sectors	Topics
Type I Alternative School Leaders’ Understandings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding of mission - what alternative education does</li> <li>• Understandings of population - who alternative education serves</li> <li>• Primary and secondary understandings of what alternative education is and who it serves.</li> <li>• Boundaries - what is not alternative education and who is not served by alternative education</li> <li>• Views that align with the three primary discourses: safety nets, safety valves, true alternatives</li> </ul>
Type II Alternative School Leaders’ Understandings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding of mission - what alternative education does</li> <li>• Understandings of population - who alternative education serves</li> <li>• Primary and secondary understandings of what alternative education is and who it serves.</li> <li>• Boundaries - what is not alternative education and who is not served by alternative education</li> <li>• Views that align with the three primary discourses: safety nets, safety valves, true alternatives</li> </ul>

Type III Alternative School Leaders' Understandings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding of mission - what alternative education does</li> <li>• Understandings of population - who alternative education serves</li> <li>• Primary and secondary understandings of what alternative education is and who it serves.</li> <li>• Boundaries - what is not alternative education and who is not served by alternative education</li> <li>• Views that align with the three primary discourses: safety nets, safety valves, true alternatives</li> </ul>
Themes that exist across alternative school type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conflating Alternative Education and AEDY, Stigma, contrast between simple and multidimensional views of Alternative Education</li> </ul>

Using these sectors and topics, an interview protocol was developed with the aim of establishing what type of alternative school each participant leads before shifting to the participant's understanding of the purpose of alternative education and students who attend alternative schools. The final questions in the interview protocol focus on establishing the boundaries around the participants' understandings of alternative education, recognizing the types of schools and programs that the participant would include under the umbrella of alternative education and those that the participant does not view as alternative education as well as exploring participants' explanations for these distinctions. Prior to beginning interviews, pilot interviews were conducted with an individual working in a type II/III alternative and an individual working in a type I alternative school. During one of the interviews, specific questions intended to establish what kinds of schools the participant viewed as alternative education resulted in the participant revising her view of what constitutes an alternative school in the middle of the interview. For this reason, specific questions establishing the boundaries around participants' views of alternative education were reserved for the end of the interview protocol so as not to influence how participants respond to the other questions such as how they describe alternative education's purpose and how they describe students who attend alternative schools.

## Analytical Methods

In keeping with Silverman's (2010) recommendation that data analysis in qualitative research is not something that happens after all data have been collected, but instead must be a continual, ongoing process throughout data collection, data collected through both surveys and interviews were read multiple times and analyzed using initial coding lists soon after collection. Miles and Huberman (1994) also argued for combining, "each wave of data collection with a corresponding exercise in condensation and analysis" (p. 56), which requires coding, ongoing revision of codes, organization of coded material, evaluation and the development of explanatory theories. However, Weiss (1994) recognized that in practice data analysis during the process of data collection is often challenged by "a conspiracy of forces" (p. 151) consisting of the many draws on the researcher's time. For this reason, ongoing coding and analysis of data was conducted throughout data collection with a particular focus on data analysis before transitioning from the survey to the interviews and at the midpoint of the interviews. This approach ensured that data analysis was integrated into data collection beyond the efforts to code data as it was collected and the natural tendency to develop "insights, speculations, and small-scale theories" (Weiss, 1994, p. 151) while conducting interviews, transcribing and reviewing data records.

Data analysis for this study employed Weiss' guidelines for an issue-based approach to data analysis and reporting. Weiss argues that data analysis for an issue focused report must move through four, "analytic processes...coding, sorting, local integration, and inclusive integration" (1994, p. 154). Coding began as soon as data were collected using initial codes based on the study's theoretical framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Initial codes were drawn from Raywid's typology (1994), which describes three types of alternative schools: type I, true alternatives; type II, punitive alternatives or safety valves; and type III, safety nets. Understandings related to type I, true alternatives were expected to include:

associating alternative education with innovation, a view that schooling needs to be altered to meet the diverse needs and interests of students, high expectations for student performance, valuing student autonomy and voice, and embracing nontraditional curricular and pedagogic practices. Understandings associated with type II punitive alternatives or safety valves were expected include a belief that alternative education's purpose is custodial, a belief that alternative educational placement is a form of punishment, lowered expectations for student academic performance, and a belief that some students are "disruptive" or "dangerous" and need to be isolated from their peers. Finally, assumptions related to type III alternatives or safety nets were expected to include: a focus on socio-emotional treatment and views that students, as opposed to the school, need to change, a goal of remediating and returning students to the comprehensive school, a view that alternative education is intended to serve "at-risk" or disconnected students, and lowered expectations for student academic performance.

Initial codes based on these variables of interest included: perceptions connected to each of the three discourses, which were coded T1, T2, and T3 combined with a code indicating the code for the specific understanding of alternative education reflected in the segment of data. For example, data indicating the participant connects their work or alternative education with unique pedagogic approaches would be coded T1PED to indicate this is an understanding that resembles true, innovative alternative discourse and that the comment relates to pedagogic change. Another example of an initial code is T2PLnCH to identify data related to viewing alternative education as a placement not a choice, which would be associated with type 2, safety valve discourse.

Additionally, pattern codes, which Miles and Hubberman (1994) prescribed when, "a coded segment of field notes illustrates an emergent leitmotiv or pattern that you have discerned in local events and relationships" (p. 57), were developed during the process of data collection. Early pattern codes included, CAA indicating a participant conflated alternative education with AEDY,

STIG for statements that indicated alternative education is associated with stigma, and JD for data that juxtaposed conflicting discourses.

While theoretical framework was the primary source for the initial list of codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994), emergent codes were developed over the course of data collection and analysis. Codes were adjusted and new codes were created using steps outlined by Krathwohl (2009): identifying importance by finding “common phrases as well as surprising, counterintuitive, and unexpected material” (p. 316) within the data, using word count software to identify commonly used words and phrases, reading and rereading the transcripts and listening to recorded interviews multiple times to help identify patterns and relationships which Krathwohl calls, “loading your mind” (p. 317), and “letting your unconscious process the data” (p. 317) by carrying a notebook at all times where I recorded new ideas, interpretations or theories about the patterns and relationships in the data.

Survey data were initially coded using an Excel spreadsheet that allowed for quick comparison across all respondents’ answers. This was valuable during the early phase of coding, in which codes based on the theoretical framework were tested against the data and developed to better reflect the emerging themes and patterns within the data. Data collected through interviews were transcribed using a computer-based transcription service, which provides automated transcription that is approximately 90% accurate and allows the researcher to review and revise the transcript for complete accuracy. Transcribed interview data were moved into Microsoft Word files and coded. During this phase of data analysis, I continued to employ a flexible approach to coding, allowing, “codes to emerge progressively” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 62), adjusting, combining, adding or dropping categories as necessary.

At the midway point of collecting interview data, I began sorting coded data. Sorting was conducted using NVivo software. Transcribed interviews and survey data were uploaded to NVivo and were organized by codes, creating nodes first organized into two main categories,

participants' "Understandings of Alternative Education" and their "Descriptions of Their Work." Within each of these categories additional nodes were created to organize codes organized around the three discourses that define alternative education's purpose, Type I, Type II, and Type III, and patterns that emerged within each of these areas. Additional nodes were created to accommodate emerging themes. Within the NVivo software, nodes served as "excerpt files" (Weiss, 1994, p. 157) organizing the coded material around themes. These nodes were then read and analyzed and then recoded and reorganized as appropriate, allowing for the creation of additional nodes to address subtopics and then consolidating or renaming nodes to better match the emerging themes and patterns within the data.

NVivo was also used during data analysis as a tool for conducting word frequency searches, identifying words that were potentially relevant to the research questions, such as: "different," "behavior," and "support." Once identified, these terms were coded or added to already established codes. Similarly, phrase searches were also employed to identify the frequency of certain phrases. Finally, NVivo's matrix coding was employed to identify the patterns within understandings held by leaders of similar programs. For example, a matrix coding inquiry was conducted to examine correlations between the type of alternative program a leader worked in with the types of alternative programs the leader included within his or her definition of alternative education. Similarly, matrix coding was used to examine correlations between the presence of certain words such as behavior, discipline, and placement with the type of programs participants lead. Tables with the results of these matrix coding inquiries are included in chapter four.

As the process of coding transcribed text and organizing codes into NVivo nodes progressed, I began local integration by creating descriptions of the content within nodes along with explanations of my interpretations of the meaning of the excerpts. This process of developing explanations was ongoing throughout data collection and analysis, revising

explanations as new data were incorporated. The goal in this stage of data analysis, as established by Weiss (1994), was to create theories, “that make sense of the material” as opposed to simply having a “descriptive summary” (p. 159). These theories were developed both while I was engaged in the process of coding and reviewing and organizing the contents of each node, but also throughout the day. As I had opportunities to reflect on the data and establish new theories and explanations of the emerging themes, I recorded these theories and explanations in a notebook to be later compared against the data. The final steps of local integration were revising labels of codes to match emerging theories. This process was followed by a final reorganization and resorting of coded materials, so that coded material matched revised code labels. Once all data were collected, coded, sorted into excerpt files, and locally integrated through the development of theories explaining the contents of each excerpt file, I began the final step of data analysis, “inclusive integration” (Weiss, 1994, p. 160). Inclusive integration consisted of organizing the theoretic codes established during local integration so that relationships between the themes were clear and the order with which themes and coded material would appear in chapter 4 were established.

The final stage of data analysis consisted of conducting a negative case analysis. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation defined negative case analysis as an examination of, “data that do not support or appear to contradict patterns or explanations that are emerging from data analysis,” allowing the researcher to, “revise, broaden and confirm the patterns emerging from data analysis” (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). For this study, two of the primary themes that emerged during data analysis were that participants associate alternative education with complex meanings and that these meanings tend to align with the three discourses described in the literature review. However, there were data that contradicted these two themes. Negative case analysis requires further examination of patterns that, “refute the researcher’s reconstructions of reality” (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 121). Silverman argued that “the qualitative

researcher should not be satisfied by explanations which appear to explain nearly all the variance in their data” (2010, p. 281). Instead data, which do not fit into the primary themes must be accounted for through negative or deviant case analysis.

For this study, negative case analysis required reexamining the three participants who did not associate alternative education with complex meanings and instead held monolithic views of alternative education and its purpose. Erlandson et al. (1993) argued that considering and incorporating these “dissenting” views “reflects the complexity inherent in the setting’s context and that it enhances the opportunity for thick description” (p. 121). This proved to be true as the opinions of participants who held one-dimensional views of alternative education’s purpose conflicted with the theme of complex meanings but supported a primary conclusion of the study, that alternative education in the area is most often viewed as a safety valve allowing for the removal of “disruptive” students from the comprehensive school.

Negative case analysis for this study also required examination of a prominent theme that did not align with one of the three discourses but instead was inherent within all three discourses. All participants in the study associated alternative education with meeting the individual needs of students. However, this theme could fit into any of the three discourses depending on how the participant defined the needs of students. Both the theme of the needs of students and the narrow views of some participants “contradict patterns or explanations” (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006) that emerged during the process of data analysis. Negative case analysis allowed for the examination of non-conforming data improving the descriptions and theories of the study and serving to “strengthen the validity of research” (Silverman, 2010, p. 284).

## Chapter 4

### Findings of the Study

To answer the study's research questions, twelve leaders of schools and programs that differ from comprehensive education in either instructional mission, pedagogic practices, or student population were asked to share descriptions of their work and their understandings of what alternative education is and what it is not. In this chapter, I will review their responses describing the themes across leaders' understandings of alternative education and align their understandings with the three primary discourses that describe alternative education as creating safety valves, safety nets, or true alternatives.

This chapter will first review the local context. After conducting a review of the 149 school district websites within the geographic boundaries of the study, it became clear that there are three basic types of alternative schools and programs within the region, which align with Raywid's (1994) typology. The first section of this chapter will draw from my review of district websites, providing a detailed overview of the three types of alternative schools and programs within the region: true, innovative alternatives, which provide choice and focus on an academic theme or instructional practice; safety valves, disciplinary, or behavioral placement alternatives; and safety nets, therapeutic, or remedial alternatives. Next, the chapter will turn to an overview of how the twelve participants in the study describe alternative education and where they draw the boundaries around this construct, what is and what is not alternative education. Then, the chapter will review the themes that emerge across leaders' understandings of alternative education and how those themes align with the three primary discourses. Finally, I will explore themes that emerged during a negative case analysis, which examined patterns within the data that do not correspond with the study's primary themes.

### **The Local Context**

As described in detail in chapter 3, I conducted a review of school district websites to identify potential participants for the study. This search also revealed important contextual information about how alternative education is employed and described within the region. While the website review provides a description of the local context, this synthesis did not employ formal qualitative document analysis methodology and therefore does not provide the level of detail and analysis that would accompany a formal document analysis. Drawing from observations made during my review of 149 school district websites, this section will provide a descriptive overview of the differing types of alternative schools and programs operating within eastern Pennsylvania.

During searches of school district websites, I looked for references to alternative education or schools and programs with a mission, pedagogic practices, or student population that differ from the comprehensive school. The search of each website included: reviewing the listing of schools within the district, using the search feature to search for the term “alternative,” and reviewing the student handbook. As I reviewed websites and compiled the list of potential candidates, it became clear that alternative schools and programs within the area largely align with the groupings established by Raywid’s (1994) typology, which categorizes alternative schools as: type I “schools of choice,” true alternatives that aim to change the nature of school, type II “last-chance programs,” safety valves, with a primary focus of remediating behavior or removing “disruptive students,” and type III “remedial focus” safety net alternatives, which aim to address the academic, social or emotional needs of students who struggle in traditional educational environments (p. 27). In this section, I use the categories established by Rawid’s typology to provide an overview of the local context and how alternative schools and programs are described on school district websites within the region.

### **Type I, True Alternative Schools**

Raywid (1994) described type I alternatives as, “schools of choice and are usually popular...likely to reflect programmatic themes or emphases pertaining to content or instructional strategy, or both” (p. 27). Raywid also identified a central tension in how alternative education is understood by explaining that many people view alternative education as not being for all students but instead serving those “who cannot or will not succeed in a regular program” (p. 26). She contrasts this view of alternative education with one that focuses on “innovation and creativity in both practice and organization” (p. 26). It is the latter that drives a type I alternative school. Type I alternatives are innovative, creating new approaches to teaching and learning, not because their students lack the emotional, academic, or behavioral skills needed to be successful, but because there is an interest or need that can be met through a different approach to education or a pedagogical innovation.

As I reviewed school district webpages, it became evident that type I alternative education is the least utilized approach by public-school districts within the geographic boundaries of the study. In total, seven type I alternative schools operated by public-school districts were identified. Within this category, six of the schools have a thematic academic focus. Four of the schools are STEM academies; there is also a career center and an arts and humanities academy. The seventh school, Building 21 in Allentown, employs a unique pedagogic approach, described as, “competency-based” featuring “applied learning,” which positions, “teachers as guides and students as designers of their own pathways to graduation by giving them choice and voice about how, what, and where they learn” (Building 21 Allentown). Based on my review of district websites and available documentation, it was clear that these seven schools meet Raywid’s description of type I alternative education, focusing on pedagogic and organizational

innovation as opposed to altering the environment for students who are not successful in the comprehensive school.

It is important to note that, while there is a relatively small number of type I alternatives within the region, one explanation for this is the inclusion criteria for the study, which excludes cooperatives between multiple districts, such as regional technical-vocational schools as well as charter schools, which are not operated by the public-school district, and cyber schools that have no brick-and-mortar component. Each of these approaches are employed as educational alternatives throughout the region. Most school districts provide access to a cyber school and many others offer technical-vocational education through a local cooperative. Therefore, while there were only seven identified type I alternatives operated by school districts in the region, there are public alternatives of choice that are available to students in nearly every school district within the geographic boundaries of the study.

The seven schools identified as type I alternatives all share common demographic attributes. Each of the schools is located in a large urban or suburban school district, including: Allentown, Hazleton, Wilkes-Barre, Downingtown, and Chester. During the review of district websites, there did not appear to be any district-controlled type I alternative schools operated by the many rural school districts within the geographic boundaries of the sampling population. While information regarding school history was only available for four of the schools, all of those schools note that they have been developed within the last ten years, so these type I alternative schools are a relatively recent addition to the menu of educational alternatives in the region. School size was variable across the seven schools. On one end of the spectrum, the Downingtown STEM Academy has a student enrollment of 800 while, on the other end of the spectrum, the Wilkes-Barre STEM Academy had a graduating class of 12 in 2018.

One theme that emerged during the review of each school's website is that the majority of the type I alternative schools employs a selective admissions process to determine student

enrollment. For many of the schools, this admissions process includes measures of academic competency: a minimum required GPA, admissions tests, teacher recommendations, essay scores, and transcript requirements. Downingtown STEM Academy, for example, requires students to have completed algebra 1 and level 1 of a foreign language during or before 8<sup>th</sup> grade (Downingtown Area School District). Some of the schools also employ non-academic measures to determine admissions, including: student interviews, attendance records, and discipline records. While admissions processes with academic criteria appear to be the norm within these type I alternatives, Building 21 in Allentown does not describe an admissions process and identified itself as, “non-selective” (Building 21 Allentown).

There are also a number of pedagogic and programmatic similarities across the seven type I alternatives. Most of the schools mentioned community partnerships as a key feature of the school. For example, Building 21 in Allentown described working, “closely with members of the local and school communities to carefully construct a robust network of online, offline, individual, small group, large group, skills-based, and applied learning opportunities” (Building 21 Allentown). Similarly, the Wilkes-Barre STEM Academy described, “cooperative opportunities with local higher education as well as local businesses and industries to give the students real world learning experiences” (Wilkes-Barre Area School District). Other school websites mentioned job shadowing programs and internships, and many of the schools described partnerships with local universities, which allow students to dual enroll, taking college level classes while still enrolled in high school. Another attribute shared by many of the school websites is that they described their programs as having heightened academic expectations, academic challenge, and rigor. Most of the seven schools also made frequent reference to non-traditional and innovative teaching practices, such as: hands-on learning, project-based learning, technology integration, interdisciplinary instruction, and authentic assessment, which the

Hazelton Academy of Sciences described as identifying, “creative ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge” (Hazelton Area Academy of Sciences).

The school websites universally stated a unique academic mission and a specific target student population. For example, the Hazelton Area Arts and Humanities Academy described its mission and the students it serves, stating: “This program will showcase the creative spirit and academic and artistic talents of our community’s young artists. Students will be inspired through an arts integrated, humanities focus to teaching and learning” (Hazelton Area Arts and Humanities Academy). Similarly, the STEM Academy at Showalter in the Chester Upland School District described the specific student outcomes it strives for and the academic practices it employs:

Our school is designed to prepare students for 21st century careers in the sciences and in engineering. The philosophy behind the program is to provide students with a unique opportunity to learn through traditional and non-traditional teaching methodologies. Teaching and learning will have a heavy emphasis on project based learning, experimentation, hands on activities, and research (Chester Upland School District).

Most of the schools also clearly articulated values that students are expected to develop and embrace, such as: responsibility, leadership, team work, or “a mindset of growth and effort” (Downingtown Area School District).

The review of district websites revealed that there is a small number of district-operated, type I alternative programs in eastern Pennsylvania. They are primarily thematic with clearly defined student populations – often consisting of academically talented students or those with particular strengths or interest in a certain area such as math, science, or the arts; they all embrace community engagement and encourage innovative academic practices. While there is a small number of these programs, innovative alternative education appears to be an emerging trend in the region as many of the schools were founded within the last decade. The most important

shared trait of these schools, for the purposes of this study, is that none of the seven type I alternative schools are called alternatives or alternative education anywhere on their websites. In fact, a search for the word alternative on each of the seven school webpages resulted in zero occurrences of the word. The Hazelton Area Academy of Sciences is identified as a, “S.T.E.M. magnet school” (Hazelton Area Academy of Sciences), but the majority of the schools simply referred to themselves as academies. While each of the schools clearly fit Raywid’s description of type I alternative education, schools focused on innovation as opposed to remediation, the absence of the word alternative indicates that these schools are not necessarily representative of how alternative education is viewed within the region.

### **Type II, Safety Valve Alternative Schools**

Type II, safety valve alternative schools, on the other hand, appear to be present within the majority of school districts within the geographic boundaries of this study and are universally referred to as alternative education. Raywid (1994) characterized type II alternative schools as those that focus on behavioral remediation. They are schools to which a student is placed or sent in response to disciplinary infractions or repeatedly disruptive behavior. According to Raywid, these alternative schools are unlikely to employ innovative practices, instead focusing on the “basics, emphasizing wrote skills, and drill” (p. 27).

Very few of the districts in the geographic area of the study posted extensive information about type II alternative programs on their websites. Some districts simply listed a teacher’s work assignment as alternative education without providing any information about the alternative school or program and its mission or the students it serves. Other districts had an alternative education page on the website that listed cursory contact information without identifying details

about the alternative schools' purpose or programs. Therefore, for many alternative schools in the area it is unclear whether they should be categorized as type I, type II, or type III alternatives.

One exception to this trend is the William Penn Building within the Allentown School District, which is described on the website:

The Allentown School District's AEDY Program at the William Penn Building meets the behavioral needs of identified students with a comprehensive alternative education program which is run in partnership with Communities in Schools (CIS). The school offers an educational placement system that moves students through short-term academic and behavioral interventions before placing students back into their home schools as they meet the established exit criteria (Allentown Area School District).

The program's focus on behavioral change and temporary placement align with Raywid's description of type II programs whose primary focus is behavioral remediation as opposed to academic innovation.

While Allentown is one of the few school district websites that clearly identified the student population and mission of its behavioral alternative school, a search of student handbooks, which are published on most school district webpages, revealed that many of the school districts in the area utilize type II alternative programs as a response to student misbehavior. Many, if not the majority, of the 149 school districts in the sampling population listed removal to an alternative school or placement in alternative education among the disciplinary consequences enumerated in the student handbook. The following excerpt from the Radnor High School student handbook outlines the possible disciplinary consequences for creating a false alarm:

Response by School: The Principal, in consultation with the Superintendent, will do three or more of the following:

- Parent contact

- Conference with student
- Suspension of all privileges and extra-curricular activities
- Out of School Suspension
- Conference with Superintendent
- Alternative School placement
- Expulsion (Requires School Board action)
- Contact law enforcement authorities
- Criminal prosecution

(Radnor Area School District, p. 45)

This excerpt is representative of how alternative education appeared within many student handbooks in the region. Using alternative education as a disciplinary consequence or punishment intended to serve as a deterrent is directly in line with Raywid's (1994) description of type II alternatives as, "programs to which students are sentenced – usually as one last chance prior to expulsion" (p. 27).

My review of district webpages suggests that this approach to alternative education is commonplace in eastern Pennsylvania. More than half of the high school handbooks reviewed during participant selection included alternative education as a potential disciplinary consequence or defined alternative education's purpose as providing a temporary educational placement for students after serious disciplinary infractions. However, it is important to note that these references to disciplinary alternative education in student handbooks rarely clarified if the alternative school that students are assigned to is operated by the school district or by an intermediate unit or private provider. Therefore, while it is clear that disciplinary alternative education is commonplace within the region and serves as a disciplinary response to student

misbehavior, the exact number of these type II alternative schools and programs operated by public-school districts is unclear and identifying this number is beyond the scope of this study.

### **Type III, Safety Net Alternative Schools**

There is consistency in how type I, innovative alternatives and type II, safety valve alternative schools are defined across school district websites in the region; type I schools are featured on district webpages while type II schools, are often not and are instead described within student handbooks; type I schools are chosen by students and employ selective enrollment criteria to determine who is able to attend while type II schools serve as a mandatory and potentially punitive placement for students who have committed a disciplinary infraction; type I schools are not referred to as alternative education, and type II schools are universally labeled alternative education.

Type III, safety net alternatives, on the other hand, are described with a greater amount of variation on district websites. Type III schools tend to adopt features of either type II disciplinary alternatives or type I innovative alternatives. In many ways, type III alternatives can be viewed as existing on a continuum between type I and type II alternatives. Some type III schools feature innovative practices and admit students by choice, viewing enrollment in the program as a privilege. On the other hand, other type III alternative schools serve as a disciplinary placement as well as a therapeutic or remedial placement – these schools often feature counseling and behavior modification programs aimed at remediating behavioral challenges. In this section, I will review the commonalities across all type III alternative school websites in the sampling population and then explore themes that emerged across type III alternatives with traits that align with innovative, type I alternatives, and the patterns across type III alternatives with features that are more closely aligned to type II, behavioral alternatives.

Raywid (1994) described type III alternatives as schools whose primary focus is providing academic or therapeutic support, “serving students who are presumed to need remediation or rehabilitation—academic, social/emotional, or both” (p. 27). These programs are likely to be associated with “at-risk” students, reduced academic expectations, socio-emotional counseling, and credit recovery. Type III schools are also unlikely to be places where students are sent as the result of misbehavior. Instead, they are more likely to employ specific enrollment criteria. Unlike type I schools, the enrollment criteria for type III alternatives usually include academic failure, credit deficiency, and emotional or even behavioral challenges that have prevented students from realizing success in the comprehensive school.

Similar to type I innovative alternative schools, websites for type III alternative schools within the sampling population often included clear descriptions of the school’s mission and target student population. The Pennsbury School District’s Twilight School is a good example of this trend, stating: “The Pennsbury Twilight program is dedicated to providing a developmentally-appropriate learning experience for all at-risk students in grades 6-12 in a standards-based school environment” (Pennsbury School District). Another example of a type III alternative school with a well-defined mission and student population is the Northbridge School, which is described as: “support[ing] students who are struggling academically in grades 8-12. While at Northbridge, students are able to recover credits while receiving individualized support in a small classroom community” (North Penn School District). Across type III alternatives in the region, target student populations are often identified as: at risk, challenging or struggling students, and those who, “benefit from additional academic support and a smaller environment with more personalized instruction” (North Penn School District).

There are also similarities across school districts’ descriptions of type III alternative schools. Many school websites highlighted smaller, more supportive environments. Hybrid learning, featuring a mix of computer and web-based instruction with face-to-face instruction, is

another academic feature referenced by many of the schools. The schools almost universally identified therapeutic or academic support as a key programmatic feature. Goal setting and individualized instruction are also commonly referenced. For example, the Chester Upland Alternative Education Program stated that it strives to, “recognize through its instructional program the unique qualities of all learners and integrate problem solving strategies as a tool to empower students to develop their potential” (Chester Upland School District). The Northbridge School described its approach to teaching and learning as providing an, “individualized learning path outlines both the supports that will be in place for the student and a plan to maximize the number of credits the student can earn” (North Penn School District).

While there are a number of commonalities across descriptions of type III alternative schools in the region, there are many ways that they differ as well. Perhaps the most significant variation within type III alternatives in the region is whether or not they adopt the label alternative education. Some of the schools are labeled as alternative education but, similar to the type I, true alternative schools in the study, many of the schools did not refer to themselves as alternative education anywhere on their websites. This variation seems to coincide with whether the type III program is more closely aligned with the goals and features of type I alternative education or the goals and features of a type II, safety valve alternative education. All of the schools and programs described in this section have similar features of serving “at-risk” students in a smaller, more supportive environment. However, some also articulated goals that indicate they are highly innovative, changing many of the programmatic features common to traditional schools. Other schools more closely resemble type II alternatives and identify discipline and behavioral remediation as primary programmatic features.

The Northbridge School provides a helpful illustration of a type III alternative that adopts features of type I alternative education. Northbridge’s mission focuses on credit recovery and supporting students who have struggled in other educational environments. The school is small,

100 students, and includes support and individualized instruction, all features of type III alternative education. At the same time, the school employs innovative practices in instruction, assessment, and behavioral management. The school employs a “station-rotation model,” in which students work in small groups and rotate through stations that include hybrid education as well as small group instruction from the teacher, “allowing them to receive the same content in three different forms of instruction” (North Penn School District). For assessment, the school employs “mastery-based” grading, where students are allowed to move through courses at their own pace, earning credit as they master content. The school also employs “Restorative Practices,” which provides voice to students because those in, “authority do things with them, rather than to them or for them” (North Penn School District) when addressing conflicts that emerge within the community. Also, like the type I alternative schools in the region, Northbridge is not referred to as alternative education anywhere on the school’s website.

On the other end of the spectrum, Easton Area Academy exemplifies how some type III alternatives adopt attributes of a type II, safety valve alternative school. This confluence of two alternative types is clear in the school’s mission, which states that the school provides an, “increased service environment to students at-risk for school drop out and those not maximizing their potential for school success” (Easton Area School District). At the same time, the mission also explains that, “students also receive intense behavior modification counseling aimed to assist them in a successful return to the regular classroom” (Easton Area School District). This description of the school’s student population and its program situates it clearly in what Raywid describes as type III, safety net alternative education, providing remediation and support to students who have not been successful in traditional educational environments. However, references to “behavior modification” and a list of “reasons for referral,” which includes “violent or threatening behavior” situates the school in close proximity to schools that would be categorized as type II, safety valve alternative schools.

### Summary of Contextual Information

The previous sections provide an overview of how alternative schools are depicted on school district websites in eastern Pennsylvania. Two important details of this review are that type II, safety valve alternative schools appear to be the most frequently employed version of alternative education and they are the only schools that are consistently referred to as alternative education. Type I, true alternative schools on the other hand are never referred to as alternative education and appear to be the least frequently employed approach to alternative education. Schools that align with type III, safety net alternative education fall in the middle; some referred to as alternative schools while others are not.

Within the group of schools aligned with type III, safety net alternative education, there seems to be a continuum of program features and program labels. Figure 4-1 depicts how school district website portrayals of alternative schools and programs fall along a continuum between type I and type II alternatives.

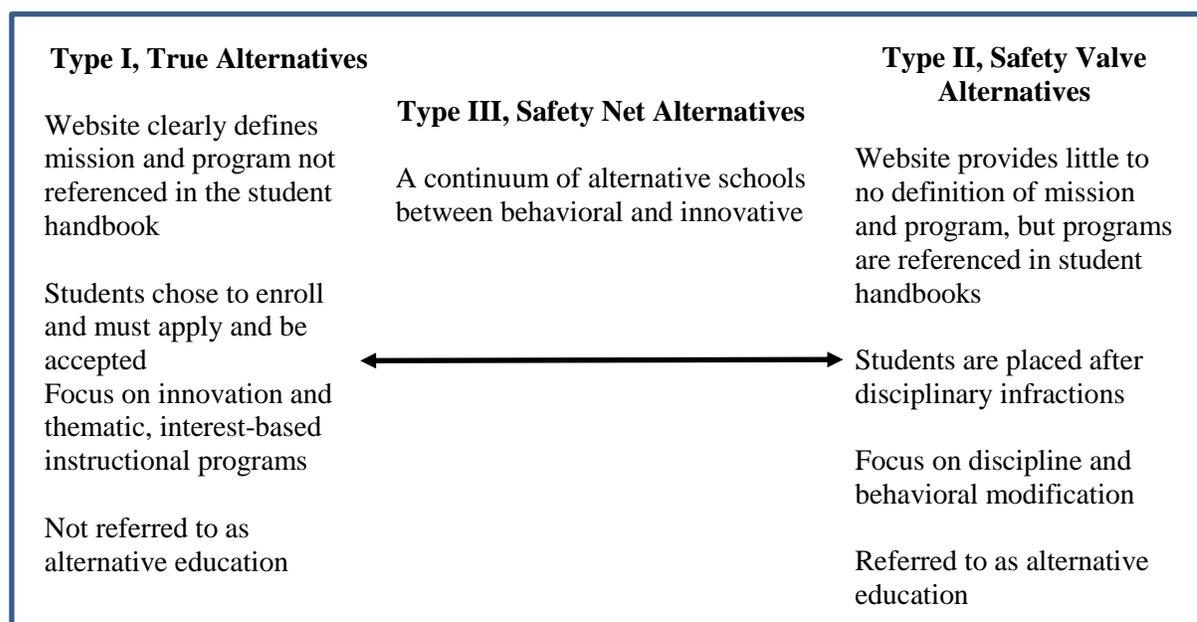


Figure 4-1: A continuum of alternative school types

Schools aligned with Raywid’s description of type III alternative education appear more likely to adopt the term alternative education if they also have features of a type II safety valve alternative school, a focus on behavior modification or placement as a result of disciplinary infraction, and they appear less likely to adopt the term alternative education if they have features that make the academic program more innovative and therefore more aligned with type I alternative education.

### **Overview of Participants’ Definitions of Alternative Education**

During both the interview and the survey, participants were asked questions to clarify how they define alternative education and where they draw the boundaries around this construct - what kinds of programs they consider alternative education and what programs they would not consider alternative education. Table 4-1 shows the breakdown of participants’ responses. As the table shows, all twelve respondents viewed type II, safety valve alternatives as alternative education. On the other end of the spectrum, only three of the participants, viewed type I true alternatives such as STEM schools as alternative education. Type III safety net alternatives, such as credit recovery or emotional support schools were viewed as alternative education by half of the participants.

**Table 4-1:** Participants’ definitions of alternative education.

Type I, True Alternative Schools are Alternative Education	Type II Schools, Safety Valve Schools are Alternative Education	Type III, Safety Net Schools are Alternative Education
3/12 (25%)	12/12 (100%)	6/12 (50%)

This breakdown shows that the most common view of alternative education is to define it as creating type II, safety valve alternatives. However, half of the participants included type III,

remedial schools within their definition of alternative education and one quarter of the participants included type I, innovative schools within their definition of alternative education.

One potential explanation for the presence of varied understandings of alternative education is that the study included participants who lead widely different types of alternative schools, ranging from thematic, innovative alternatives that require students to apply and be accepted to disciplinary, type II alternatives to which students are assigned after a disciplinary infraction. Table 4-2 below introduces the twelve participants and shows the relationship between the type of alternative school each participant leads and the type of schools that he or she considered to be alternative education.

Table 4-2: Overview of participants

Participant	Participant's School	Views School as Alternative Education	Alternative Education Serves:
John	Theme-based, innovative, type I alternative	No	Students that are "a little bit troubled"
Sharon	Emotional support program	No	"Behavioral issue students"
Amy	Credit recovery school	No	"Students with disciplinary concerns"
Roger	AEDY school	Yes	Students who "must meet [AEDY] criteria"
Howard	AEDY school	Yes	"Students who meet one of the six [AEDY] criteria"
Michael	AEDY program	Yes	"Students removed from the school settings"
Travis	Remedial program addressing truancy, academic deficiency, and behavioral challenges	Yes	Students who "could not function...in the regular ed. setting"
David	Credit recovery school	Yes	"Students that were struggling"
Monica	Credit recovery school	Yes	Students, "that need some type of intervention"

Cindy	AEDY program	Yes	“Non-traditional kids...they have strengths that we don't know about”
Shandra	Theme-based, innovative, type I alternative	Yes	Students with “specific interests or desires”
Ben	Credit recovery program	Yes	“Kids that may or may not have found their niche in the regular school”

Table 4-2 shows that for most participants there was alignment between the type of program they lead and how they defined alternative education. At the same time, there were three participants, John, Sharon and Amy, who did not believe that their programs should even be considered alternative education. John leads a type I, true alternative and Sharon and Amy lead type III, safety net programs. These three respondents all held very narrow views of alternative education, limiting their use of the term to only programs that serve as placements for “disruptive students.” This narrow view of alternative education was also held by most of the leaders of type II, safety valve alternatives, with the exception of Cindy, who leads an AEDY program but believed that alternative education could be any school that serves a student need or interest not addressed by the comprehensive school.

Ultimately, participants’ definitions of alternative education all fall into one of three categories as shown in table 4-1. In the following sections, I will explore the descriptions of alternative education within each of the three groups delineated in table 4-1.

### **Alternative Education is a Disciplinary Placement**

As was indicated in previous chapters, there is a growing view that alternative education creates schools and programs that serve as educational placements for “disruptive students.” All twelve participants included II, safety valve alternative schools within their definitions of

alternative education. However, six of the participants believed that schools that serve “disruptive students” and those with “behavioral problems,” such as Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth are the only schools that should be considered alternative education, making the case that other schools focused on other missions and student populations are something else and should be labeled as such. In this section, I will review these six participants’ explanations of what alternative education is and what it is not.

John, is the leader of a type I, true alternative school. His school is theme-based and enrolled by students who show particular interest and capacity in the academic areas the school emphasizes. He felt that he knew very little about alternative education, but when asked what that term calls to mind, he described alternative education as serving “troubled” students:

Like we have alternative education that is ... which is.... I don't know if is what you're getting at...which means like you know it's a different area where kids go that you know are a little bit troubled, like it's alternative ed. You know, where they can't survive in the classroom just because of behavior issues and they get taken to alternative ed...That's what we've learned it to be.

When asked if he considered his program to be alternative education, he recognized how the term alternative could apply to the work he does saying that his program, “is kind of an alternative to your standard education.” However, he has never considered his school to be alternative education:

No and I guess that's when you kind of caught me off guard with that question like that. You know I'm not really sure I've ever.... Like no one's ever asked me that. Yeah but like I said we only know from the term that we use alternative ed. We know what that is...I envision it being a place where kids that are having a hard time getting acclimated to regular educational processes... kids that just they can't sit in a regular classroom and

behave. They need a little bit more extra help. They need a little more guidance than what your standard education process can give them, so they go to an alternative education program.

It is important to note that John felt like he knew very little about alternative education. In his view, his school arose in response to the interests of students who want additional instruction in a specific content area and a different approach to instruction. He associated alternative education with the programs his school district labels as alternative education, disciplinary placements focused on addressing student behavior.

Despite leading a different type of alternative school than John, Sharon shared a similar view of alternative education. She is the leader of an emotional support program. She noted that her program is often misunderstood as alternative education: “Oh, absolutely. People refer to us as alternative education all the time, but if you want to be technical, we are not considered...like we're not an AEDY placement.” Her program focuses on providing students a small environment where they can receive therapeutic supports to help them address challenges, which in some cases include behavioral challenges, preventing them from finding success in the comprehensive school. Despite the similarity between her program and other type II, safety valve programs, she did not call her program alternative education because it is not identified as an AEDY program.

She also would not describe credit recovery or theme-based schools as alternative education either; she stated:

I guess in my experience and what I envision alternative ed I would not think of that as alternative Ed. I think alternative Ed is more like behavioral. Um, I mean they, I guess they are alternative. They are different from the norm? You know, the quote unquote norm, but I, when I hear those things, I don't think oh that is alternative ed.

She recognized how the term alternative might apply to a number of different schools that differ from traditional education, but reserved the term alternative education for only disciplinary schools that serve as a response to behavioral issues or more specifically AEDY programs.

Amy also leads a type III alternative school focused on credit recovery. She stated in her response to the survey that her school, while different from traditional education, is, “not typical alternative education. We don't have any students with discipline concerns.” She chose not to participate in a follow up interview and therefore did not fully elaborate on her view of alternative education. However, she did make it clear that her reason for not participating further is that her program is not alternative education and that typical alternative schools deal with, “disciplinary students.” She mentioned having experience with, “traditional alternative education” but reserved that term for programs that address behavioral concerns.

Within the group of participants who articulated narrow definitions of alternative education limited to disciplinary placement alternatives, there were also three leaders of AEDY programs. Each of their three programs serve as a placement for students who have committed certain disciplinary infractions. The goal of all three programs is to allow students to continue their education while receiving therapeutic interventions intended to change their behavioral patterns allowing them to transition back to the comprehensive school. Roger and Howard, both made it very clear in their survey responses that they equate alternative education with programs established under AEDY policy. They each responded to a survey question about the different kinds of students that can attend alternative schools with very similar answers. Roger responded, “No, they must meet criteria. Google search ‘AEDY PA,’ that will take you to the states [sic] homepage on AEDY schools and under the link for referral/intake form, it will list the 6 reasons a student can be sent to an AEDY school.” Howard responded to the same question with a nearly identical statement, which limits alternative education to only those AEDY programs, “AEDY is

primarily for students who meet one of the six criteria. The six of these criteria deal with students with continuing discipline issues or a discipline issue that rises to the level of a removal of their educational setting.”

While both of these participants limited their view of alternative education to AEDY programs, Howard did comment that alternative education should be expanded to serve, “students who are not typically disruptive but don't fit into the mold of students at a regular education public school.” There is discrepancy between Howard’s view of what alternative education is and what it should be. His view of what it is aligns with type II, disciplinary alternatives, but his view of what it should be is more closely aligned with either type III remedial focus programs or even type I innovative alternatives, which would provide alternative schools with a broader range of missions and target student populations.

Similarly, Michael, another leader of an AEDY program, described the students who attend alternative schools:

Students that are not going to ever get it at that time: following the rules, getting along in class, just being a normal nondisruptive student and then obviously threatening behavior or, you know, committing crimes at the school. Basically, a student is not going to be successful at that school at that time following the criteria. I believe the school district should have them removed from the school setting.

Michael also clarified that he would not call other schools such as credit recovery, emotional support, and thematic schools alternative education because that label should be reserved for AEDY programs: “I view those as a different. No, I would just call them by their specific names. Like other graduation, optional programs or...I guess alternative confused you.” Similar to Roger and Howard, Michael views AEDY and alternative education as synonymous and argues that every other school that is different from the comprehensive school is something else.

All six of the participants reviewed in this section conflated alternative education with Pennsylvania's AEDY policy. Five of the participants have strong understandings of AEDY and the schools and programs created under it. For Michael, Roger and Howard, this is true because they work in AEDY programs. Sharon articulated a number of ways her program overlaps with AEDY in terms of its purpose and the students it serves, and Amy referenced having previous work experience in these types of alternatives. While many of them understand how the term alternative might apply to other school designs such as credit recovery or an arts academy, they feel that alternative education denotes a school dedicated to meeting students' behavioral needs and schools that serve as a placement following a disciplinary infraction.

### **Alternative Education is an “Intervention” for Struggling Students**

While the six participants reviewed above contribute to the argument that alternative education is increasingly associated with schools for behavioral remediation, interestingly, half of all participants had a broader understanding of alternative education and associated alternative education with other school designs. Three of the participants viewed alternative education as encompassing both schools that provide a placement for “disruptive students” and schools that meet the needs of students who struggle in regular education for other reasons, including: students needing academic remediation, emotional support, a smaller environment, or an individualized instructional approach. This view would include both Type II, safety valve programs, aimed at behavioral remediation and discipline, as well as Type III, safety net programs, which focus on academic or emotional remediation and support.

Travis leads a program that blends characteristics of a type II safety valve, behavioral school with those of a type III safety net, remedial alternative. Some students attend the school because they have struggled with discipline and behavioral challenges while other students attend

the school because they have fallen behind academically or simply find the environment of the comprehensive school overwhelming, because of anxiety or other challenges, and therefore attend the alternative school. In many ways, the school provides a smaller environment where diverse needs of student who have struggled in the regular educational program can be met.

Similar to the varied purposes his program fulfills, Travis defined alternative education broadly as, “a change in environment to meet that student’s need.” He described the students who attend alternative schools as those who are not, “able to function in a regular environment.” Unlike the participants in the previous section, Travis did not limit this to students who cannot “function” because of behavioral challenges, but also included students who are failing academically, students who have had trauma in their personal lives, or students who are being bullied and need to be, “in a smaller alternative environment rather than being out there.” While his view of alternative education encompasses schools that serve many types of students, he did not include type I, true alternatives, such as STEM schools or technical-vocational schools, within his definition of alternative education. He explained the difference in that students attend those schools by choice and out of interest: “they wanted maybe something more. I think that's the difference there is that they're seeking out that. I feel like a lot of alternative ed... they don't find it, it finds them.” He referenced the way many students are placed in alternative education or need to attend an alternative school because of some issue they are facing. For him, this distinguishes alternative education from theme-based, type I innovative alternatives that students choose because of interest or a career path they would like to follow.

Similarly David, whose program’s primary focus is credit recovery, also viewed alternative education broadly; he stated, “I think of an alternative school as anything that's different from the regular school so there can be many different ways that it looks.” He went on to describe the ways that alternative schools are different than comprehensive schools:

The main thing is the way that the academics are delivered and the size... A lot of times there's a little bit, I'd say more social emotional support, whether it be behavior, drug and alcohol... I think it's a little bit more about forming relationships with the kids and making them feel comfortable because I do think academics kind of takes a little bit of a backseat until you get them comfortable. And then really when in those settings I think a smaller setting there's more supports for the students academically, so I think the alternative schools kind of look at the student as more as a whole-being instead of just solely academically.

Though his definition of alternative education includes anything that is different, he did not view thematic, type I true alternative schools as alternative education. While recognizing that an art academy or agricultural school fits his definition, of “different” he excluded them because they do not serve, “students that were struggling,” which he viewed as a defining characteristic of alternative education.

Monica, the leader of a type III remedial focus program, which provides credit recovery as well as emotional support, defined alternative education very similarly. She described her view of alternative education:

I just think of something that's different, something that meets the needs of students in a different way than could be met in a traditional setting. And so I usually, I think of alternative as something that's much smaller, and again, it's the relationships are key, and I think that it's just much more personalized for students.

This view of alternative education, which encompasses anything that is different, is nearly identical to David’s view of alternative education. Monica also drew the boundaries around what is and what is not alternative education very similarly. She did not include schools that are purely innovative or thematic, type I alternatives because alternative schools target students that, “need some type of an intervention.” She would not categorize schools that students choose just because

of interest as alternative schools, because like David, she believed the need for “intervention” or serving a student who has struggled in traditional education is a defining characteristic of alternative education.

All three of these leaders described alternative education as something that meets the needs of students who have not been successful in the comprehensive school for a number of reasons. None of the three leaders included alternatives that are just based on a certain academic focus or student interest within their definition of what is alternative education. One interesting theme that emerged in both Monica and David’s descriptions of alternative education is they both began with the problematic way other people perceive alternative education. Monica described her experience with other’s perceptions of alternative education, “I think there's still a stigma that is out there surrounding alternative education. My building was actually, the name was actually changed, so it's no longer considered an alternative school.”

When asked what specifically the stigma around alternative education is in her community, she stated that, “they associate it with the bad kids.” David’s experience is nearly identical; while he views his program as alternative education, many people around him disagree with this label. He explained this tension:

I think a lot of times the perception of an alternative school is just that; it's a behavior school... I know that our teachers here in my program now are offended when we're called an alternative school because they think discipline and you know, I always talk to them and say that alternative school just means different.

Both David and Monica hold broad views of alternative education, applying the term to any school that serves students with unique needs that have prevented them from being successful in traditional educational environments. However, their experiences speak to the growing view in the geographic area of the study that alternative education often means a “disciplinary school” or placement for students with “behavioral issues.”

### **Alternative Education Meets the “Individual Interests” of Students**

The final grouping of participants held the most inclusive conceptualization of alternative education. These leaders’ definitions of alternative education encompass all schools and programs that differ from comprehensive education, including STEM schools, technical-vocational schools, art academies, and magnet schools. The three participants in this category each work in a different alternative school type: one leads a thematic, type I, true alternative; one leads a disciplinary, type safety valve alternative program, and one leads a type III, safety net credit recovery school.

Cindy leads an AEDY program located within a larger public-school building. Students are not able to enroll in her program by choice; instead, they must be placed in the program after a disciplinary infraction or an established pattern of behavioral infractions. However, she believed that this is not the only model of alternative education. Her view of alternative education included any school that varies from traditional education; she explained all the different schools she believes fall under the category of alternative education:

If you look at the magnet schools in Philadelphia, like I think they're all alternative.

They're all alternative schools. You have the school for the performing arts. You have the school for agriculture that sits in the middle of Philadelphia. Those are alternative ways to get the job done and meet the needs of kids too. You know when... you have an agriculture kid sitting in the middle of the city and you can offer them the opportunity to raise livestock and grow food and then sell it. I mean, they see it all the way from the time they put the seed in the ground until they're selling it at their store on Tuesday. You know, you've. You've created an alternative way to, to teach.

For her, alternative education is any approach that varies from traditional education whether that change is made to address a problematic behavioral pattern, an emotional challenge, an academic deficiency, a particular interest, or even “strengths that we don't know about, you know, that maybe haven't been tapped into in the general education setting.”

Shandra, on the other hand, leads a type I, true thematic alternative to which students must apply and be selected in order to attend. The school is designed for students with particular strengths and interests within an area of academic focus. However, her view of alternative education was nearly identical to Cindy's. She defined alternative education as: “anything that is geared to the specific interests or desires or the necessities that a student might have.” Within this definition, she included magnet schools, cyber schools, and thematic focus schools as well as schools that:

Meet the individual needs of the students...to help them in their credit recovery for whatever reason, they may have been out of school...had a baby have to go to work for the family, whatever it might be. That gives them a chance...we meet their needs in that way.

She explained a number of different reasons a student might attend an alternative school, which include a particular strength or interest, a career goal, a limited ability to attend school because of parenthood or a need to support a family, or because they have, “been in trouble and they're trying to get their life back together and recover credits.”

Ben, the leader of a type III remedial alternative that serves students in need of credit recovery and students who have struggled because of behavioral or emotional challenges, initially associated alternative education with meeting these needs:

The purpose of alternative education to me is, you know, you identify students that you know are bright, intelligent kids that for whatever reason, their behaviors and those behaviors could be you know school avoidance behaviors. Um, obviously some potential DNA [drugs and alcohol] issues, some family dynamic issues that have impeded their ability to perform at the level that they should within a mainstream comprehensive high school setting. Um, you know, we serve a purpose to kind of help manage behaviors, correct behaviors through smaller classes, through a more therapeutic group sessions and what not to identify these behaviors, attack these behaviors and try to correct these behaviors, which in reality a large comprehensive high school cannot do and still maintain the curriculum and whatnot at a high standard.

While his initial definition of alternative education aligns with type II, safety valve behavioral schools or type III, safety net therapeutic alternatives, Ben later revised his definition to include schools designed to meet specific interests or academic strengths:

Well it would in the fact that...again, you're targeting a specific group of kids that may or may not have found their niche in the regular school and this is a niche that they, they may have found. Where obviously they can focus on something that they have high interest that may attract them to school and maybe help them, you know, with buy in.

Like the other participants described in this section, Ben's definition of alternative education is broad and would encapsulate a wide range of school designs, including schools that meet behavioral needs, schools that provide remediation, and schools that are designed around specific areas of interest.

### **Mixing Discourse**

As the previous sections have shown, there are three primary ways that participants in this study defined alternative education. The largest grouping, with six participants, believed that the only schools that should be considered alternative education are disciplinary or behavioral schools that serve students who have been removed from comprehensive schools for disciplinary infractions. The second group, expanded on this definition to include not just students who have struggled to be successful because of behavioral concerns but all students who struggle in comprehensive schools for any reason and require an “intervention” to get back on track. Finally, the third group held the most expansive view of alternative education encompassing not only schools that serve students who have struggled in traditional education but also those schools that provide another “niche” that can meet the needs of students who have a special interest or who prefer a certain pedagogic approach. In many ways, these three definitions align with Raywid’s (1994) typology, which identifies three types of alternative schools: type I, true alternatives; type II, safety valve disciplinary alternatives, and type III, safety net remedial alternatives.

The previous sections explored participants’ definitions of alternative education and how they view the boundaries around this construct. However, the data for this study also show that there is a contrast between participants’ definitions and the meanings and values they associate with alternative education. In some ways, this could be viewed as the contrast between their macro views of alternative education, how they define it and what schools they believe fit within their definitions, and their micro views of alternative education, the values, beliefs, and understandings that they associate with alternative education and their own work. While all of the participants’ definitions of alternative education can be neatly organized into the three categories created by Raywid’s (1994) typology, these categorizations do not adequately encapsulate the complexity of participants’ beliefs about their work and of alternative education’s purpose.

One explanation for the complex and sometimes contradictory ways participants describe alternative education is the presence of three competing discourses. As patterns of language that shape social reality, discourses influence how practitioners define alternative education. However, definitions are also likely to be rational and linear. At the same time discourses influence understandings, beliefs, and values, which are more complex and can even be contradictory. The literature review explored three competing discourses that are evident in research and policy.

- 1) True alternative discourse, describing alternative education as an avenue to innovation and changing the nature of teaching and learning
- 2) Safety net discourse, describing alternative education as providing remediation and a supportive environment designed to slow drop-out rates and retain students in the school system
- 3) Safety valve discourse, describing alternative education as enabling the school system to release students who are labeled “disruptive” or “dangerous”

All three of these discourses appeared as prominent themes across the data collected for this study.

Unlike their definitions, participants’ descriptions of their work and alternative education often included complex and apparently contradictory values and beliefs. To fully understand the complexity of the meanings participants associate with alternative education, it is important to recognize that most participants’ descriptions of their work and alternative education’s purpose include values associated with all three of the conflicting discourses described above. Unlike participants’ definitions, which can be neatly categorized, creating clear lines around what is and what is not alternative education, the meanings and values that participants associate with alternative education create significantly blurrier lines around this construct. The data show that a

participant who defined alternative education as creating behavioral schools is also likely to talk extensively about supporting individual students and innovation. At the same time, a participant who defined alternative education broadly, including any school that is different from comprehensive education, might still articulate associations between alternative education and behavioral placement or even schools that “warehouse” disruptive students.

There are a number of examples in the data of conflicting discourses influencing the meanings a participant associates with alternative education. One example is Roger, who works in a type II, safety valve alternative and equated alternative education with AEDY schools and programs. He argued that: “Alt ed staff should be willing to go above and beyond for students along with coming up with new and innovative ways to educate students who in most cases have had poor results in school.” Roger juxtaposed all three discourses within his response. He defines alternative education as only disciplinary or behavioral placements aligned with safety valve discourse. However, he describes alternative education as vehicle for innovation and transformation of educational processes to meet the needs of students who “have had poor results in school,” understandings that align with safety net and true alternative discourse.

Similarly, Michael, who also leads a type II AEDY program and believes credit recovery and STEM schools are not alternative education, incorporated each of the three discourses in how he described the function of alternative schools. He viewed alternative schools as providing a place for students “removed” from the comprehensive high school and as a place where students, “learn how to modify their behaviors.” However, he also described alternative education as providing a “different education” and therapeutic support:

I think the main responsibility to call yourself an alternative education program is that you're providing a different education than the one they were receiving, so you couldn't have them come in and think you could just teach them the same way and treat them the same way with discipline and behavior as they do at the sending school and hope that

they can figure it out because they got in trouble now. You have to teach it differently. You need to have more small-group instruction, specific instruction, counseling, group counseling, individual counseling, and then again, obviously, they need to have a behavior plan and goal, something to look forward to and clear, define the achievement that they should be reaching.

Michael's description of what alternative schools should do encompasses all three discourses. While he considered behavioral modification and removal to be defining characteristics of alternative education, he also talks about the importance of educational change, doing things differently than the comprehensive school as well as support, both academic and therapeutic.

Travis, who works in a type III, safety net program focused on truancy, academic deficiency, and behavioral challenges also demonstrates the influence of all three discourses in how he described his program:

Sure. Well, the program I work in, it's a very innovative program actually, so it's for grades seven through 12...and it is all individualized. It's cyber based. So, um, it covers three areas to be eligible for the program. Um, there's behavioral aspect. There is truancy, academics, and then one of the biggest part that it's becoming too is a credit recovery as well.

Travis described his program in ways that align with alternative education as a safety net discourse, including academic remediation and credit recovery. He also connected his program with safety valve discourse, describing a "behavioral aspect," and true alternative discourse, describing his program first as "innovative."

The previous sections in this chapter focused on participants' definitions of alternative education and how they draw boundaries around the concept, what schools they consider alternative education and what schools they would consider something else. The following sections will explore the connotations participants associate with alternative education, the

themes that emerge within the values, beliefs, and meanings that participants' associate with alternative education's purpose and their own work and how participants' understandings align with three distinct discourses, which describe alternative education as creating true alternatives, safety nets, and safety valves.

### **True Alternative Discourse: Changing the School**

Only two of the participants in this study lead schools that are purely type I, innovative alternatives, and only three participants' definitions of alternative education labeled these innovative alternatives, such as STEM schools and art academies, alternative education. However, connecting alternative education with innovative practices and changing the nature of schooling is a primary theme within the data. Nearly all participants in the study made references to ways that their own schools and alternative education in general change the nature of schooling, altering educational environments and academic practices. Even participants who lead behavioral type II programs and view only those programs as alternative education, talked about innovation and changing the nature of schooling. Michael exemplified this pattern when he stated, "the main responsibility to call yourself an alternative education program is that you're providing a different education," and he is not alone in arguing for alternative schools to change the nature of schooling while also defining alternative education as creating behavioral placements for "disruptive" students.

The frequency with which participants use language that can be associated with changing the school environment or academic practices is demonstrated in table 4-3. Developed using NVivo's Matrix Coding function, table 4-3 shows the word frequency counts for terms related to innovation across the three categories of alternative schools that participants lead. The table shows that participants made frequent references to alternative education being different than

comprehensive education, such as: web-based instruction, interest, smaller school size, relationships, and a greater sense of community. Notably, the terms are referenced with frequency by leaders of all three school types, showing that alternative school leaders are also influenced by true alternative discourse, which describes alternative education as creating true, innovative alternatives and an opportunity to change the nature of schooling.

Table 4-3: True alternative discourse word frequency totals.

Word	Participant's Alternative School			Total
	Type 3, Remedial (n=6; 50%)	Type 2, Behavioral (n=4; 33%)	Type 1, Innovative (n=2; 17%)	
Computer, Cyber and Online	18 (39%)	8 (17%)	20 (43%)	46
Relationships	11 (73%)	4 (27%)	0	15
Smaller and size	72 (76%)	22 (23%)	1 (1%)	95
Environment	30 (75%)	8 (20%)	2 (5%)	40
Community	12 (40%)	2 (7%)	6 (20%)	30
Goal(s)	27 (53%)	18 (35%)	6 (12%)	51
Interest	5 (23%)	2 (9%)	15 (68%)	22

One statement connecting alternative education to changing the nature of schooling, which appears throughout the data, is that alternative schools are different from traditional schools. Statements of this nature were evident in the thinking of leaders across the continuum of alternative school purposes. For some participants, being different was a defining characteristic of alternative education. This was the case for Monica, who leads a credit recovery school; she stated:

We're different than the traditional comprehensive high school, and I think for me, when I think of alternative education, I just think of something that's different, something that

meets the needs of students in a different way than could be met in a traditional setting, and so I usually, I think of an alternative setting as something that's much smaller, and again, the relationships are key, and I think that it's just much more personalized for students.

David, whose program and definition of alternative education is nearly identical to Monica's also believed being different is a defining characteristic of alternative education. In response to the question of whether or not he views his school as an alternative school, he said:

I would consider us an alternative school because of the way that our credit recovery and a little bit more of the hybrid and it's, it's a different setting and feel, which again is a lot different...I truly view alternative education as any educational environment that differs from the traditional school.

Similarly, Cindy noted that behavioral schools, credit recovery schools, magnet schools and thematic schools are all examples of alternative education, because:

They're just getting the job done in a different way. And I think ultimately that's all. Whatever your emphasis is, you know, you're, you're reaching a kid who is not the traditional student, whether it's discipline at Valley Forge or whether it's art at another school, or in our case we're just so little, you know, and we're super close.

Shandra, who leads a true, innovative alternative, also equated alternative education with just being different, stating that anything that is different is an alternative school, which includes:

Many different kinds of schools, one like mine, cyber schools, an arts and humanities academy... so, if you look throughout the country, there are many different kinds of magnet schools. Some districts actually have military magnets within their programs, so anything that is geared to the specific interests or desires or the necessities that a student might have.

While there are differences across the schools these four participants lead and how they define alternative education, they all viewed creating a school that is different from comprehensive education to be a central value in alternative education.

At the same time, even those leaders who hold narrow views of alternative education, defining it as a placement for “troubled” students, also associated alternative education with being different from comprehensive education. Michael’s statement that alternative schools must “provide[ing] a different education” is one example of this thinking. Roger and Howard who lead similar programs and have the same narrow definition of alternative education also stated that alternative educators must create, “new and innovative ways to educate students,” and establish “supportive and structured environments,” respectively.

### **Changing the Environment**

Within this theme, participants frequently connected alternative education with changing the school environment and nurturing close relationships between teachers and students. David, who leads a type III, credit recovery school and viewed alternative education as an “intervention” for students who have not experienced success in the traditional educational environment, highlighted changing the environment as one the main benefits of his alternative school:

Our biggest strength is the culture and the way that we handle the students, especially with anxiety and depression. We implemented restorative practices schoolwide. We've seen a huge increase in performance and our discipline numbers have gone down. Our attendance is going up; our overall grade is going up. I think it's been a huge, huge benefit to the school. The feedback we get from the students as well is that they feel more

a sense of community. They feel as though the teachers care about them, and that's something that they were missing in their home schools.

Monica also described relationships and how different her school's environment is from the traditional school as its greatest strength:

I would say it's building relationships...One of the things that you'll see if you were to come into our building is we have starfish lots of different places in the building, and so I don't know if you're familiar with the starfish story... I'll just read it real quickly...so one day a man was walking along the beach when he noticed a boy picking up and gently throwing things into the ocean, approaching the boy. He asked young man, what are you doing? The boy replied, throwing starfish back into the ocean. The surf is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them back, they'll die. The man laughed to himself and said, do you realize there are miles and miles of beach and hundreds of starfish? You can't make any difference. After listening politely, the boy bent down, picked up another starfish and threw it into the surf and smiling at the man, he said, I made a difference to that one. So we really look at every student as that starfish, so they all have different needs, but they all matter and they're all worthy, and part of what we look at when we think about credit recovery, when we say credit recovery, but the basic reason why the majority of students are with us is because they failed. And so they sometimes see themselves and their family sometimes see themselves as a failure, so when we enroll the student, we want to be as positive as we can and we want to help them understand, hey, this is a fresh start, this is brand new, you can do this, you got the potential, we're going to help you. We're going to support you...building those relationships is so key and so critical because you really got to have a growth mindset and change the thinking of that student.

Monica's description of the importance of relationships is accompanied by the narrative that she uses as school leader to ensure that creating positive teacher-student relationships is a priority within her school's culture.

Ben, who also leads a credit recovery school, similarly referenced relationships when identifying his school's strengths: "Just the small setting, the more personalized feel. We really pride ourselves...in the fact that we build really good relationships with our kids...know that we're there for them and we're there to help them." Monica, Ben and David's descriptions of teacher-student relationships and an altered school environment are compelling examples of how alternative education creates the potential to change schooling.

Leaders of type II, behavioral placement alternatives also frequently referenced the importance of changing the environment and teacher-student relationships. For example, Howard, who leads an AEDY program, described his school as, "a supportive and structured environment." Similarly, Michael described the strength of his AEDY program is that, "with the smaller numbers I think we are able to garner strong relationships with the students because I feel that...a lot of them have issues just creating a relationship with adults." A third AEDY program leader, Cindy, also described the importance of shifting the school environment and relationships:

I think the thing that absolutely has to be in place is the connection with the students...you don't have time for that in the high school setting. I taught English for seven years and graded 90 papers a week, and while I made every effort to connect with kids, there was no way I was going to connect with ninety kids in the day.

These descriptions of relationships and community within AEDY programs exemplify how the meanings and values participants associate with alternative education and their work can connect to competing discourses. While their programs, and in some cases their definitions of

alternative education, align with safety valve discourse, Howard, Michael and Cindy all describe positive teacher-student relationships as an essential value in alternative education.

### **Computer-Based and Individualized Instruction**

Interestingly, John and Shandra, leaders of type I, true alternatives did not comment extensively on the importance of relationships between students and teachers as they described their programs and the purpose of alternative education. They both described their schools as significantly different than traditional education, but their focus was on how teaching and learning are changed within their schools. Shandra, for example, described project-based learning and teachers that take a different approach to instruction and assessment:

We really stress presentation skills, so our students really learn a lot of the soft skills of presentation, communication. They do a lot of group work, they do a lot of teaching each other things. So much of the work that the teachers do is behind the scenes in preparation so that the students can learn to become independent learners.

Similarly, John described his program as using a unique approach to teaching and learning, which makes extensive use of technology and positions students as partners in the educational process, responsible for their own learning:

I would say ninety nine percent of their work is online or computer-based. So that that computer is kind of like their you know that's their baby. They use it to take notes; they use it to learn; they use it to do whatever they need for research.

It is important to note that while Shandra views changing the nature of teaching and learning to be an attribute of alternative schools John does not. He sees this innovative instruction as a central value of the work of his school, but he does not view his school as alternative education.

While John does not view changing teaching and learning as an attribute of alternative education, many of the participants in the study, even those who do not see instructional change as a defining characteristic of alternative education, incorporated references to instructional change into their descriptions of alternative education and their work. One of the primary changes to teaching and learning referenced in the data is the use of computer and web-based instruction to individualize instruction. Seven of the twelve participants referenced hybrid, online, or web-based instruction. Table 4-4 illustrates participants' descriptions of computer-based instruction within their programs.

Table 4-4: Computer-based instruction.

Participant	Alternative School	Computer-based instruction
Cindy	AEDY program	The individualized kind of learning that we're able to offer that they choose their online classes within the confines of what they need for their transcript, but we have offered a lot more choice than we can in the building.
Travis	Remedial program addressing truancy, academic deficiency, and behavioral challenges	It's all individualized and it's through...cyber programs...and they each have their own curriculum, their own classes.
John	Theme-based, innovative, type I alternative	The kids are one to one with computers they each get a computer...I would say ninety nine percent of their work is online or computer-based...What a lot of the teachers do is they flip the classrooms.
David	Credit recovery school	We use a lot of online computer-based credit recovery to try to catch kids up, whether it's in the course of a year or in classes that have been failed previously.
Monica	Credit recovery school	So we support students through an online software program called Plato, the philosopher, Plato, and that gives students an opportunity to take both core and elective courses, so that they can, you know, make sure that they're meeting the requirements for graduation.
Ben	Credit recovery program	We do some online classes as well that if they need to make up an additional credit or whatnot, they can, they can do some work through a state approved program where they can logon and can work on an individualized pace and we monitor.

Amy	Credit recovery school	Students have either a full day or a hybrid schedule and spend a block or two with me. I meet with each student weekly and set goals for them. Since the courses are online, students can work at home and in the evenings as well.
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As Table 4-4 shows, many of the participants in the study described computer-based instruction as a way to change the nature of teaching and learning and create a more individualized educational experience. It is important to note that the goal of individualizing instructions by using technology exists across the many types of alternative programs participants lead. Though Cindy, the leader of an AEDY program, does highlight a concern regarding computer-based instruction with her student population, saying: “it was a lot of online...if a student is not motivated in the classroom...multiply that times 10 in an online setting because...it's up to them to stay on top of things.”

Participants also described their schools as using goal setting, small-group, and one-to-one instruction to individualize teaching and learning. Michael described this approach within his AEDY program, which primarily features, “smaller group instruction and a smaller class size so they get a lot more individual attention.” Within Monica’s credit recovery program, each student has individualized goals established when they first arrive at the school. These goals then become a focal point of the student’s academic experience; Monica stated that each, “student understands in this program, that you're about to participate in, is going to be designed specifically for you.”

The data gathered in this study shows that true, innovative alternative education discourse is reflected in the way that leaders describe their work and the purpose of alternative education. This was true for leaders who work in innovative alternatives and participants who defined alternative education as any school that differs from the comprehensive school in an effort to meet the individual needs and interests of students. However, this discourse was also evident in the views of leaders of remedial alternatives who described alternative education as an

intervention and in the views of leaders of behavioral placement alternatives who described alternative education as any school or program that serves as a placement for students removed from the comprehensive school because of behavioral infractions.

### **Safety Valve Discourse: Alternative Education as a Behavioral Placement**

In the previous section, the word different was associated with discourse describing alternative education as an opportunity to change schooling; however, the word different also has other implications within the data. Sharon, who leads an emotional support program, talked about how difference can be perceived by her students:

That's kind of a sad thing too when our students realize... I am in placement, and so that already makes me different, you know, now I'm at a special school; that makes me different... They kind of have to come to terms with that... yes, some of you know, what our students are dealing with before they even walk through our door is a lot of the stuff that we can't even imagine.

Monica also recognized the potential connection between different and stigma.

These are people who... have never stepped foot in the building and... don't really have a frame of reference other than what they've heard, you know, and so there's this rumor that's out there... it's unfortunate because I think it prevents certain students from coming to us. Um, but you know, I think alternative... people don't like the idea of something different. They think that... the, the traditional high school should be one size fits all. Like everybody should, you know, when you're in ninth grade, you just go to the high school. And so the fact that there are some students who need to be with me in that smaller environment, they miss out on the opportunity because of fear.

While the previous section showed that associating alternative education with being different creates the potential for innovation, different can also be associated with a second discourse that describes alternative education as a “safety valve” or a place to move students who “disrupt” the educational environment. In this view, different becomes stigmatizing.

The following section will explore how participants’ understandings align with safety valve discourse, which describes alternative education as creating placements for “disruptive” students. Within this view, alternative education is not a choice for students or their families, but instead a place to house students removed from traditional education because they are “disruptive” or present a “behavioral problem.” Table 4-5 uses NVivo’s Matrix Coding function to align data associated with alternative education as a “safety valve” discourse with the different alternative types that participants lead. The table shows that terms such as behavioral, placement, and AEDY were used frequently by the participants as they describe their work and the purpose of alternative education. As table 4-5 shows these terms are stated most frequently by leaders of safety valve alternative schools. However, they are also used frequently by leaders of safety net alternative schools. Some of the occurrences of these terms within the data collected from remedial alternative leaders are the result of negative statements articulating what the participants’ programs do not do. In other cases, the terms are associated with statements about the overall purpose of alternative education. For example, the two participating leaders of innovative alternative programs do not use these terms to describe their work, but they do associate these terms with alternative education in general.

Table 4-5: Safety valve word frequency totals

	Participant's Alternative School			Total
	Type 3, Remedial (n=6; 50%)	Type 2, Behavioral (n=4; 33%)	Type 1, Innovative (n=2; 17%)	
Stigma	7 (100%)	0	0	7
Discipline	15 (68%)	7 (32%)	0	22
Violation, Weapons, Truancy, Drugs,	13 (48%)	12 (44%)	1 (4%)	27
AEDY	7 (22%)	25 (78%)	0	32
Placement	32 (47%)	33 (49%)	3 (4%)	68
Behavior(al), Disruptive + Troubled	63 (55%)	44 (39%)	7 (6%)	114

### Placement Not Choice

Data from this study show that alternative education is often described as a placement where students removed from the traditional school for disciplinary infractions are compelled to attend without choice. For many of the participants, placement for behavioral infractions is a defining characteristic of alternative education and their schools. For other participants, placement is something they associate with alternative education, either because they view alternative education in this way or because they are aware that alternative education is viewed in this way by others.

In total, seven of the twelve participants described their schools as mandatory placements following a disciplinary infraction. Four of the programs serve only this function while three of the programs serve as a disciplinary placement for some students but also enroll other students by

choice for academic or emotional remediation. Michael, who leads an AEDY program, described why students are placed within his program: “for some of the major infractions of the AEDY guidelines. You know weapons, drugs...and they'll just get placed.” Cindy, Howard, and Roger all lead schools that only enroll students for behavioral violations or as Roger said for one of, “the 6 reasons a student can be sent to an AEDY school,” which include drug and weapons violations as well as criminal acts and repeated behaviors that would merit a suspension. Some of the participants in the study described school enrollment practices that mix enrollment by choice and enrollment by placement. This is true for Sharon’s emotional support program; she described how some students are placed in her program, “We have had students that have been expelled from...the high school for fighting or for bringing drugs or something like that. And then they do place them here.” Similarly, Travis’ school serves students who choose to attend for emotional or academic remediation, but his program also serves as a placement after disciplinary infractions: “there's kids that are thrown in here...It's an isolated environment.”

In light of the many alternative schools that enroll students through placement after behavioral infractions, it is not surprising that many of the participants in the study articulated beliefs and understandings that associate alternative education with a behavioral placement. This was universally true for the participants who held narrow views of alternative education, defining it as only those schools that follow AEDY policy and provide behavioral remediation to students who have committed serious infractions. John, for example, leads an innovative type I alternative that uses a selective admissions process to determine enrollment. However, he does not consider his school alternative education. He views alternative education as an environment where students are placed for behavioral reasons – students who, “can't handle their stay at a normal educational atmosphere they have to be placed in another area.”

While there is congruence between John’s definition of alternative education and the meanings he associates with this construct, many of the leaders who defined alternative education

more broadly and lead programs that serve students by choice also made statements associating alternative education with behavioral placement. Travis, for example, described how he viewed alternative education early in his career: “I envisioned when I first started out in alt ed it was definitely a placement center.” Similarly, Cindy commented on how the role of alternative education has evolved over the course of her career:

They have been called different things...and they've come under all these other names, but you know, I think typically they just housed kids, um, who have failed in the traditional setting for one reason or another, whether it's a violation, then they got kicked out...since then...the state has said you cannot keep a kid hostage in alternative ed without giving them some kind of way to, to transition back, so I think that they've changed.

Ben described how placement works in other districts: “They are frustrated that they don't have a program like ours and you know, they kind of have to warehouse kids at other programs.” Sharon also described a similar contrast between her program and her impression of alternative education placements in other districts, “They [students] said, you know, we're just given a worksheet, you know. We sit there. The kids are kind of running the show. Um, you know, there's not a whole lot of academics going on.”

### **Stigma**

Within the theme of alternative education described as a safety valve, perhaps the most important pattern across participants' beliefs is that alternative education is often associated with stigma. The participants who spoke about alternative education stigma each identify it as the product of other people's misunderstanding of what happens within an alternative school. Cindy illustrates this trend, stating: “There are folks who believe that Alt Ed is a dumping ground, that

the students are 'gone forever.' I know I have colleagues that don't even agree with the existence of such programs." Cindy, who works in an AEDY program, highlights the two primary features of alternative education stigma: a belief that the students served by alternative education are troubled or beyond hope and a sense that alternative education programs are not academic and just serve as "dumping grounds." Within the context of alternative education as a safety valve discourse, where alternative education is frequently associated with behavioral placement and in some cases is compared to a "warehouse" for difficult students, stigma is unavoidable.

While comments that associate alternative education with placement for behavioral remediation and "troubled" students were present in the beliefs expressed by every participant, direct references to stigma were primarily made by participants who lead type III remedial alternatives. Travis, who leads a school that provides academic, behavioral, and therapeutic remediation, talked about how his program is viewed from the outside:

The main difference here is it's not just some people in the broader, broader sense might think of alternative ed and even our program...that it's for kids who are bad. It's just preconceived, you know, not, not a good judgment as well, so I'm kind of sensitive to that as it doesn't always have to be because they are terrible.

Ben, whose school also provides academic, therapeutic, and behavioral remediation, had a nearly identical understanding of how his school is viewed from the outside.

Quite frankly, even our program as long as it's been around and people that know what our program is, there still a lot of negative connotations to it, right, wrong or indifferent...its these kids that are, you know, big druggies and they're violent offenders. and, you know, you're breaking up fights every day and you are restraining kids and you're doing all those kinds of things and you're just getting a bunch of kids that are kind of just thrown out of the regular school and not wanted.

David, whose school provides credit recovery, but in the past was used as an AEDY placement, also talked about working to undue the stigma associated with alternative education in the local community:

I think a lot of times the perception of an alternative school is just that; it's a behavior school...I know that our teachers here in my program now are offended when we're called an alternative school because they think discipline and you know, I always talk to them and say that alternative school just means different. It means something different than the regular high school, but I definitely think the perception is that alternative schools generally are, for lack of a better term, I've heard things like they're babysitting services...and really watered down academically, so that's been a tough thing for our program to overcome...Too many times alternative education is hurt by the stigma of being the school for the bad kids.

Monica's school also has shifted its mission in the past, moving away from behavioral remediation to purely serving as a credit recovery school. Just like David, she has struggled with perceptions about her program in the local community:

I think because we're in a community where there's a number of people who generationally have lived here and so they're familiar with my building and what it used to be, and they in some instances are leery of sending their children or grandchildren to our building because of that alternative label that we used to have, so we're working on, you know, almost like a PR campaign. How do we get the word out? How do we help students understand and families understand that no, this is very different...? How do you erase from people's minds that stigma?

Four of the six participants who lead type III remedial programs commented on how they wrestle with local perceptions of alternative education and their programs. This alternative education stigma leads members of their communities to view their schools as places for “bad kids” where little academic work is done. The other two participants who lead type III programs do not comment on negative perceptions of their programs. However, these participants, Sharon and Amy, both state that their schools are not alternative education. In both cases, their perceptions of alternative education align with the alternative education stigma described in this section. Sharon explains: “I definitely envision some sort of behavioral issue students in Alternative Ed.” Amy’s view is nearly identical, “Our program is not typical alternative education. We don't have any students with discipline concerns.”

### **Alternative Education as Punishment or Deterrent**

The data gathered in this study show that safety valve discourse, which describes alternative education as a placement for “disruptive students,” influences the way many practitioners think about the purpose of alternative education. For some participants, it is the primary influence on their understanding of alternative education, and they conflate alternative education with a place to remove students whose behavior disrupts the traditional educational environment. For other participants, safety valve discourse stigmatizes their work and the students they serve, leading them to confront the negative beliefs and values associated with alternative education as a safety valve and the stigma attached with attending such a school.

One element of the alternative education as a safety valve discourse, which did not have the prevalence in the data that was expected, was practitioners connecting alternative education with punishment. The literature review suggested that alternative schools are sometimes positioned as a deterrent against student misbehavior or to serve as a punishment. Also, the

review of websites, student handbooks, and the local context indicated that alternative education, which is often listed as a consequence for serious behavioral infractions, would likely be viewed in this way by participants. However, there were very few instances where participants referred to alternative education as punishment or deterrent.

Michael's following description of his type II, AEDY program is the only reference to punishment within the data. Referring to comprehensive school administrators' decisions to place students in his program, Michael stated, "instead of having the kids get sent out..., they have to have a punishment, so they were utilizing my program." The word discipline, on the other hand, is frequently referred to within the data. Michael uses the word discipline referring to alternative education as a punishment: "Alternative Education should fill the role of providing public school districts more options when it comes to disciplining students." In both of these cases, Michael articulates the view that alternative education is a punishment.

The relative absence of the word punishment in the data is unexpected. Even when the term discipline is used, with the exception of Michael's statement above, it is not used to describe alternative educational placement as a form of punishment. Instead participants refer to discipline as they talk about alternative education stigma, as David does here: "I know that our teachers here in my program now are offended when we're called an alternative school because they think discipline." In other places, discipline is used to refer to students' actions before they were moved to alternative school, as Howard described: "the six of these criteria deal with students with continuing discipline issues or a discipline issue that rises to the level of a removal of their educational setting" or it is used to refer to what happens within the participant's alternative school as Monica exemplified with her description of the role of advocates at her school:

They check in on attendance, make sure that student has, if they were absent, you know, have you turned in your absence notes so that that can be excused, you know, etc. And

then behaviorally they check in to see, you know, are there any discipline referrals or any issues that they need to try to, you know, focus in on and help the students.

Instead of participants referring to alternative education placement as punishment or discipline, this process is often referred to as placement. Numerous examples of the term placement were explored in the previous section. While placement in this context may have some shared connotations with punishment, there are important differences between the words and what they indicate should happen within an alternative school.

Cindy described how this tension between punishment and placement manifests within her AEDY school.

I mean we'll meet with students in September who don't wind up in alt ed, alternative placement, till the fourth quarter because we try to give them every opportunity to kind of pull it together in the building. And then we have other kids who ironically petition to be in alt ed. They're like, "I don't, it doesn't work to be in here and I want to be in alt ed." And that is not really how this works. Although we've had a couple really savvy kids who found out, you know, if they had a superintendent's hearing and they had a drug and alcohol violation and it wasn't their first one that was going to be an automatic bounce into alt ed, so we've had to really, really kind of keep things on the QT. In terms of like, we have to tell the kids why they're placed, but then when we tell them why they got placed sometimes that becomes an advertisement to their friends... I sat in the superintendent's hearing with a young lady that said to the superintendent, you know, we could have made this a lot easier on everybody and you could've just let me be in alt ed. Clearly where I belonged. Instead I had to have a drug violation because I knew you'd have to place me, and I was like, "aye yai yai"...If we'd had the program earlier, she would have been a shoo-in, but you know a senior kid and kind of rallying to get in was kind of like you know we can't do it that way, but ultimately, she graduated from alt ed

anyway.

Cindy is clearly confronted by the tension between creating a school that meets the needs of her students and one that serves the comprehensive school's interest in deterring misbehavior. Her district treats alternative education as a disciplinary consequence and, at the same time, as an educational placement where struggling students will have access to an educational environment that is a better fit for them. This creates a tension where students want to attend the alternative school, but are not able to enroll by choice. Instead they must commit behavioral infractions, such as having drugs or alcohol at school, before they can enroll in the alternative school.

A school district that positions alternative education as a consequence either must create an alternative school that no one would want to attend or find ways to cope with the fact that something students want is only available if they engage in potentially dangerous behavior. Cindy's school opts to take the second approach attempting to, "keep things on the QT" in regards to how students end up in alternative education. This decision allows her to operate an alternative school that is appealing to many students. However, it is not hard to imagine that other district administrators and alternative school leaders are pressured into taking the first approach, creating a school that no student would want to attend.

### **Safety Net Discourse: Supporting Struggling Students**

Cindy's school's role as a placement for students who have committed behavioral infractions aligns it with alternative education as a safety valve discourse, but her descriptions of her work align with a third prominent theme in the data, participants describing alternative education as providing remediation or support for students "who cannot function" in the comprehensive school environment. This theme aligns with discourse describing alternative education as a "safety net" for struggling students, preventing dropout, helping students persist in

school, and remediating challenges that have prevented them from succeeding in the past. Table 4-6 below shows the word occurrence frequencies for terms that align with this discourse.

Table 4-6: Safety net word frequency totals.

	Participant's Alternative School			Total
	Type 3, Remedial (n=6; 50%)	Type 2, Behavioral (n=4; 33%)	Type 1, Innovative (n=2; 17%)	
Problem(s) + Issues	25 (54%)	9 (20%)	12 (26%)	46
Interventions	7 (58%)	5 (42%)	0	12
Struggling	13 (65%)	7 (35%)	0	20
Emotional + Trauma	29 (100%)	0	0	29
Recover	22 (92%)	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	24
Failing	20 (65%)	6 (19%)	5 (16%)	31
Counselor	20 (44%)	25 (56%)	0	45
Credit	44 (86%)	5 (10%)	2 (4%)	51

Within this discourse alternative schools are described as serving specific needs of students, which are usually either emotional or academic – though reference to behavioral remediation could also be viewed as part of this discourse. Students, on the other hand, are sometimes described as flawed and unable to function.

### Emotional Supports and Credit Recovery

The majority of participants described their programs or alternative education as providing either emotional or academic support. Table 4-7 provides an overview of this pattern.

Table 4-7: Emotional and academic supports.

Participant	Alternative School	Emotional and Academic Supports
Cindy	AEDY program	Being able in a counseling setting and our mental health services and things that we're able to help families with
Travis	Remedial program addressing truancy, academic deficiency, and behavioral challenges	In meeting the kids' emotional needs...these kids come in with baggage and how are they supposed to learn their education...if they just got in a fistfight with their dads or something happened, um, in that way...It's just an environment to make them successful.
Michael	AEDY program	They get counseling. They get smaller group usually specifically designed instruction sometimes from the teachers...to set up for them to have success.
Sharon	Emotional support program	We have a social worker on staff, so she does group weekly sessions with our students. If a student is struggling, if they're having an issue, you know, if there was something occurred in the home the night before they come into school, the next day they're having a rough day, they can ask to meet with her at any time and process through whatever's going on.
David	Credit recovery school	We backfill that material with an online program. What will assign online assignments and if they go back and complete those, we can retroactively go and bring that ten up to a sixty-five to passing, so that way, it kind of digs them out of the hole and give them a level playing field for the rest of the year.
Monica	Credit recovery school	Our mission is credit recovery... The structure of our building is...semesters as opposed to full year courses because that's how we allow students to make up more than one-year worth of credit in the school year... Then the goal is for them to graduate on time with their class.
Ben	Credit recovery program	Our program can offer an additional two credits per year, so kids that may have failed something in ninth grade... and are coming to us credit deficient, there is the opportunity for them to get caught up expedite and go back with their graduating cohort.
Amy	Credit recovery school	Our program's purpose is to give students a way to earn credit recovery in a stress-free, flexible setting, with additional academic and emotional support.
Howard	AEDY School	Improving their behaviors by providing them with a supportive and structured environment where they receive a minimum of 2.5 counseling hours per week.

Nearly all participants identified counseling, emotional support, credit recovery, or academic support as an integral part of alternative education or their school. Monica, for example, described an alternative school as one that: “provides academic, social and emotional support in a

smaller setting for at-risk students.” Similarly, David described alternative education as providing:

More social emotional support, whether it be behavior, drug and alcohol...There is ...a little bit more counseling, a little bit more involved. I think it's a little bit more about forming relationships with the kids and making them feel comfortable because I do think academics kind of takes a little bit of a backseat until you get them comfortable. And then ...there's more supports for the students academically...I think the alternative school... looks at the student as more as a whole being instead of just solely academically.

Ben's description of alternative education also addressed support:

The purpose of alternative education to me is...identify students that... are bright, intelligent kids that for whatever reason, their behaviors and those behaviors could be you know school avoidance behaviors...have impeded their ability to perform at the level that they should within a mainstream comprehensive high school setting. Um, you know, we serve a purpose to kind of help manage behaviors, correct behaviors through smaller classes, through a more therapeutic group sessions and what not to identify these behaviors, attack these behaviors and try to correct these behaviors.

Shandra associated alternative schools with places that provide academic support to assist students, so they get back on track academically: “I know there's kids that go there because they've been in trouble and they're trying to get their life back together and recover credits because they've lost because of whatever trouble.”

### **Students Can't Function**

The other main pattern within the data aligned with alternative education as a safety valve discourse is that participants described the students who attend alternative schools as students who struggle or students who cannot function within the regular educational environment. Travis' description of students who enroll in alternative education illustrates this trend:

These kids for the most part cannot function in the regular ed setting, whether it be behavioral, educational, truancy, family, you know, there's always a precipitating factors and external factors that play a role...had a trigger that trigger in their life or something happened in their life. And that's what we see with a lot of our students is that something has happened to make them, um, you know, pretty much not being able to function in a regular environment...It could be a number of reasons. We have a kid in here who is so smart and we know that he could and he could, you know, do it in regular ed, but, you know, he was bullied. He was bullied and he, uh, he just could not make it kind of got swallowed up in the larger classroom.

Michael also described alternative school students as unable to function: "it's a place where students that are struggling with a regular program and are...just against accepting help from administration, counseling. They just don't want, they are not responding well to any intervention at all." Similarly, Roger labeled alternative school students as those, "who in most cases have had poor results in school," and Amy called them, "students who don't fit the traditional school setting." Ben described a pattern of behavior that results in students being unable to succeed in the traditional environment:

There's that element of kids that really aren't traditional performing students, which means when school is over, school is over for them, they're not going to go and sit at the

kitchen table at night and do you know, their Algebra homework and do problems one to 31 odd and turn it in, so you know, they have a tendency to start getting behind in classes and then that kind of snowballs on them, so either they try to avoid it...you know cut a class...or just at the end of the day say, well, what's the point I am failing anyway? And just kind of go into that self-destruct mode just kind of let that ride out.

Like many of the participants, Ben's description of alternative education students creates the impression that the students are not able to succeed within the comprehensive school.

Each of these participants used terminology that describes the students who attend alternative schools as unable to "fit" or "function" or as those who have had "poor results" or are "struggling." One interesting difference between Travis' description of alternative education students and the other participants addressed above is that Travis connects the students' struggles not only to the students' flaws but also with flaws in the traditional school setting. This comes through in his description of a smart student who was bullied and, "swallowed up in the larger classroom." While the participants in the previous paragraph all described students as unable, other participants, like Travis, connect student inability to function with some problem within the larger school environment. David's description of students who attend alternative schools exemplifies this tension between flaws of the student and flaws of the larger school system:

I think generally they'd be a student that in the comprehensive schools is disengaged.

Whether it be because the, the academics are too high and they need support. Whether it be that they're just disinterested, and they don't care about school. I think their troubles at their regular schools...I think it manifests in different ways. Sometimes it's behavior, sometimes it's bad grades, sometimes it's getting in trouble outside of school, so a lot of times I think as a student that's really disinterested with school in general. Some of them

fall between the cracks. And you're just kind of silent and failing silently and not being noticed and others are, are doing the same thing, but they're outwardly acting out because they are disengaged.

David talked about students who struggle with behavior or grades, but he offered a balanced explanation of why this happens. On one hand, the student may be disinterested or struggle with academic expectations, but on the other hand, the student may “fall through the cracks” and not be “noticed” within the larger school environment. This tension highlights how discourses can overlap. Here the discourse that alternative education is a safety net for “students who can’t function” is intermixed with the discourse that alternative schools are an opportunity to change the nature of teaching and learning.

Cindy and Monica also offered descriptions of alternative school students that, while acknowledging that the students have struggled, also criticize the comprehensive school environment, aligning with changing the school discourse. Cindy described alternative school students as “non-traditional kids” and those who have been “underserved:”

I mean, I just think non-traditional kids. I think they have strengths that we don't know about that maybe haven't been tapped into in the general education setting...I think a lot of the students are underserved for one reason or another.

Monica also described alternative school students as “at-promise” shifting the narrative that labels students at-risk; she expanded on her view of alternative education students:

The students traditionally I feel are very capable...I think that they just need to have maybe things presented to them in a different way. Whether that means it's something online. Sometimes students like to work independently; sometimes students need that smaller class size so they can have more one on one time with the teacher, and I also

think that the type of engagement needs to be different. I think that a lot of times students are often turned off by the way things are sometimes presented in a larger setting.

Sometimes I'm helping students understand the why behind what they're doing. So, you know, making it relatable to the real world so that students understand the reason why you're being asked to do this and how this is going to benefit you in your future....I think in some sense they're disenfranchised or turned off by just the traditional way that school has been for them... I've seen, they started off pretty well and they were so called good students and then somewhere they just kind of, you know, lost their footing.

Unlike many of the other participants, Monica and Cindy's descriptions of alternative education students change the narrative, placing the fault for previous failure on the comprehensive school. They acknowledge individual challenges that contribute to student failure, trauma, poverty, disenfranchisement, but ultimately, Monica and Cindy both view comprehensive schooling as flawed. They also described alternative education as serving students who have been "turned off by the way school has been for them," which aligns with the discourse that connects alternative education with innovation.

### **Lowered Academic Expectations**

Another pattern within alternative education as a safety net discourse evident within the data was associating alternative education with reduced academic expectations. This belief positions alternative education as a safety net where students are retained within the system, but they no longer have access to the same high-quality educational experiences as students in the traditional school. Some participants articulated beliefs that lowered academic expectations are a characteristic of alternative schools. Sharon, for example, talked about the impression her students have expressed of many alternative schools: "we're just given a worksheet, you know,

we sit there, the kids are kind of running the show... There's not a whole lot of academics going on." For Michael this reduced academic expectation is a common attribute of alternative schools: "I would describe alternative ed as usually a separate building or a place where many students that are similar to each other can be in an environment that maybe isn't as educationally demanding as high school." While he disagrees with this belief, David also noted that many people associate alternative education with reduced academic expectations: "I definitely think the perception is that alternative schools generally are... I've heard things like they're babysitting services... and really watered down academically."

One potential explanation for this association between alternative education and reduced academic expectations is that as schools with multiple goals, alternative schools must balance providing academic challenge with meeting other elements of their mission. Sharon, for example, talked about the struggle to accomplish all of the goals of her emotional support program while maintaining the same academic standard as other schools:

That's really a challenge for them. We really try to parallel our curriculum with our high school. Obviously not being on the block scheduling and just with the various behavioral and emotional needs of our students we are not on the same pace, but we try to keep it pretty parallel, but just modify that curriculum to meet the needs of our students.

Michael's experience in his AEDY program is nearly identical:

Sometimes it's tough with the counseling just because we're in the building and we don't have a set counselor just for us so we have to bend the program around the rules and it's tough to keep up with the rigors of the same exact high school schedule that they had, but now they have a shorter schedule and counseling and someone like me getting on them all day, so it's like they run out of time.

David also struggles to strike the balance between fulfilling the mission of his credit recovery school and retaining an academic standard equal to that of the comprehensive school:

I think sometimes where we can definitely look to improve is... the rigor. We do keep the same curriculum, but I think sometimes with the sliding due dates and things like that the students when they're here and they're successful aren't best set up to go back to the high school and be successful.

For schools that strive to provide remediation, reduced academic expectations may be difficult to avoid as practitioners struggle to balance the many needs competing for time.

Cindy, however, had an innovative way of thinking about time that allows for a change in academic expectations instead of a lowering of academic expectations. She described her view of time and the accumulation of academic credit:

I want my students to finish high school and I don't care about artificial timelines. You know, kids get all hung up on while I am a senior. I've got a girl coming back in September that's going to be 20. But because she's um, she doesn't have, she's technically a homeless kid, you know, we're going to continue to, we're going to continue to educate her and that, that high school diploma is her ticket that she's got a child, she's trying to get back from these different taken summer as you know, that's our ultimate goal is show that they can go out in the, in the, in the big world and contribute in some way.

Cindy makes it clear that innovation can make it possible to retain academic quality by shifting practices within an alternative school. In this case, she changes the timeline schools usually hold students to as they work to accumulate credit.

### **Negative Case Analysis**

The data reviewed in the previous sections support the argument that three discourses are prevalent across the belief systems of alternative school leaders. While practitioners' definitions of alternative education fit into one of three alternative school types, the belief systems of

participants are far more complex. Most participants made statements connecting alternative education to all three of the discourses. One participant, Monica, revealed a belief system aligned almost entirely with the view that alternative education should serve as a safety net and as an avenue for innovation. However, she did recognize the influence of others who view alternative education as a safety valve and spoke extensively about alternative education stigma, associating alternative education with the “bad kids” and the efforts she makes on behalf of her school and students to counteract this view of alternative education.

While most of the participants in the study held complex beliefs about alternative education, there were three participants whose beliefs and understandings did not fit into the theme of associating alternative education with multiple meanings. These participants’ views of alternative education were one-dimensional and consistently aligned with only safety valve discourse and the view that alternative school only allows for the removal of “disruptive” students from the comprehensive school. John, Sharon, and Amy all define alternative education as serving students with “behavioral issues.” There were other participants who defined alternative education this way, but those participants’ descriptions of alternative education all included beliefs and values that also align with innovation and support. John, Sharon, and Amy, on the other hand, all defined alternative education as a behavioral placement and limited their beliefs to associating alternative education with a safety valve.

John, who leads an innovative, thematic, type I alternative program, felt uncomfortable answering questions about alternative education, responding: “I don't want to say anything because I'm not familiar with it. To give you any of like the actual like bylaws or anything like that.” However, he did describe what he envisions when asked about alternative education, saying: “if a kid can't handle their stay at a normal educational atmosphere they have to be placed in another area.” While he associates the work of his program with innovation and changing the nature of teaching and learning, he does not view his school as alternative education. His beliefs

about alternative education are one-dimensional, connecting it only with behavioral placements or alternative schools that serve as a safety valve.

Sharon and Amy both felt more equipped to talk about alternative education, but also viewed it as a behavioral placement. Amy distinguished her program from alternative education saying:

Our program is not typical alternative education. We don't have any students with discipline concerns. Also are [sic] students need to be at a certain academic level to be able to successfully complete the courses. Our program's purpose is to give students a way to earn credit recovery in a stress-free, flexible setting, with additional academic and emotional support.

Sharon and Amy did both make one connection between alternative education and support in response to a question about what they believed alternative education should be. Sharon stated that alternative education should:

Help provide more individualized support, teach responsible decision-making skills, develop and improve coping strategies, and maximize academic skills. Alternative education should collaborate with school districts, parents, and outside agency providers to facilitate students' return to the home school setting once goals are met.

Similarly, Amy stated: "Alternative education should provide appropriate learning with additional supports to meet the needs of students who don't fit the traditional school setting."

Neither Sharon or Amy viewed their emotional support programs as alternative education. Unlike John, they expressed familiarity with alternative education – Amy even mentioned working in alternative education for 25 years. However, they distinguished their work and their emotional support programs from alternative education. Their descriptions of their own work resemble the complex values and beliefs common among participants in this study, mixing language about

remediation, placement, and innovation, but the complexity of their beliefs does not extend to their understandings of alternative education, which they view simply as: “more like behavioral.”

The common trait shared by these three participants is that they all viewed their work as something different than alternative education. All three participants put distance between their work and alternative education, which they perceive as serving students with “discipline concerns.” While they were the only participants in the study who shared this one-dimensional view of alternative education, there was evidence of this theme within other participants’ responses. Monica, for example, talked about alternative education stigma and their community’s perception that alternative education is for “the bad kids.” David’s description of his teachers’ perceptions of alternative education most closely aligns with this theme. He explains how teachers at his credit recovery school view alternative education:

I’ll tell you, if you talk to our staff, our staff would not refer to us as an alternative school because in their definition, alternative schools...would be a school that deals with students with behaviors...I would say if you were to walk into our building and refer to us as the alt school as we used to be called, after you walked out, I would have quite a few staff members in my office saying that that’s not right. We’re not that.

Like Amy, Sharon, and John, David’s staff distinguishes their own work at a credit recovery school from alternative education. They separate their school, which is described as supportive and innovative, and alternative education, which they perceive as behavioral placements for disruptive students.

Together the understandings of alternative education shared by David’s staff and Sharon, Amy, and John illuminate two of the main themes within the data for this study. One theme is that alternative education is associated with a safety valve, “the bad kids,” and stigma. The desire of some participants and their coworkers to create distance between the work they do and alternative education shows that these negative views of alternative education are pervasive. At the same

time, these negative cases provide a potential explanation for why the mixing of the three discourses is so prevalent among the majority of participants. While safety valve discourse appears to be the dominant discourse describing alternative education, individuals are likely to make sense of their work in complex ways and to attribute positive meanings to their own work. A leader of a program that serves as a placement for students labeled “disruptive” may accept this approach as the defining characteristic of alternative education. At the same time, incorporating other beliefs and meanings into their view of alternative education and their work, describing alternative education as an innovation or an intervention, allows these participants to attach positive meanings to their work.

### **Meeting the Individual Needs of Students**

All of the themes illustrated in this chapter establish distinctions: distinctions between alternative school types, variations in the values and meanings participants associate with alternative education, and the differences between participants who hold one-dimensional views of alternative education and those who hold complex views of this construct. However, another theme that emerged during negative case analysis was that one pattern emerged across participant responses that unified alternative education as opposed to creating distinctions between alternative types. This pattern was connecting alternative education with meeting the needs of students. Like the three participants described in the previous section, this pattern serves as a negative case, in that it contrasts with the main themes traced across the data. Meeting the individual needs of students does not align with any one of the three discourses. Instead, it appears to be compatible with all three ways of viewing alternative education and is therefore a theme that transcends the three discourses as opposed to distinguishing them for each other.

Table 4-8 shows how participants connect alternative education or their work with meeting the individual needs of students.

Table 4-8: Meeting the needs of students.

Participant	Alternative School	Meeting the Needs of Students
Cindy	AEDY program	Those are alternative ways to get the job done and meet the needs of kids.
Travis	Remedial program addressing truancy, academic deficiency, and behavioral challenges	It is necessary for alternative education to be available in public schools so that students will have a second chance to be successful and meet students' emotional, behavioral and educational needs.
Michael	AEDY program	It is an alternative form to providing students an education in a setting where their behavioral needs can be met more appropriately.
Sharon	Emotional support program	Obviously not being on the block scheduling and just with the various behavioral and emotional needs of our students we are not on the same pace, but we try to keep it pretty parallel, but just modify that curriculum to meet the needs of our students in our program.
David	Credit recovery school	I truly view alternative education as any educational environment that differs from the traditional school... Some students need a different environment.
Monica	Credit recovery school	You have to have a dedicated staff that is willing to work extremely hard to meet the needs of the students.
Shandra	Theme-based, innovative alternative	Anything that is geared to the specific interests or desires or the necessities that a student might have... any school that serves the individual interests or needs of a student.
Ben	Credit recovery program	If they need to make up an additional credit or whatnot, they... can work on an individualized pace... Sometimes things happen, you know, and kids need some more support, so one of the teachers may be pulled out of a class if you have an issue to help the kids right away, like our counselor.
Amy	Credit recovery school	Alternative education should provide an appropriate learning with additional supports to meet the needs of students who don't fit the traditional school setting.
John	Theme-based, innovative alternative	They need a little bit more extra help. They need a little more guidance than what your standard education process can give them.

As table 4-8 shows, meeting the individual needs of students was a universal theme across the responses of the alternative school leaders who participated in this study. Two of the participants are not included in the table above, Howard and Roger, because they do not directly

reference meeting student needs in their responses to the survey – neither Howard nor Roger participated in a follow up interview. However, Roger stated: “Alt ed staff should be willing to go above and beyond for students along with coming up with new and innovative ways to educate students who in most cases have had poor results in school.” Similarly, Howard stated that, “it would be beneficial to have students who are not typically disruptive but don't fit into the mold of students at a regular education public school.” Both statements suggest that Howard and Roger, like the other ten participants in the study, connect alternative education with meeting students’ individual needs.

Another pattern that emerges within this theme is that distinctions between safety valve, safety net, and true alternative discourses are still evident. They emerge in how the participants define the needs of students. For example, Michael, who defines alternative education as schools and programs that provide a behavioral placement for disruptive students, connects alternative education with meeting students’ behavioral needs. Travis who defined alternative education as providing remediation and support, describes alternative education as meeting “students’ emotional, behavioral and educational needs.” This is consistent with his view of alternative education as any school or program designed to provide academic, emotional, or behavioral remediation. Shandra on the other hand, who leads an innovative, theme-based alternative and defined alternative education broadly, connects alternative education with meeting, “individual interests or needs.”

Patterns within the data that align with three distinct discourses, or ways of describing and understanding alternative education’s purpose, can be viewed as creating three separate visions of what alternative education is and what it can be. Instead of separating participants’ understandings of alternative education, viewing alternative education as meeting the individual needs of students creates a unified vision of what alternative education should be. When viewed through the lens established by this theme alternative education is not a safety valve, safety net, or

innovative alternative. Instead, all alternative schools share a unifying mission of meeting the unique needs of students.

### **Chapter 4 Summary**

Chapter 4 provides a review of the data and explores the complexity of participants' understandings of alternative education. A review of school district websites and participants' definitions of alternative education create three contrasting possibilities for what alternative education is: a behavioral placement, an intervention, or an avenue to innovation. These definitions give the impression that there are three distinct versions of alternative education. However, participants' definitions are not necessarily consistent with the values and meanings that they associate with alternative education. For most of the participants, the connotations, the meanings and understandings, they associate with alternative education do not always match their definitions. For, example, a participant who defines alternative education as a disciplinary placement is still likely to associate alternative education with innovation, strong teacher-student relationships, and providing academic or therapeutic support. These complex views of alternative education align with the three discourses traced in the literature review. Discourses, or patterns of language that shape perceptions of social reality, describe alternative education as either a safety valve, a safety net, or true alternative, but in practice these discourses often appear within the values and understandings of a single alternative school leader, which indicates alternative schools are more complicated than their definitions imply.

Definitions and discourses create the impression that there are distinctions between alternative school types. At the same time, an analysis of negative cases shows that the view that alternative education meets the unique needs of students was persistent across all participants' responses. This theme does not align with any one discourse but instead seems to be compatible

with all three discourses. The literature review suggests that the dominant understanding of alternative education would be as a behavioral placement and the primary beliefs and values expressed by participants would be those that relate to safety valve discourse: punishment, placement, and disruptive students. The data for the study confirms that these are primary understandings of alternative education within the area.

## Chapter 5

### Summary, Discussion, and Implications

#### Summary

This study examines the understandings of alternative school leaders in eastern Pennsylvania. Specifically, this study explores how leaders of diverse types of alternative schools view alternative education and its purpose and how these leaders' understandings align with prevailing discourses, which describe alternative education as a safety valve, safety net, or innovative, true alternative. This study addresses the following research questions:

How is the purpose of alternative education understood by alternative school leaders?

What patterns and themes are evident across alternative school leaders' understandings of alternative education?

How do these patterns and themes align with prevailing alternative education discourses?

Narratives describing alternative education have evolved since the early alternative education movement in the 1960s. At that time, alternative education was primarily associated with challenging and altering the nature of schooling (Raywid, 1999; Lehr et al., 2004). However, as the political and social context surrounding alternative schools changed, alternative education also came to be viewed as an opportunity for remediation or removal of students labeled disruptive or at-risk (Young, 1990; Kelly, 1993). These evolving narratives have formed discourses or systems of narratives that shape how we perceive what is true and untrue, possible and impossible (Foucault, 1990; Alvesson & Karreman, 2003). Over time, three discourses about the purpose of alternative education have emerged:

- 1) True alternative discourse, describing alternative education as an avenue to innovation
- 2) Safety net discourse, describing alternative education as providing remediation and a supportive environment designed to slow drop-out rates and retain students in the school system
- 3) Safety valve discourse, describing alternative education as enabling the school system to release students who are labeled “disruptive” or “dangerous”

This study finds the third discourse, associating alternative education with punitive schools where students are placed after a disciplinary infraction, to be the most prevalent view of alternative education.

The data gathered during this study support the hypothesis that in eastern Pennsylvania alternative education is most frequently associated with schools that serve as behavioral placements for disruptive students. In chapter 4, the findings of this study begin with a review of the local context and an analysis of school district websites’ descriptions of district alternative schools and programs. This review found that the most frequent occurrence of the term alternative education was within student handbooks where placement in alternative education is often listed as a consequence for serious or repeated disciplinary infractions.

Some school district websites included information about alternative schools that focus on innovation. These schools are theme-based, adopting curricular or pedagogic identities – such as STEM academies or project-based learning schools. However, none of these schools adopt the label alternative education or refer to themselves as alternative schools on their websites. A third group of alternative schools in the area adopt missions related to remediation. As Figure 4-1 on page 65 shows, these remedial alternatives, such as credit recovery schools and emotional support schools, appear to exist on a continuum between innovative and behavioral. Consistent with the

argument that alternative education is primarily viewed as placements for disruptive students, remedial alternative schools that are more closely aligned with behavioral placements appear more likely to adopt the term alternative education than those that are focused on academic remediation and innovation.

The review of school district websites gives the impression that the only schools considered to be alternative education in the area are those created under AEDY policy or those that serve as behavioral placements. The data gathered through surveys and interviews of alternative school leaders complicate this conclusion. While the data indicate that the most prevalent definition of alternative education is behavioral placement for disruptive students, they also show that many alternative school leaders hold more complex views of alternative education and its purpose. Half of the participants in the study limit their definition of alternative education to schools that serve as behavioral placements, but the other half believe that schools that focus on academic or emotional support are also alternative education, and three participants include programs that have no association with discipline or remediation, schools such as STEM schools and art academies, within their conceptualization of alternative education.

Further complicating participants' understandings of alternative education, data analysis looked beyond participants' definitions to examine the beliefs, values, and meanings participants associate with alternative education and their work. While participants' definitions provide insight into how they view alternative education, their beliefs, values, and meanings were expected to be both more complex and more likely to illuminate how these leaders approach their work (Sergiovanni, 1992). This analysis found that most participants who narrowly define alternative education as schools that serve as behavioral placements also associate alternative education with innovation and support.

Finally, an analysis of negative cases confirmed the hypothesis that alternative education is most often associated with behavioral placements. Three participants fell outside of the main

themes of the study, dissociating alternative education from their work and viewing the construct very narrowly as schools and programs that serve as behavioral placements for disruptive students. These cases contrasted with the views of the other participants, even those who define alternative education narrowly, but still hold complex understandings of alternative education. These negative cases confirmed the hypothesis that, within the region, alternative education is often associated with behavioral placement.

The data collected in this study present a complex picture of how alternative school leaders in eastern Pennsylvania describe alternative education. AEDY policy defines alternative education as disciplinary placements for disruptive students, but alternative school leaders associate this construct with multiple meanings, the most frequently referenced being meeting the individual needs of students. The following sections will discuss the findings and primary themes of this study and their implications for alternative school students and leaders, policy makers, and researchers.

## **Discussion and Implications**

### **Limiting Alternative Education to Disciplinary Placements**

As has been suggested throughout the literature on alternative education in Pennsylvania (Hosley, 2003; Hosley et al., 2009; Education Law Center, 2013; Holtzman, 2014) and across the United States (Barr, 1981; Aron, 2003; Graham, 2015; Dunning-Lozano, 2016; Horsford & Powell, 201), this study found that many people associate alternative education with disciplinary placements, behavioral schools, and as one participant lamented, “the bad kids.” This trend was evident in the review of school district websites, which observed that many student handbooks list alternative education as a disciplinary consequence and that schools focused on remediation

or innovation are rarely labeled alternative education. Also, all twelve of the participants in the study agree that these disciplinary placements are a type of alternative education while only three participants consider theme-based innovative schools to be alternative education, and for six of the participants, alternative education was viewed as synonymous with AEDY or alternative schools that serve as disciplinary placements.

When the context is considered, it should not be surprising that half of the participants believe that the only schools that should be considered alternative education are behavioral placements. AEDY policy, has taken on a substantial role within Pennsylvania's school districts. In 2006, there were 614 AEDY programs in Pennsylvania, serving 30,000 students (The Education Law Center, 2010). AEDY resulted from the passing of the national Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 and the Safe Schools Act of 1995 and Act 30 of 1997 in Pennsylvania (Bickford, 2001). These laws and similar zero tolerance policies have been linked to the shifting alternative education landscape (Dunning-Lozano, 2016; Horsford & Powell, 2016) and to increasing suspension rates (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Giroux (2003) described similar zero tolerance policies as branding, "students as criminals and as a result, increasing numbers of young people who are suspended, arrested, or expelled from school, often for ludicrous reasons" (p. 62).

AEDY policy defines the purpose of alternative education narrowly, creating placements for students labeled, "disruptive:"

Alternative education placements are temporary in nature, and should be considered only when severe or persistent behavioral problems require more intensive intervention services and after all other avenues have been exhausted. The goal of alternative education is to continue providing education services along with behavioral interventions to overcome the disruptive behavior and return students to the regular school environment. (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013, p. 1)

This policy provides a clear but restrictive description of what historically has been a complex construct, defining alternative education simply as temporary placements for “disruptive youth.” The data gathered in this study show that AEDY policy and the programs created under it are part of a discourse that has likely influenced the way practitioners both inside and outside of AEDY programs view alternative education. Of the six participants in this study that define alternative education as serving “disruptive youth,” only three of them lead AEDY programs. Also, many of the participants who lead non-AEDY alternatives such as credit recovery and emotional support programs commented on how alternative education is viewed by students, the community, and educators as serving “behavioral” students or “the bad kids.”

This finding aligns with other studies conducted in the region that depict Pennsylvania’s alternative schools as serving almost entirely as behavioral placements for “disruptive students.” Hosley’s (2003) study of alternative education in Pennsylvania concluded that safety valve or “Type II Discipline program components are common to most programs” (p. 15). Similarly, Hosley et al. (2009) found that practitioners in alternative schools believe, “that the programs should continue to focus on the reengagement of disruptive and at-risk students” (p.4), and Holtzman’s (2014) study of comprehensive school principals in western Pennsylvania found that, “fourteen principals (70%) reported that they use day behavior modification programs and four principals use evening behavior modification programs... to manage their alternative education population” (p. 76).

The data gathered for this study also support the conclusion that alternative education is closely associated with stigma, or as Ryan (2009) argued, practitioners: “inextricably link ‘alternative’ with kids whom society has judged disadvantaged, disruptive, or unwanted” (p. 5). Many studies of alternative education have come to the same conclusion (Kelly, 1993; Conley, 2002; Watson, 2014; Horsford & Powell, 2016). Barr and Parrett described (2001) how placement and stigma work within public schools, “At-risk youth arrive at school far from ready

to learn, and public-school programs tend to isolate them, stigmatize them, and place them in programs that widen the academic gap between them and their better achieving peers” (p. 47). Kelly (1993) takes this a step further, suggesting that stigma may be a goal in some alternative schools; she observed that these schools, “were not constantly trying to shed stigma. Some regarded stigma as a useful tool for maintaining the safety valve function of the continuation program” (p. 68). While some may view stigma as contributing to a punitive alternative education program’s capacity to function as a deterrent against misbehavior within the comprehensive school, this is an unethical and problematic use of alternative education.

While one participant in this study, Michael, referred to alternative education as a “punishment,” none of the participants expressed the view that stigma is the goal of alternative education. Instead, participants in the current study viewed stigma as an unfortunate byproduct of the way alternative education has been operationalized and understood in the region. Both Monica and David described efforts they have made to rebrand their schools in hopes that students and families will overcome negative perceptions related to alternative education and their schools. Monica specifically commented on how she knows that this stigma has prevented students from attending her school despite the fact that her school, “is considered a privilege since we do have such a small number of students that we can enroll.”

Alternative education stigma is particularly concerning when we consider that alternative schools often serve the most vulnerable students. For these vulnerable students, developing positive academic identities and improved self-concept is often a goal of alternative education, but stigma threatens to undermine this work and further marginalize these students. Echoing a common theme in alternative education literature (Aron, 2003; Barr & Parrett, 2001; Zweig, 2003), this study found that alternative school students are often viewed as vulnerable because of “trauma,” family poverty, learning or mental health difficulties such as ADHD or anxiety, or as

Sharon described because they, “have been taken out of their homes, have maybe come from a juvenile treatment facility or another residential program.”

While the effect of stigma on alternative school students is beyond the scope of this study, there are a number of studies that have suggested that because of stigma, alternative education has a paradoxical effect on vulnerable students (Tallerico & Burstyn, 2004; Dunning-Lozano, 2016). The size and the lack of support and relationships make the comprehensive school environment untenable. Bryk and Thum (1989) found that school organizational features such as small size and strong relationships have “significant educative consequences for all students, and especially at-risk youth” (p. 377) and they argue that increasing school size contributes to student alienation and dropout. Similarly, De La Ossa (2005) argued that alternative schools have the ability to restore the communality lost in large comprehensive schools. From the beginning of the alternative education movement, alternative schools have been described as meeting vulnerable students’ needs by providing a smaller, more caring community with a greater focus on individual needs and talents (Gold, 1978; Gregg, 1999; Tallerico & Burstyn, 2004; Quinn et al., 2006; Bland et al., 2008; Cable, Plucker & Spradlin, 2009; Ryan, 2009; Farrelly, 2013).

However, the act of attending such a school often results in stigma that can negatively impact students’ sense of self-efficacy and their future educational prospects (De La Ossa, 2005; Prior, 2010). Dunning-Lozano found that an alternative school, “may paradoxically contribute to lowered student outcomes, self-perceptions and higher dropout rates, while simultaneously offering some students the opportunity to obtain an academic credential otherwise unavailable to them” (p. 445). Similarly, Bland et al.’s (2008) study observed students attending an alternative school experienced improved educational experiences and relationships, but their educational experiences were often viewed as inferior by the traditional school teachers, which made the transition to a regular school challenging.

Stigma is not the only problem related to associating alternative education with disciplinary placements. One of the values of alternative education is that it suggests schooling can take on multiple forms. Raywid (1999) described alternative education as, “an empty glass to be filled with any sort of liquid” (p. 47). The empty glass metaphor captures the potential created by alternative education. While so often schools are inflexible organizations that struggle to move away from traditional structures and instructional approaches, alternative education creates the possibility of a blank canvas and the suggestion to do things differently. For this reason, during the early alternative education movement of 1960s and 1970s alternative education was primarily associated with innovation and support for students not served well by the comprehensive school. Over time, other meanings such as serving “at risk” students or creating behavioral placements also became associated with alternative education. This study contributes to a growing research base that argues alternative education, which was once associated with many possible meanings, is increasingly associated with disruptive students, behavioral placements, and safety valves (Guerin & Denti, 1999; Aron, 2003; Hosley, 2003; Munoz, 2004; Tallerico & Burstyn, 2004; Hosley et al., 2009; Carver and Lewis, 2010; Graham, 2015; Dunning-Lozano, 2016).

This trend threatens to reduce the complex understandings of what alternative education can be down to a single purpose: educating “disruptive students” in a secluded environment. Six of the twelve participants in this study attached this narrow definition to alternative education, viewing alternative education as synonymous with AEDY. Also, while three of these six participants held beliefs about alternative education and their work related to support and innovation, the three participants described in the negative case analysis did not. For them alternative education simply means behavioral placement where disruptive students are moved and educated in hopes that they will learn to behave appropriately in a school setting. These three participants all believed that their schools are not alternative education. Additionally, other participants cited interactions with coworkers and community members who share this one-

dimensional view of alternative education. These data illustrate the growing influence of safety valve discourse, which appears to now be the dominant discourse and, for many people, has become the only way alternative education is perceived. Ultimately this trend makes alternative education stigma unavoidable and threatens to eliminate alternative education's ability to offer, "different avenues for learning" (Lehr et al., 2004, p. 4) to students, families, and communities.

### **Implications for Policymakers**

State and school policies have the potential to shape the meaning of alternative education. Unfortunately, current state and district policies in Pennsylvania overwhelmingly describe alternative education as creating behavioral placements. This reduction of alternative education's complex meanings could strip the construct of much of its ability to promote innovation and facilitate the development of multiple approaches to teaching and learning. For policymakers, the findings of this study lend support to The Education Law Center's recommendation that Pennsylvania should revise AEDY policy to create "a broader definition of alternative education that would involve a continuum of options for students who need different types of educational experiences" (2010, p. 40).

Alternative school leaders who participated in this study recognized that those outside of alternative education often view it simply as schools for the "bad kids." The language of AEDY policy certainly creates this impression. This language has the potential to constrict the meanings associated with alternative education so that those who create and lead alternative schools cease to view alternative education as an "empty glass" and instead view it as a safety valve. Policymakers can begin to address issues created by the language of AEDY policy by adopting a new state definition of alternative education. Porowski et al. make the case that, "at a minimum, a definition should recognize alternative education's many purposes and evolving nature" (2014, p.

18). By defining alternative education narrowly, AEDY policy falls short of this recommendation.

The language of AEDY policy also contributes to alternative education stigma. The creation of policy is often referred to as a value-laden process (Majone, 1989; Fowler, 2000), which can “construct belief systems, social categories, and other meanings that become part of taken-for-granted understandings of reality” (Rosen, p. 276, 2009). Rosen argues that policy, which is often misunderstood as simply instrumental and having concrete expectations that direct behavior, are also, “public expressions and exaltations of particular values and principles, rather than instrumental means to achieving particular ends” (2009, p. 270). In this view, policy as an expressive act communicates values and meanings that shape educators’ belief systems and how they make sense of their work and the students they serve.

In labeling alternative education as serving “disruptive youth” and articulating the specific offenses that can result in placement, the framers of AEDY policy were likely attempting to create clear guidelines that would protect vulnerable students from unnecessary placement in AEDY programs. Studies of Texas’ disciplinary alternative school placements have suggested that practitioners have utilized these programs in ways not intended by the policy, resulting in “the new criminalization of school discipline has disproportionately targeted minority students and students who read below grade level” (Reyes, 2001-2002, p. 555). Therefore, the instrumental intent of the language used within AEDY policy was likely an effort to avoid the “overrepresentation of discretionary punishment of minority students” (Tajalli & Garba, 2014, p. 628) observed in Texas’ DAEPs.

Unfortunately, this instrumental view of policy does not take into consideration policy’s ability to “construct social reality” as an expressive act and “constitutive activity” (Rosen, 2009, p. 275). As an expression of values, the language of AEDY policy labels students as disruptive, which is unquestionably stigmatizing. At the local level, situating alternative education as a

consequence for misbehavior and its ubiquity in the disciplinary section of student handbooks, is likely to have the same effect.

State and local policymakers should recognize the importance of evaluating alternative education policy not only based on its instrumental intent but also taking into consideration the policy's expressive value and how language within the policy contributes to the labeling and stigmatizing of vulnerable and marginalized students. Kelly (1993) argues that separating alternative education from stigma would require that policymakers apply Barr's recommendation of, "diversifying the whole of public education into a system of optional alternative schools and programs serving all youth" (1981, p. 571). Kelly argues that any alternative education policy that labels and groups students based on a perceived weakness, whether that be academic, emotional or behavioral, will ultimately result in stigma within school systems oriented to reward and promote normativity and to correct student attributes viewed as deviant or deficient. Gregg makes a similar argument, contesting that policy makers must use alternative education to promote variety within the school system that can meet the needs of diverse student populations instead of crafting policy inspired by, "deficit models that attempt to 'fix the child,' scare tactics, authoritarian approaches, and punishment" (1999, p. 112). Ultimately, both local and state policy makers can look to the results of this study and studies across the country to understand that the growing association of alternative education with "the bad kids" is likely to undermine the benefits of alternative education for vulnerable students who need support and improved academic self-concept.

Prescriptive state policy also threatens to inhibit the freedom needed at the local level in order for alternative schools to innovate and meet the needs of students within the local context. Making the case for innovation in schools, Sizer argues for, "substantial authority in each school" and, "state authorities...forswearing of detailed regulations for how schools should be operated" (2004, p. 214). The literature base on alternative education consistently identifies autonomy as a

crucial element in creating the context for effective alternative schools (Garrison, 1987; Raywid, 1988; Young, 1990; Barr & Parrett, 2001; Cable et al., 2009). In order to ensure that local actors have sufficient autonomy to create effective alternative schools, state policymakers should create policies that allow for broad understandings of alternative education, protecting students from the stigma associated with being labeled “disruptive” and protecting alternative educational leaders’ ability to promote innovation at schools. Local autonomy would also allow practitioners at the local level to match alternative school designs with the needs of their student population.

### **Complex Meanings: Associating Alternative Education with Innovation and Support**

As the previous sections show, this study joins many others that argue that the meaning of alternative education has changed, and what was once primarily associated with innovation and changing the school system is now most often defined as schools that serve as behavioral placements for disruptive students. However, the data from this study also show that many alternative school leaders continue to link alternative education with the meaning and values that characterized the early alternative education movement: innovation, support, and meeting the needs of diverse groups of students (Raywid, 1994). This study paints a picture of school leaders who operate within a context where the primary discourse describes alternative education as a safety valve. Nevertheless, these alternative school leaders associate their work and alternative education with a broad range of meanings and values.

David’s description of the contrast between his view of alternative education and his faculty’s understanding of the concept best exemplifies the tension created by contrasting views of alternative education: “our teachers here in my program now are offended when we’re called an alternative school because they think discipline and you know, I always talk to them and say that alternative school just means different.”

Other studies have noted the presence of multiple and often conflicting values within alternative schools (Kelly, 1993; De La Ossa, 2005; Dunning-Lozano, 2016). Kelly (1993) observed the conflict created by opposing views of the purpose of alternative schools in California continuation schools where a, “tension has existed between the desire to become an alternative center-with the goal of accommodating differences in learning styles, schedules, and the like-or a treatment center-with the goal of returning students to the comprehensive high schools” (p. 70). Similarly, De La Ossa (2005) observed that students believed their alternative school better met their needs than the comprehensive school, but “felt they were viewed and treated as second class citizens by the public, school boards and teachers for choosing an alternative way to be educated” (p. 34).

Organizational theorists provide a framework for understanding the presence of conflicting understandings, meanings, and values within an organization. Many theorists have contested that meanings, beliefs, and values form the foundation of organizational culture (Pettigrew, 1979; Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984; Meglino & Ravlin, 1998; Schein, 2010; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). Morgan (1986) contended that, “shared meaning, shared understanding, and shared sense making” (p. 128) are each ways of thinking about organizational culture. Others have defined organizational culture as binding members of an organization together (Smircich, 1983; Hanson, 1996) and as based on “deeply held meaning and beliefs” (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015, p. 49). However, organizational culture is not always unified. Culture can be fragmented (Wilkins & Ouchi, 1983, p. 469), can consist of “competing value systems” (Morgan, 1986, p. 127), and can be strong or weak (Deal & Kennedy, 1982), indicating that within an organization it is not uncommon for individuals to hold distinct understandings or incompatible value systems creating a “weak,” “fragmented,” or fractured culture.

The tension between participants’ views of alternative education, which incorporate support and innovation, and the views held within their schools and communities that alternative

education is simply for behavioral placements is an example of what Sackman (1992) called “complex and even paradoxical” (p. 156) organizational culture. The presence of contrasting beliefs, meanings, and values related to alternative education places greater importance on effective school leadership. Positive school culture is widely recognized as an essential ingredient for the success of any school (Cheng, 1993; Gaziel, 1997; Hoy, Tarter & Hoy, 2006; Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Baldy, Green, Raiford, Tsemunhu & Lyons, 2014; Tschannen-Moran, Salloum & Goddard, 2014).

At the same time, school culture and shared meanings and values are likely more significant for alternative schools because of how widely the meanings associated with alternative education can vary, from serving as “grim detention centers” to “an exciting laboratory” (Barr, 1981, 571). Obleton’s (2010) survey of disciplinary alternative school principals in Georgia found that, “the dimension most often found to have a relationship with students’ outcome measures was school culture” (p. 139). Similarly, Quinn et al. (2006) argued that:

students identified as troubled or troubling tend to flourish in alternative learning environments where they believe that their teachers, staff, and administrators care about and respect them, value their opinion, establish fair rules that they support, are flexible in trying to solve problems, and take a nonauthoritarian approach to teaching.” (p. 16)

McClay’s (2011) qualitative study of continuation schools drew from observations of a school whose culture was characterized by, “a commitment to never giving up on students” (p. xiii). McClay concluded that, “affective qualities of staff members, both classified and certificated, are perceived to be more important to the students' and schools' success than the quantity of staff members on site” (p. xiii).

The link between leadership and culture has been explained by organizational and educational theorists (Sergiovanni, 1992; Taylor-Dunlop & Norton, 1997; Alvesson, 2002), and many studies view school leadership as instrumental to the creation of effective and ethical

alternative schools (Tylor-Dunlop & Norton, 1997; Barr & Parrett, 2001; Tallerico & Burstyn, 2004; Quinn & Poirier, 2006; Farris, 2014). Studies have also found leadership to be the primary culprit when alternative education takes on a more problematic form as Horsford and Powell (2016) conclude in their case study of one behavioral placement alternative school, stating: “Second Chances Academy’s lack of effective and sustained leadership have contributed to a host of issues concerning school culture, climate, and instruction” (p. 21).

When alternative school leaders associate alternative education and their work with innovation, support, and meeting students’ unique needs, the likelihood is that even an alternative school to which a student is assigned for a behavioral infraction can become a positive educational experience for that student. While student outcomes are beyond the scope of this study, it is telling that Cindy, who believes that alternative schools serve students that, “have strengths that we don't know about, you know, that maybe haven't been tapped into in the general education setting...I think a lot of the students are underserved, you know, for one reason or another,” reports that of the “50 to 60” students who have been served by her AEDY program only one has dropped out of school. This is a tremendous success rate for a school serving a vulnerable and marginalized student population. The literature base would suggest that Cindy’s view of alternative education and her belief that her type II disciplinary alternative should be relational and innovative is likely a key reason her program is so successful.

The fact that so many of the participants in this study have complex belief systems and views of alternative education creates reason for some optimism about the quality of alternative schools in the region. The review of school district websites and the local context suggested that Pennsylvania is populated by safety valve alternatives where students are sent to rid the comprehensive school of “disruptive” students. However, the frequency with which participants link their programs to innovation and support suggests that this is not a fair characterization of alternative schools and programs in the region.

### **Implications for Alternative School Leaders**

The findings discussed in the previous section position leadership as a crucial ingredient for alternative school success. The participants in this study resist (Anderson & Grinberg, 1998) the dominant safety valve discourse to differing extents. Theory and research about leadership and culture suggest that the individuals who are most successful in resisting safety valve discourse and retaining positive ideologies about alternative education's purpose and the students it serves will be most successful in creating effective alternative schools.

The benefit of alternative education's complex meanings is captured in Edwards' (2013) description of an alternative school design process, which he believes:

Enables leaders to literally “think outside the box” and stretch their definitions of what schools are. Such a design process also gives school leaders the psychological permission to pursue school organizational patterns and theoretical frameworks that would otherwise be constrained by conventional thinking that encourages maintenance of the status quo. (p. 21)

Granting “the psychological permission” to alter the paradigm of traditional schooling is one of the qualities that makes alternative education promising for school innovation and transformation. However, in order for this potentiality to exist, those who create and lead alternative schools must hold complex understandings of what alternative education is and should be. If alternative school leaders view the construct as simply meeting the comprehensive school's need for a place to house “disruptive students,” the product will be inferior educational environments. On the other hand, leaders who associate alternative education with complex meanings have the potential to create alternative schools that meet the diverse needs of students.

At the same time, simply holding certain ideas about alternative education is not enough to ensure that those ideas become part of a school's culture. Alternative schools need skilled

leaders who can problematize simplistic views of alternative school purpose and influence school culture. Therefore, alternative school leaders should be those with both significant leadership skill and training and those who recognize the importance of taking a strengths-based approach to defining students and who connect the work of their alternative schools with innovation and support. For leadership practice, this suggests that cultivating a positive school culture needs to be a primary objective for alternative school leaders. The problems created by alternative education stigma, addressed in previous sections, suggest that to improve student outcomes, alternative school leaders also need to be able to influence the community's view of alternative education, so that students' alternative educational experiences are not viewed as inferior, reducing their opportunities after graduation or transition out of the alternative school (Bland et al., 2008).

This is a tall task for alternative school leaders. While the complex views held by participants in this study creates some optimism, this optimism is tempered by the magnitude of the leadership challenge faced by alternative school leaders. Further concerns are raised by Hosley's finding that more than 50% of alternative schools in Pennsylvania are operated by an administrator who has "combined duties" (2003, p. 15) such as a comprehensive school assistant principal or principal or a district level alternative education coordinator or director of student services, whose role in the alternative school only comprises a portion of their work. In light of the findings of this study, this is a practice that should be reconsidered.

Alternative school leadership needs to be prioritized. Alternative schools should be led by individuals with significant leadership training, a commitment to the success of the alternative school and its students, and an understanding of alternative education's complex history and the research base. The findings of this study lend support to Hosley's (2003) argument that professional development is essential for those who work in alternative schools and Hosley et al.'s (2009) suggestion that a master's degree in alternative education would be beneficial to many practitioners.

### Mixing Discourses

While associating alternative education with complex meanings is valuable for alternative school leaders, analysis of the data from this study found that not all complex meanings are equal. Some participants in this study respond to the changing meaning of alternative education within the local context by mixing discourses or juxtaposing the values expressed by safety valve, safety net, and true alternative discourses within their own views of the purpose of alternative education and their work.

Michael, for example, talks about alternative education as a disciplinary tool and a way to promote order in the comprehensive school by providing a place to remove “disruptive” students, but he also describes the importance of relationships within his alternative school where teachers are committed to, “understanding the behaviors and working through things and you have a better chance to develop relationships with the staff and adults and understand maybe where they're coming from.” Similarly, Roger, who leads an AEDY program and views the purpose of alternative education as creating placements for disruptive students, also contests that “Alt ed staff should be willing to go above and beyond for students along with coming up with new and innovative ways to educate students who in most cases have had poor results in school.” This mixing of contrasting meanings was a common theme in the data gathered for this study and it has both promising and concerning implications for alternative education in the region and the students it serves.

Kennedy et al. (2016) also observed contrasting understandings of an alternative school's purpose within the ideologies of individual teachers. Their study examined comprehensive school teachers' views of the purpose of an alternative school, finding that they, “often hold mixed beliefs about alternative schools, seeing them as both a punishment and as providing needed support and services” (p. 230). The current study complements Kennedy et al.'s finding,

indicating that alternative school leaders are also subject to this mixing of discourses and viewing alternative education both as a disciplinary consequence and as a caring environment designed to meet students' needs.

Ultimately, we must view the mixing of discourses in two ways to fully understand this phenomenon. On one hand, associating a disciplinary alternative school placement with discourses that connect alternative education with support and innovation is likely to have some mitigating effect on the inevitable stigma and negative self-concept that accompany the process of being labeled "disruptive" and removed to an Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth program. As the previous section explained, attaching positive meanings to the work of a disciplinary alternative school placement is likely to help practitioners overcome external pressures to create "schools undesirable enough to deter bad behavior" (Gregg, 1999, p. 109).

While the mixing of discourses may have a positive effect on school culture, it could also potentially result in the justification of a problematic response to flaws in the educational system. The research base indicates that alternative schools with a disciplinary focus are problematic. It is important to note that there is a dearth of evidence regarding what works in alternative schools; Lange and Sletten (2002) argued that "the literature lists several characteristics of 'effective' alternative schools; yet, there is little empirical evidence that the characteristics consistently transfer to desired outcomes for students" (p. 22). One potential explanation for lack of evidence for what works in alternative schools is that there is such significant variation in definitions for this construct and foci for these schools, which can range from behavioral remediation to academic acceleration. This variation can make large scale quantitative research difficult if not misleading. However, the extant empirical evidence as well as a substantial number of qualitative studies suggest that, as disciplinary alternative education programs, it is likely that Pennsylvania's AEDY programs constitute a flawed approach to working with vulnerable students.

Cox, Davidson and Bynum (1995), conducted a meta-analysis of studies, using a broad definition of alternative education that would include a range of school types; they concluded that alternative schools have “no effect on delinquency” (p. 219). The researchers theorize that improvements in student self-esteem and attitudes toward school are not significant enough to “overcome other influences that may have had a greater effect on subsequent delinquency” (p. 229). At the same time, a sizable section of the research base describes disciplinary alternative schools as a part of a broader pattern of the criminalization of school level misbehavior (Reyes, 2001-2002; Kim et al., 2010) and the school to prison pipeline (Horsford & Powell, 2016; Kennedy-Lewis et al., 2016). Therefore, alternative schools appear unlikely to result in improved student behavior, but instead disciplinary alternative schools could potentially contribute to further marginalization of these students.

Qualitative researchers have also theorized that alternative schools are more likely to promote student growth and engagement if instead of focusing on discipline they are, “focused on enriched academics and educational choices” (Franklin, Streeter, Kim, and Tripodi, 2007, p. 134) or creating a, “college-going culture” (Farris, 2014, p. 5). Similarly, Watson argued that an alternative school helped students persist in school and graduate because, “where traditional education labeled them as deviant, and therefore unworthy of remaining in its highly resourceful system, alternative education did not label them with any deviant labels” (p. 209).

In light of what the research base indicates about disciplinary alternative education programs, the mixing of discourses observed in this study could promote a flawed approach to alternative education. Kennedy-Lewis et al. (2016) also concluded that the convergence of multiple discourses about an alternative school’s purpose can serve to justify the continuation of a problematic educational practice. They contest that: “Educators also justified their recommendations to send students to Phoenix by claiming that students would be better supported there...these unsupported claims serve to make palatable educators’ use of positional privilege

and power that systematically disadvantage” (p. 241). Kelly (1993) makes a similar argument about practitioners mixing of multiple goals for California’s continuation schools:

Thus at the organizational level, continuation schools may provide a safety valve—whether in response to demands for equal opportunity or class conflict—keeping the comprehensive schools pure while providing a second, yet devalued, chance to those who have been pushed out. Stated differently, institutional convenience may dictate that rebels and failures be put into a separate institution that, as a slave to conscience, aims to reconnect these students to the educational enterprise (p. 31).

The current study aligns with both Kelly and Kennedy et al. in arguing that juxtaposing two conflicting goals, meeting the needs of the comprehensive school by providing a safety valve and meeting the needs of students, is likely to promote the continuation of problematic approaches to alternative education.

Foucault (1990) provides insight into this phenomenon, arguing that discourses, which may seem in conflict, can actually function in concert. He argues that “there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy” (p. 102) and attempts to view discourses as representing either the, “dominant or dominated” (p. 102) are misleading. Instead, understanding the effects of discourses requires that we look at, “what reciprocal effects of power and knowledge they ensure” and “what force relationship make their utilization necessary” (p. 102). In the instance of the mixed discourses observed by Kelly (1993), Kennedy et al. (2016), and the current study, these discourses ensure that certain students are viewed as “disruptive” or “a threat to the social order” (Giroux, 2003, p. 61) and that disciplinary alternative placements are viewed as a viable solution to this problem.

### Counter-Narrative

The previous section explored how some school leaders respond to prominence of safety valve discourse by associating alternative education and their work with additional meanings including innovation and support or mixing discourses. While this response might lead to the creation of more relational alternative schools, it also lends credibility to the creation of behavioral placements and reifies the stigmatizing assumptions and beliefs about students expressed by safety valve discourse. In contrast, some participants in this study employ counter-narratives when describing alternative education, their work, and the students they serve. Counter-narratives challenge the beliefs and values expressed by safety valve discourse and redefine alternative education and the students who attend alternative schools.

Monica's description of the work her school does to help students rethink their educational identities is emblematic of counter-narrative:

The basic reason why the majority of students are with us is because they failed, and they sometimes see themselves and their family sometimes sees them as a failure. So when we enroll the student, we want to be as positive as we can and we want to help them understand, hey, this is a fresh start. This is brand new. You can do this. You got the potential. We're going to help you. We're going to support you.

Monica's description not only challenges understandings of alternative education as a place for "bad kids," she also challenges the assumptions that are associated with at-risk students and students who fail. She redefines these students as capable and redefines the schools' roll as helping these students to realize their potential.

There were many other examples of counter-narrative in this study. Monica also refers to her students as "at-promise" instead of at risk, confronting the implications of the term at risk, which Kelly (1993) argues creates a, "tension between addressing 'special' needs and separating-

and seemingly inevitably, stigmatizing-targeted groups” (p. 93). Cindy also rejects stigmatizing labels in describing the students served by alternative education, calling them, “non-traditional kids, I think they have strengths that we don't know about.” David places the blame for student failure on schools, calling his students those that, “feel marginalized in traditional schools.” Counter-narratives, such as these, challenge the assumption that some students are incapable or disruptive and need to be reformed through placement in alternative school, arguing instead that students are capable and will thrive in an educational environment that takes a different approach.

Other qualitative studies of alternative education have also observed the presence of counter-narrative. Kim (2006) explored multiple voices within an alternative school, including students and practitioners, and argued that by engaging students’ voices the study facilitates the expression of counter-narratives through which, “taken-for-granted thoughts are disturbed” (p. 15). Similarly, Buffington-Adams (2014) found that an alternative school teacher can lead students to construct their own counter-narratives, challenging the “discourse of risk,” which prescribes, “remediation to the underclass which is viewed as culturally deficient” (p. 170). In both studies individuals within an alternative school are observed as engaging in counter-narratives that challenge the dominant belief systems of the alternative schools.

However, other studies have observed alternative schools, themselves, creating the context for counter-narratives, which help students overcome previously assigned labels that defined them as at-risk, disruptive, or incapable. Watson (2014) observed the effect of counter-narrative on two students who attend a supportive alternative education program: “Where traditional education labeled them as deviant, and therefore unworthy of remaining in its highly resourceful system, alternative education did not label them with any deviant labels” (p. 2019). Similarly, Nasir et al. (2013) concluded that an alternative school redefined students, who had previously experienced marginalization in the traditional school:

In typical classrooms, they felt that the dominant racial ideology perceived Black males

to be intellectually inferior, and they felt harshly and unfairly punished by the discipline system of the school. In the alternative all-Black MDP class, the students felt that their teachers invoked alternative racial ideologies that recognized them as capable and valuable (p. 507).

As Watson and Nasir et al. suggest, participants' counter-narratives are likely to protect students from the stigma associated with attending an alternative school or being labeled a disruptive or at-risk student by redefining these students and the reasons they have not been successful.

### **Implications for Leadership Practice**

The contrast between counter-narrative and mixing discourses has important implications for leadership practice within alternative schools. Participants' mixing of discourses, combining descriptions of innovation and support within a behavioral placement alternative, are well-intended and likely to improve the climate and performance of these schools. However, this approach accepts definitions of alternative school students as flawed, disruptive, and incapable, reifying alternative school stigma. In contrast, by challenging traditional values and definitions, counter-narrative is likely to promote students' "positive identity development" (Tallerico & Burstyn, 2004, p. 40), enabling them to "try on new academic identities" (Kennedy, 2011, p. 6).

As they examine the purpose of alternative education and their work alternative school leaders should consider the contrast between a safety valve and a safety net as Kelly (1993) defines these terms:

A safety valve provides a mechanism to rid mainstream schools of failures and misfits without holding school administrators fully accountable for the consequences, a mechanism that reinforces students' disengagement from school. By devaluing the program, administrators districtwide could use the continuation school as a threat in order

to marshal students into conformity. By contrast, a safety net provides a program geared to meet the intellectual and social needs of those that the mainstream schools cannot or will not help, a program that meets with some measure of success in reengaging students. (p. 68)

While school leaders may mix discourse and attach many meanings to alternative education and their work, a school cannot be both a safety valve and a safety net. A safety valve view of alternative education labels students as inferior or damaged, stripping students of the positive academic identities they need to be successful. A safety net, on the other hand, is intended to meet students' needs and help them persist in school. Therefore, practitioners' well-intentioned attempts to merge safety valve and safety net functions of alternative education are undermined by the incompatibility of these two constructs.

In order to move beyond mixing discourses, practitioners need to examine how they define the needs of students. For alternative school leaders, the implication is that counter-narrative, defining the needs of students in a way that challenges safety valve discourse, is essential to creating alternative schools that benefit students. If leaders define students' needs as behavioral dysregulation, which needs to be remediated; defiance, which needs to be changed to compliance; and an isolated environment, where these behavioral challenges can be remediated, the resultant alternative schools will be punitive and stigmatizing. Attempts to meet students' needs in this way are reminiscent of Freire's description of, "attempts to liberate the oppressed with tools of domestication" (2015, p. 65). Alternative programs that assign students to a segregated environment without their consent or that of their parents essentially label those students as inferior to their peers and unfit for mainstream education.

Kelly (1993) argued that safety nets meet the unique needs of students; safety valves, on the other hand, might be described as meeting the needs of students, but their true purpose is to

meet the needs of the comprehensive school by removing students labeled “disruptive.” To empower disenfranchised students, alternative school leaders should employ counter-narrative, defining students’ needs in ways that contradict the beliefs and values expressed by AEDY policy and safety valve discourse. Counter-narrative depicts students as capable as opposed to simply “behavioral” and the purpose of alternative education as transformative as opposed to custodial. Cindy does this when she describes the Philadelphia Magnet schools:

You have the school for the performing arts. You have the school for agriculture that sits in the middle of Philadelphia...Those are alternative ways to get the job done and meet the needs of kids too... you have agriculture kids sitting in the middle of the city and you can offer them the opportunity to raise livestock and grow food and then sell it... You've created an alternative way to teach.

Within a context where alternative education and their schools are viewed as “behavioral placements” and their students are viewed as “the bad kids,” this description of alternative education is humanizing and empowering. Alternative school leaders who view their students in this way are likely to create alternative schools that transform teaching and learning and meet the unique needs of students.

By confronting the beliefs engendered by safety valve discourse, counter-narratives not only defuse alternative education stigma they may also preserve alternative education’s capacity to promote systems change. Safety valve alternative schools have been described as inhibiting innovation. In their 1978 analysis of public alternative schools, Arnove and Strout argue that, “options within public schooling have come to function as barriers to the reformations initially implied by the private alternatives” (p. 93). Similarly, Raywid (1999) also recognized the potential for alternative education to inhibit systematic change:

There are those who hold that alternative schools have functioned primarily as support for keeping the current system intact, permitting maintenance of the status quo by simply

removing those the school is failing. As used for such a purpose alternative schools may be a mixed blessing, obscuring urgently needed changes (p. 50).

Raywid and Arnove and Strout argue that as safety valves alternative education, which was once viewed as a tool for changing the school system, inhibits innovation by providing a partial solution to a complex problem. While mixing discourses accepts the dominant views of schooling and at-risk or disruptive students, counter-narrative challenges these perspectives, serving as a catalyst for rethinking how schools are designed and how they meet the diverse needs of diverse students.

### **Rejecting the Label “Alternative Education”**

The previous sections explored the implications of participants who respond to the prevalence of safety valve discourse by attaching complex meanings to the purpose of alternative education either by mixing discourses or engaging in counter-narrative. This section will explore the responses of participants who take a different approach, defining alternative education narrowly and disassociating their work and their schools from alternative education. Despite leading small schools of choice that offer educational experiences quite different from the comprehensive school, three participants rejected the label alternative education and adopted other names for their schools. John, who leads an innovative, true alternative, as well as Sharon and Amy, who lead safety net remedial alternatives, all stated that they do not view their programs as alternative education.

All three participants lead schools that meet the inclusion criteria for the study, which defines alternative education as “an administrative unit with its own personnel and program: a school or a school-within a-school, but not just a course or a course sequence” (Raywid, 1983, p. 191) with an instructional mission, pedagogic approach, or student population that differ from the

comprehensive school. These participants' schools also fit most definitions of alternative education put forth in the literature base, including: Aron's (2003), "all educational activities that fall outside the traditional K-12 school system" (p. 2), Bullock's (2007) meeting, "unique vocational interests and needs" (p. 3), and Raywid's (1994) three-part typology which includes innovative and remedial schools.

There are definitions that describe alternative education more narrowly, excluding vocational schools and purely innovative or interest-based alternatives, including the one published by the U.S. Department of Education:

Alternative schools and programs are designed to address the needs of students that typically cannot be met in regular schools. The students who attend alternative schools and programs are typically at risk of educational failure (as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school). (Carver & Lewis, 2010, p. 1)

However, Sharon's emotional support program and Amy's credit recovery school would both be considered alternative education by this definition. Nevertheless, these participants reject the label alternative education, which they reserve for "behavioral schools."

This finding lends support to studies like Hosley's (2003), which concluded that, "The combination of the Act 30 guidelines, wording in Act 48, and school district responses to the survey make it clear that Pennsylvania's emphasis for alternative education is Type II-Discipline programming" (p. 16). This study also provides an extension to Hosley's explanation in that educational policy may not just have changed how alternative education is used in Pennsylvania; it also has contributed to changing how alternative education is understood. In eastern Pennsylvania, schools that would likely be considered alternative education in other parts of the country are now called emotional support programs, credit recovery schools, and theme academies instead of being labeled alternative education because they are not placements for

disruptive students. This coincides with the observations made during the review of school district websites that the only alternative schools in the region that are consistently labeled alternative education are those that are enacted under AEDY policy.

Despite leading schools that fit many definitions of alternative education, these participants as well as others who lead non-AEDY alternative schools would not have been included in many studies of alternative education. For example, Hosley (2003) collected data through “teacher surveys were mailed to administrative offices with a request to distribute them directly to AE teachers” (p. 5) and Hosley et al. (2009) only mailed surveys to participants identified on, “program funding lists provided by PDE, the researchers arrived at an unduplicated count of 367 school districts and intermediate units that received funding under the AEDY program” (p. 8). Both of these studies concluded that alternative education in Pennsylvania is largely limited to disciplinary placement alternatives. However, by relying on PDE lists and administrative reference, both of these studies limited participation to practitioners who work in alternative schools established under AEDY policy.

Both of the studies described in the previous paragraph paint a picture of what alternative education is in Pennsylvania, how it is understood, and how it is operationalized. However, in each case the researchers’ decisions about sampling population, inclusion criteria and recruitment methods all significantly influence the outcomes of the studies. The studies conclude that most alternative schools in Pennsylvania employ, “Type II Discipline program components are common to most programs” (Hosley, 2003, p. 15). However, in light of the finding of this study, there were likely many participants who lead schools that fit most definitions of alternative education who were not included in the study, particularly those like Monica, David, Shandra and John whose programs are not labeled alternative education by their school districts and are not included in state lists of AEDY programs.

### **Implications for Research**

For researchers, the findings described in the previous section illuminate an important implication: studies of alternative education must approach defining alternative education and participant selection cautiously. Because alternative education is “a perspective, not a procedure or program” (Morley, 1991, p. 10) in establishing a sampling population and defining this construct, researchers ultimately shape how alternative education can be perceived. For example, in their conclusion, Hosley et al. (2009) described alternative education as: “Alternative education programming in Pennsylvania is provided under restrictive funding designated for disruptive youth” (p. 18). It is important to note that this is only one version of alternative education, specifically Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth. The results of my study show that this is far from the only type of alternative school operated by public school districts within the state. Only four of the participants in this study lead schools that can be simply categorized as AEDY, yet five of the other participants consider their schools to be alternative schools. Instead this study suggests a different explanation than Hosley’s, which is that public school districts and the department of education are most likely to label safety valve, disciplinary alternative schools as alternative education and are less likely to view alternative schools that serve as safety nets or prioritize innovation as alternative education.

This argument lends support to Dunn’s (1997) contention that qualitative methods are essential to studies of alternative education. Dunn contests that, “dilemmas associated with using traditional tools to evaluate non-traditional schools have encumbered evaluation of alternative schools, especially before the advancement of qualitative methodology in program evaluation” (p. 16). One of those dilemmas is the need to define a sampling population and

recruitment methods. As the previous paragraph showed, quantitative studies of alternative education in Pennsylvania have excluded potential participants because of researcher's definitions of sampling population and choice of recruitment methods. This is likely often the case for quantitative studies of alternative education. Unlike quantitative studies, qualitative methods allow for more flexibility in the process of recruitment and defining the sampling population. As Krathwohl argues, qualitative methods are preferential when, "the nature of the program or process is sufficiently diffuse that goals are best discerned in the research process rather than determined beforehand" (2009, p. 237).

The complexity and ambiguity of the concept of alternative education is one of its strengths. While it may confound researchers and policymakers, ambiguity creates many possibilities and therefore can nurture innovation. In a sense, alternative education suggests only one absolute: one size does not fit all and a school system that endeavors to create a perfect approach to education is destined to fail because students have such diverse needs and interests. However, researchers' attempts to define this concept in order to make it measurable, inevitably create limitations and restrictive definitions of this construct. While quantitative research of alternative education is essential, it is important that quantitative researchers clarify that the definitions of alternative education used to establish a sampling population are exclusive and do not necessarily reflect the many possible forms alternative education can take.

### **Limitations**

While the approach to participant selection employed in this study allowed for a more diverse and representative group of alternative schools than the studies described in the previous section, it also resulted in challenges during participant recruitment. The review of school district websites was time-consuming and imprecise in terms of identifying every alternative school

within the region. As a result, there likely are alternative programs within the geographic boundaries of the study that were not included in the sampling population. Many of the websites screened during participant selection had limited or outdated information. In some cases, this was revealed during follow up phone calls and emails to potential participants.

Another indicator that the sampling population did not include every school in the area that fits the inclusion criteria was that the vast majority of school district student handbooks in the area identified alternative education as a disciplinary consequence. However, many of these school districts did not identify the name of their alternative education program or the individual who oversees the program. It is possible that many of these districts use private providers, schools operated by an intermediate unit, or through a consortium to provide alternative education. However, it is also possible that given the stigma attached to this type of alternative educational placement, some school districts operate programs but do not include information about them on their websites. While district administrators' views of alternative education are outside of the scope of this study, the potential that some if not many districts omit specific information about disciplinary alternative programs suggests that alternative education is often viewed as something that should be kept from the public eye.

Recognizing the potential that alternative schools and programs were missed during website screening, a second approach to participant selection included contacting all high school principals in the regions. All three of the participants identified in this second phase of participant identification were leaders of AEDY or disciplinary alternatives, which lends additional credence to the argument that school district are less inclined to include specific information about their AEDY programs than innovative alternatives on their websites. The challenge of identifying leaders of programs with non-traditional school leadership models also emerged during this point in the study as some of the high school principals identified themselves or an assistant principal

as the leaders of the alternative school, but their lack of a dedicated roll in the alternative school precluded them from meeting the inclusion criteria for the study.

An additional challenge to recruitment emerged as I began follow up phone calls to potential participants who did not respond to the survey. Some leaders of alternative schools focused on innovation or remediation declined to participate in the study because they did not believe that their schools were alternative programs. Others did not return phone calls or emails despite multiple attempts, and it is likely that their reluctance was the product of not viewing their schools as alternative education. The fact that three participants stated that they do not view their schools as alternative education and other potential participants stated that they would not participate because their schools are not alternative education lends support to the argument that the main challenge in recruiting leaders of supportive or innovative alternatives was that these schools are often not viewed as alternative education in eastern Pennsylvania despite meeting many definitions of the concept put forth by the literature and even the U.S. Department of Education.

In the end, twelve alternative school leaders participated in the study: seven who completed both the survey and the interview, three who only completed the survey, and two who only completed the interview. Any attempt to calculate a participation rate from the identified 28 alternative schools and programs would be inconclusive because of the likelihood that there are many more alternative schools operated by 150 districts within the geographic boundaries of the study. Ultimately, the small number of participants is one of the weaknesses of this study. It is likely that there may be a greater number of alternative school leaders who, like the participants described in the negative case analysis, view alternative education narrowly. However, their narrow view of this construct could have influenced their decision to not participate in the study because they do not see themselves as leaders of alternative schools.

While challenging, this study's approach to sampling effectively identified a broad group of alternative schools and programs in eastern Pennsylvania, including: theme-based innovative alternatives, credit recovery programs, emotional support alternatives, and disciplinary alternatives. The diversity of participants satisfied Creswell's recommendation to, "select cases that show different perspectives on the problem, process, or event" (1998, p. 62). Previous studies of alternative education in Pennsylvania have focused primarily on AEDY programs (Hosley et al., 2009) or alternatives for "at-risk" students (Holtzman, 2014), but this study was able to successfully include leaders of alternative schools and programs that are representative of all alternatives included within Raywid's three-part typology (1994), which explains that alternatives can be innovative, therapeutic, or punitive.

Because the study did not aspire to statistical generalization, it was more important to include a broad and representative group of alternative school leaders. At least two participants for each alternative school type were included in the in-depth interviews. This allowed for the creation of a theoretical description of the interaction between discourses and alternative school leaders' understandings of alternative education's purpose.

Having two participants from each of Raywid's (1994) alternative school types also provided the opportunity for triangulation, reducing the likelihood that identified understandings are "idiosyncratic" but instead allowing me "to develop more sophisticated descriptions and more powerful explanations" (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Another step taken to improve the external validity of the study was the inclusion of rich descriptions of the local context gathered through the search of school district websites. While prevailing discourses exist outside of local contexts, they exist in a "dialectical relationship" (Fairclough, 1993, p. 134) with the local context. Therefore, analytical generalizations must be made with recognition that the local context shapes how prevailing discourses are interpreted, prioritized, and accepted into the belief systems of alternative school leaders.

The relationship between leaders' understandings and the programs that they develop and lead are significant to the potential implications of this study, uncovering empirical data regarding how leaders' understandings of alternative education influence their work and the programs they create was beyond the scope of the study. Therefore, data analysis and conclusions do not contribute to our understanding of this relationship. Also, in examining the interaction between discourse and leaders' understandings, this study did not aspire to establish causality. Instead, as an exploratory study, data analysis and conclusions focused on developing rich descriptions illustrating the presence of a relationship between alternative school leaders' understandings of alternative education and the three prevailing discourses identified in the theoretical framework for the study.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Conclusions from this study contribute to our theoretical understanding of the relationship between alternative school discourse and school leaders' understandings of alternative education's purpose. There are a number of studies within the extent literature base that indicate the leaders' understandings shape their work (Sergiovanni, 1992) and leadership behavior has the potential to influence the thoughts and feelings of practitioners within an organization (Alvesson, 2002). Future studies should explore this relationship further. This study establishes that to differing extents alternative school leaders in eastern Pennsylvania are influenced by three discourses, which describe alternative education as a safety valve, safety net, or avenue to innovation. However, studies that explore how these understandings influence leadership behavior, alternative school performance, and student outcomes would be beneficial to our understanding of the overall effect of alternative school discourses.

While examining the understandings of comprehensive school leaders was beyond the scope of this study, I encountered a number of indicators during the course of the study that suggest that district and comprehensive school leaders' views of alternative education in Pennsylvania are largely influenced by safety valve discourse and the view that alternative education is a tool for managing "difficult" and "disruptive" students. Since alternative schools in Pennsylvania are frequently administered by a building principal or district administrator (Hosley, 2003), a similar study of how those personnel understand alternative education would also be valuable.

The findings of this study also indicate that it is likely that Pennsylvania's AEDY policy contributes significantly to the growth of safety valve discourse within the region. A larger scale study with similar methodology could better illuminate the influence of state policy on understandings of alternative education. One potential approach to studying the influence of state policy would be to conduct comparative case studies of alternative school leaders from states with significantly different alternative education policies, such as North Carolina, which defines, "alternative learning programs as services for students at risk of truancy, academic failure, behavior problems, and/or dropping out of school" (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2014, p. 1). It is likely that this broader conceptualization of alternative schools and their target population, which seems to define alternative education as a safety net as opposed to a safety valve, would result in different understanding of alternative education's purpose than those promoted by AEDY policy.

Similar comparative studies of district level alternative education policies could also provide useful contributions to the research base on the relationship between policy and alternative education practice. Philadelphia's approach to alternative education, which employs both schools labeled alternative education and many thematic high schools of choice not labeled alternative education, would provide an interesting case for further exploration both of how

alternative education is understood and how non-traditional school designs influence teaching and learning and student outcomes.

Finally, this study established that within a context where alternative education is predominantly viewed as creating behavioral placements, alternative school leaders attach multiple meanings to the work of alternative education and their schools. However, some leaders intentionally reject the beliefs and values expressed by safety valve discourse engaging in counter-narrative, which redefines the purpose of alternative education and the students who are served by alternative education. While other studies have observed alternative schools as providing the context for counter-narrative (Nasir et al., 2013; Watson, 2014), future studies should examine alternative school leaders' use of counter-narrative and the effect that these positive redefinitions have on the students who attend alternative schools.

### **Conclusion**

This study aspired to examine alternative school leaders' understandings of alternative education and its purpose. The findings of the study indicate that much has changed since the early alternative education movement, which Raywid (1994) said: "represented innovation; small-scale, informal ambiance; and departure from bureaucratic rules and procedures" (p. 26). Instead in eastern Pennsylvania, alternative education now most often represents disciplinary placements, "disruptive students," and a centralized state policy that dictates what alternative education can and cannot be.

One thing that has not changed is the continued lack of consensus around what alternative education is and what it is not. Among the twelve alternative school leaders who participated in this study, there were three distinct definitions of alternative education: alternative education as only those schools that provide placements for students excluded from the comprehensive school

as the result of behavioral infractions, alternative education as schools that meet the needs of students who were not successful in the comprehensive school because of behavioral, emotional, or academic deficiencies, and alternative education as any school that is different from the comprehensive school and designed to meet unique interests and needs of students.

This study did find that in eastern Pennsylvania safety valve discourse, which defines alternative education as providing a place to which “disruptive” students can be removed,” is the dominant view of alternative education’s purpose. All aspects of this study, the literature review, the examination of school district websites and the data gathered, all suggest that the primary way alternative education is viewed is as schools and programs that serve as behavioral placements for students labeled disruptive. Alternative education, which once held multiple possible meanings, is most often viewed very simply as a location where certain students are placed so that their behavioral needs can be met, and potentially reformed, while more capable and normatively behaving students can learn without the distraction and threat associated with disruptive students. The theoretical framework for this study suggests that the constricting of alternative education’s meaning is the product of a safety valve discourse, which permeates research, policy and practice related to alternative education.

While safety valve discourse appears to represent the dominant viewpoint across eastern Pennsylvania, most participants in this study hold complex beliefs and understandings of alternative education’s purpose. This study found that leaders of alternative schools respond to the simplifying of alternative education’s meaning and the stigma that accompanies the label “placement for the bad kids” in three ways: attaching positive meaning to the work of their alternative school by mixing discourses or associating alternative education with multiple meanings; rejecting the label alternative education by calling their school something else such as an art academy or an emotional support program; or engaging in counter-narrative, which redefines the purpose of alternative education and the students it serves. While each of these

responses are preferable to simply viewing alternative education as a safety valve, counter-narrative is most promising response to the growing view that alternative education creates placements for the “bad kids.” By engaging in counter-narrative, alternative school leaders reject these assumptions about students and alternative schooling, defining these schools and the students they serve in ways that promote effective academic practices and help protect often vulnerable students from further stigmatization.

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## Appendix A

### Survey

# Alternative Education Survey

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Q2 Is at least 50% of your work time spent in an alternative education school or program, defined as a school, school within a school or program with its own staff and program that has an instructional mission, pedagogic practices, and/or student population that differ from the comprehensive school.

Yes

No

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Q3 Are you a leader within the alternative school or program, with responsibility for at least some of the following: mission and vision, school culture and climate, attaining and distributing resources, faculty professional development, teacher evaluation, and managing student behavior.

Yes

No

Title of Project: Safety Valves, Safety Nets, and True Alternatives: How Competing Discourses Shape Leaders' Perceptions of Alternative Education

If you answered yes to the two screening questions, you are being invited to volunteer to participate in a research study. This summary explains information about this research.

The purpose of this study is to develop a detailed picture of how alternative school leaders in eastern Pennsylvania describe the purpose of alternative education.

Participation in the study involves completion of a short survey, which includes seven open response questions.

Participants who complete the survey may be asked to participate in a follow up in depth interview. If participants are selected for a follow up interview, they will be contacted via email. If participants agree to an in depth interview the researcher will either schedule an interview by phone or in person based on the convenience of the participant.

Participant confidentiality will be protected; both participants and their schools will be given pseudonyms to protect anonymity. Pseudonyms will be listed on a master record with individual identifiers, but only pseudonyms will appear in the analysis and the final research report. District names will also remain out of the analysis and only be included on the master record. The master record will only be available for review to the primary investigator, members of his dissertation committee, and other appropriate university officials. The master record and data, which includes identifiers will be stored in a secure location.

If you have questions or concerns, you should contact Neil Cronin at ----- . If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject or concerns regarding your privacy, you may contact the Office for Research Protections at -----.

Your participation is voluntary and you may decide to stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer.

Your participation implies your voluntary consent to participate in the research.

Q1 Please describe the alternative school/program at which you work.

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Q2 How would you describe alternative education and its purpose?

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Q3 Is alternative education primarily for students who are not successful in the regular curriculum? For students facing disciplinary consequences? For gifted students? For students seeking specialization in a particular area? Or for some other purpose? Please explain.

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Q4 What role do you believe alternative education should fill within the public-school system?

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Q5 What other understandings of alternative education do you encounter in your work?

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Q6 If you are aware of another school or program within your district, which should be included in this study, please identify the name of the school or program and a leader or leaders who should be contacted.

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Q7 If you would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview, please indicate below and include the best way to contact you.

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## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol

I will begin introducing myself, reviewing the informed consent information, and then asking permission to record the conversation. If participants agree, I will record using an iPad. Questions will cover four main areas: the participant's description of his/her current school, understandings of alternative education's purpose, descriptions of students who benefit from alternative education, and the boundaries around understandings of alternative education. Each section will consist of an initial question as well as follow up questions intended to solicit rich descriptions within the area.

1. Determine the type of alternative school the participant leads and how the leader defines the school's purpose and target population
  - a. Describe your school/program.
  - b. What are the key features of the program?
  - c. How is the program different than the district's comprehensive school?
  - d. What type of student is best served by your school/program?
  - e. What type of student would not be served well by your school/program?
  - f. What do you like best about the school? What would you change about the school if you could?
2. Participant's understanding of alternative education's purpose
  - a. What kind of school do you envision when you think about alternative education?
  - b. Are there other kinds of schools you would consider alternative education? What makes these schools alternative education?
  - c. What are the primary features of an alternative school?
  - d. How are alternative schools different than comprehensive schools?**
3. Participants' understanding of students who are served by alternative education.
  - a. Describe the students who you think attend alternative schools?
  - b. Are there other students who attend or could attend alternative schools?
  - c. Why do you think students attend alternative schools?
  - d. How are students at alternative schools different than those who attend comprehensive schools?
4. Recognize the boundaries around how the leader defines alternative education (**Before asking question 4a, repeat the participant's response to question 2d**).
  - a. Do you consider your school alternative education?
  - b. Why or why not?
  - c. What makes it an alternative school? Or how is it different than an alternative school?
  - d. Identify other types of alternative schools (AEDY, STEM schools, credit recovery schools, technical or vocational schools) and ask if the participant views each as an alternative school.
  - e. Why or why not? What makes these schools different than an alternative school?

## VITA

### Neil Cronin

#### Professional Experience

<i>Principal, NativityMiguel School of Scranton, Scranton, PA</i>	2017-Present
Instructional leadership	
Program development	
Enrollment management	
Curriculum design	
<i>Program Director, Chapel Hill-Chauncy Hall School, Waltham, MA</i>	2010-2016
Faculty professional development	
Teacher supervision and evaluation	
<i>Alternative Program Director, Bellefonte Area High School, Bellefonte, PA</i>	2008-2010
Student program planning	
Student support and behavioral assessment	

#### Education

D.Ed. Educational Leadership	2019
The Pennsylvania State University	
University Park, Pennsylvania	
M.Ed. Educational Leadership	2010
California University of Pennsylvania	
California, Pennsylvania	
B.A. English	2000
Connecticut College	
New London, Connecticu	